

# Imagined Literature: Notes towards a Revisionary History of Theory

Thomas Samson

## Summary

This paper makes a case for looking beyond the tropes that oversimplify the intellectual movement called Theory. It claims that this is necessary to get a glimpse of the sociocultural processes that shaped Theory and defined its moment in cultural history. This paper analyses the assumptions on which these tropes are based. Based on this analysis, it seeks to establish that Theory is not a coherent discourse that yielded knowledge of the process of reality-making, without being affected by the discourses on reality it engaged with to carve out its position. Theory is a fissured discourse whose "discoveries" were both enabled and delimited by the contexts of its articulation. In fact, Theory owes its shape to these contexts. This paper attempts to establish this thesis by studying Theory's stance vis-à-vis literature, one of the important "contexts" (for want of a better term) of Theory.

## Opsomming

In hierdie artikel word gronde aangevoer waarom verder gekyk moet word as die trope wat die oorvereenvoudiging van die intellektuele beweging genaamd Theory tot gevolg het. Hierin word beweer dat dit noodsaaklik is om 'n vlugtige blik te kry op die sosiokulturele prosesse wat Theory beïnvloed het, en waaraan sy hoogtepunt in die kultuurgeskiedenis te danke is. Die veronderstellings waarop die trope berus word in hierdie artikel ontleed. Op grond van die ontleding word betoog dat Theory nie 'n samehangende diskoers kan wees en kennis oor realiteitswording kan genereer sonder om beïnvloed te word deur die realiteitsdiskoerse waaraan die beweging deelgeneem het, en waardeur hy sy posisie verwerf het nie. Theory is 'n gesplete diskoers, en die beweging se "ontdekkings" word moontlik gemaak en terselfdertyd beperk deur die kontekste waarin dit verwoord word. Theory het trouens sy vorm aan hierdie kontekste te danke. Dié tesse word getoets aan die hand van 'n studie van Theory se standpunt oor die letterkunde, wat (by gebrek aan 'n beter woord) een van sy belangrike "kontekste" is.

In literature alone, our ideas of author, audience, reading, writing, book, genre, critical theory, and of literature itself, have all suddenly become questionable – *questionable but far from invalid, reconstituting themselves in various ways.*

(Hassan 2009; my italics)

## 1

Now that the moment of high Theory has well and truly passed, it is both possible and necessary to look beyond the facile accounts that often misrepresent sociocultural phenomena like Theory. In the context of the post-Theory debates, this is the need to engage with the two dominant tropes or facile representations of Theory that are popular in the academy today: the leaven and the lump, and the organic intellectual. Interestingly, these two accounts are founded on the same assumption about Theory: doing Theory involves a new way of relating to reality. Theory gives a new handle on experience, helps us read experience against the grain. Theory, it is assumed, is like the laws of gravity that established the invisible connection among what used to be considered unrelated events, and turned common-sense notions about daily occurrences on their head thereby transforming people's experience of them. Theory's deconstruction of the foundationalist notions of "subject" and "object" of knowledge, its reconception of these essentialist categories as effects of a process, it is assumed, has not only transformed the way contemporary reality is perceived, but has empowered the Theorist to see the shape of things to come.

This paper is an attempt to establish that both these accounts and the assumption underpinning them amount to an oversimplification of the phenomenon called Theory. Far from helping a student of Theory understand the dynamics of this phenomenon, they misrepresent this phenomenon in an effort to simplify it. This paper starts by making a case for looking beyond these "tropes" to get a glimpse of the sociocultural processes that shaped Theory and defined its moment in cultural history. It goes on to analyse the founding assumption of these tropes. It then attempts to persuade the reader that far from being a coherent discourse that yielded knowledge of the process of reality-making after successfully disentangling itself from the interpretations of reality it had engaged with, Theory is a fissured discourse whose "discoveries" were both enabled and delimited by the contexts of its articulation. In fact, Theory owes its shape to these contexts. This paper attempts to establish this thesis by studying Theory's stance vis-à-vis literature, one of the important "contexts" (for want of a better term) of Theory.

## 2

The leaven and lump is the dominant trope through which almost all the books on “After Theory” seek to understand the phenomenon, however diverse their verdict on Theory might be. In their view, what was once the esoteric preoccupation of a coterie called the *Tel Quel* group in the 1960s gradually began to get the attention of the academe and captured the imagination of the Anglo-American academe of the 1980s to such an extent that it shook practice in the academe to its roots. Like the character in David Lodge’s novella *Home Truths*, who defines post-feminism as assimilating feminism without being obsessed by it (Cunningham 2002: 3), these critics tacitly agree that After Theory is the condition of being assimilated by Theory, and not being obsessed by it. In Valentine Cunningham’s words:

Theory is everywhere. It’s rare to find anywhere now a published discussion or reading of literature, or to hear a lecture on a literary topic, certainly by a professional critic from the academy, which is not paying homage to named theorists of literature who might well have been writing before then but were known only to a few close-up chums and colleagues. A critical Rip Van Winkle waking up now after fifty years of slumber wouldn’t recognize the critical tower of Babel he’d returned to.

(Cunningham 2002: 24)

Cunningham speaks for most of his colleagues who believe that the academe has entered the After Theory phase, both for those who claim that Theory has transformed practice and those who aver that Theory has been absorbed into practice. These critics are united in their belief that the leaven of *Tel Quel* had problematised not just practice within the academy but the way the readers of the *New York Times* or the *Guardian* were wont to perceiving themselves and their world.

Arguing from his niche position within the After Theory school, Terry Eagleton sees the pervasiveness of Theory as its potential, not an actual happening. Continuing in this vein, Eagleton condemns the trivialisation of Theory and its degeneration into an academic exercise. He caricatures the pretensions of graduate dissertations on “the politics of masturbation” (Eagleton 2004a: 2) that, quite unconscious of the ludic element in this exercise, assume that radical politics boils down to these gestures. Eagleton’s caricature of the degradation of Theory in the hands of newbies is different from the caricature of Theory one comes across in David Lodge’s campus novels where Theory is dismissed as a fad. Eagleton’s sarcasm is born out of his frustration over Theory’s failure to fulfil its potential for radical politics. Eagleton doesn’t deride Derrida. His belief in Theory’s radical potential is evident in his gesture of writing a polemical introduction to *Literary Theory* in 1983 where Eagleton establishes the pedigree of the postmodern claim that reading literature is anything but an innocent reader

confronting a solid text. Eagleton's anger over what he considers the Theory-endorsed replacement of radical politics with poor substitutes is indicative of the fact that he, too, was hopeful that theory would one day transform society. This hope is belied by Eagleton's "post-Althusserian phase" attack on Theory's hope of emerging from its academic chrysalis to create a butterfly effect on contemporary social structure.

The facile representation of the Literary Theory as the little leaven that, when it mixes up with the lump of the discourse on art and society, leavens it, perhaps even has it in ferment, is in fact a misrepresentation of Theory. This is self-evident to anyone who is aware of the fact that in the early days of Theory, the proponents of the new way of reading texts had to fight for elbow room in the humanities stream in the Anglo-American academy. The so-called coterie was forced to confront and negotiate with the "received view" on art and society in the academe and in society. Their colleagues of such diverse persuasion as Jürgen Habermas, Richard Rorty, Alan Bloom, M.H. Abrams, Denis Donohue, David Lodge, Roger Kimball, Dinesh Desouza and Alan Bloom often forced the "new readers" to define their position vis-à-vis traditional views on art and reality. From the minor skirmishes like the firing of Collin McCabe or the outcry against Eva Sedgwick's article on Jane Austen to the culture war that brought to the fore a variety of issues such as the validity and ethics of reading, the role of the academic, and accountability to taxpayer, Theory in the Anglo-American academe was never allowed to forget the society "outside" the academy. Theory owes its shape to these negotiations. At the risk of sounding obvious, one can cite Derrida's professional practice as an example. Derrida was often forced to simplify his performative thesis, his technique of showing and telling, in his interviews. The popularity of these interviews as a means of accessing his thought suggested the impracticality of his method of philosophical investigation. This perhaps is the reason why very few Theorists came close to Derrida's approach to theory: close reading of texts to use the text's own elements to undermine its thesis. Many of them aimed to deconstruct texts but ended up commenting on them, thereby maintaining the distinction between text and commentary, leaving Paul de Man Derrida's only true disciple in the American academe.

The other major trope is theorist as organic intellectual of the oppressed classes. This trope draws its rhetorical power from being Theory's self-posture. Theory encouraged its students to view it as the immanent critique of the signifying practices of contemporary society. The Theorist was not just a provider of knowledge but one who understood the condition of the victims of hegemony (Gramsci 1971: 10, 418). Collin McCabe's "Foreword" to Spivak's *In Other Worlds*, and Stanley Fish's essay, "The Unbearable Ugliness of the Volvo", outline this trope/pose. McCabe defends Spivak's "pretentiously opaque" style (Eagleton 1999) thus: "No matter how great the commitment to clarity, no matter how intense the desire to

communicate, when we are trying ourselves to delineate and differentiate the practices and objects which are crucial to our own understanding and functioning and for which we as yet lack an adequate vocabulary, there will be difficulty” (1988: x). With devastating sarcasm, Fish exposes the Theory-saturated academe’s desire to empathise with the victims: “The reason that academics want and need their complaints is that it is important to them to feel oppressed, for in the psychic economy of the academy, oppression is the sign of virtue” (1994: 276).

The constant barrage of attack within and outside the academy that focused on Theory’s notorious difficulty and the academic superstardom of its proponents forced Theory to project itself as the new philosophy that studied the present, past and future states of society in their interrelation, and present its advocates as public intellectuals who felt one with the masses even though they could not communicate with them since the latter were not future-ready. Theory’s potential to self-ironise was not allowed to be fully realised. To the popularisers of Theory bent on making a fast buck by parcelling out Theory to the uninitiated while its popularity lasted, this self-posturing was too convenient an opportunity to miss.

Far from identifying the historical tendencies of contemporary society as well as the shape of things to come, Theory merely articulated the conditions of its own existence. Theory articulated its postmodernity, the “interactive planetary phenomenon wherein tribalism and imperialism, myth and technology, margins and centres – these terms are not parallel – play their conflictual energies” (Hassan 2009). Its immediate contexts were the Parisian general strike of 1968 that launched Althusser, Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari into a new trajectory of intellectual inquiry (Montag 2003), the positionless position of Derrida in Algeria that shaped his theory (Morrissey 1999), the rise of Thatcherism with which the beginnings of Theory coincided in the UK (Day 2008: 4, 311), the polemical energies released by the Anti-Vietnam war movement in the US, the era of scepticism inaugurated by the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum theory that found an impasse at the heart of the discourse of science (Norris 2000), and the arrival of “Third World” intellectual on the Anglo-American academic scene (Dirlik 1997).

One of the major problems facing those who decide to look through and beyond these tropes is the set of intriguing contradictions within Theory in its treatment of literature, contradictions that often assume the proportions of an impasse. Theory’s response to the following questions is the source of these contradictions:

1. Is literature an ideology in the Althusserian sense of the term or is it a science that lays bare the ideological misrepresentations of contemporary social relations that it chooses to depict and shows them in their true light?

2. Does literature offer insights to critics, insights that can be used to analyse other texts or is it merely a product of the context of its production, a product that is blind to its own insights?
3. Is a literary text a source of value or a mere source of fact, like most other discourses? Does it merely furnish raw, unanalysed mixture of fact and opinion that the critic has to analyse employing the heuristic devices at her disposal?
4. Is the critic's discourse superior to the literary text in being a source of knowledge and value or does it suffer from the same limitations that plague the literary text, a historical and rhetorical construct?
5. Should the academe continue with the practice of reading a few literary texts in relation to their sociocultural contexts or should it foreground these contexts and read texts, literary and nonliterary, as manifestations of these contexts?

These questions were often elided in Theory's discussion of literature and this elision is the major difficulty in conceptualising Theory's stance vis-à-vis literature.

Theory did not cannibalise literature, but it was not content with the status as yet another turn of the interpretive screw. Gerald Graff's suggestion that conflicts or issues should be the new themes around which literary texts should be organised did not receive serious critical attention in an academe where the notion that a reader's observation of texts is laden with the critic's interpretation of them was a critical commonplace. In a sense, Theory both allowed and denied fantasies about replacing the literary text with the critic's text by supporting incompatible claims: it insisted that books were in fact texts, but it was silent about the implications of this reversal of the power relation between the text and its readers. Theory's arc accommodated both those who felt Theory's arrival on the academic scene coincided with the last hour of literature (Bruss 1982) and those who viewed literature, at least some of it, as a rich source, even inspiration, of the strategies to escape immediacy that Theory advocated: polyphony, multivocality, play, and ironic distance from self and the "objective" world (Barthes 1975). In fact, the very group that claimed that literature was merely one among the many signifying practices had no problem in agreeing with Derrida's thesis that the practices traditionally associated with literature, the rhetorical construction of reality through mimesis and metaphor, represented the mother of all signifying practices, from science to history (Derrida 1982). The graphic representation of this ambivalence was the curious sight of Hayden White's *Metahistory* rubbing shoulders with Stephen Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* on the shelves in the "Theory" sections of

libraries. This sight, together with the “profess literature or perish” mantra chanted by sections of the Anglo-American academy that was concerned with the conflation of literature and nonliterary discourses in the interest of furthering the “dialogues with the dead”, managed to create a truly carnivalesque ambience in the Anglo-American academe of the 1980s.

After systematically undermining the notion of “self” by calling it the metaphysics of presence, drawing its rhetorical weapons from the arsenals of philosophy, psychoanalysis and linguistics to sustain its attack on this notion, Theory was strategically silent on authorial consciousness and intention. Canonical texts were often analysed through the employment of the central insights of Theory and canonical authors were found guilty of connivance with ideologies of capitalism, patriarchy, imperialism and racism, giving the impression that there were theoretical and practical moments in Theory, moments of memory and forgetting, coinciding with textual analysis and metacritical discussions. In what was indeed a curious sight, the movement whose beginnings coincided with the exultant announcement of the death of the author also spawned books on postcolonial Shakespeare. The vehement attack on canonical writers that these books often contained suggests that authorial consciousness was more than a mere effect of the signifying process. Harold Bloom’s polemical work, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, where Bloom presents Shakespeare as a mortal god and insists that Shakespeare worship “ought to be even more a secular religion than it already is” (1998: xvii), suggests the extent of the provocation.

After implying that a literary text, not just its meaning, is imputed by the act of interpretation, and the notions of autotelic text and core meaning are positivist fallacies, Theory maintained a studied silence when confronted with statements by critics like Barbara Herrnstein Smith, who claimed that each generation of Shakespeare readers confronts “Shakespeare’s” texts of its own creation (1988). Smith’s views were neither affirmed nor denied by leading Theorists who never stopped proclaiming that twenty-first-century literary criticism was a journey down the antifoundationalist road.

Theory challenged disciplinary boundaries, but it was reluctant to let literary studies shade into a branch of social science. No one took Robert Scholes’s suggestion of converting departments of literary studies into departments of textual studies (1985: 15-16) seriously.

In a sense, after seeming to suggest a radical break and a new departure from conventional views on the relation between a text and its interpretation, Theory ignored positions that articulated these implications and thus exoticised them. The stony silence with which these corollary positions of Theory were greeted becomes evident when it is compared with the rousing reception of other spin-offs of Theory: sexual politics, nation as narration, subaltern speech, race as ideology, and gay and lesbian studies into queer theory.

Literary Theory's ambivalence to the binary oppositions the questions listed above evoke, and Theory-baiters' efforts to persuade the academe to "see" the self-contradictory assumptions of Literary Theory, "evident" in its often incompatible assumptions about literature and criticism, form one of the strands of the response that Theory evoked in the Anglo-American academe. "Traditionalists" were bemused by the new readers' approach to literature, who, afflicted with the "Parisian disease", insisted on splitting the lark and hearing its music (Gardner 1982; Paulin 1982; Shattuck 1984; Davie 1985; Bloom 1987; Vendler 2004). Theorists spent a considerable amount of their critical energies on outlining and defending their positions, and this battle between the old and new readers was fought on the pages of some of the leading academic journals. The Hillis Miller-M.H. Abram and Hillis Miller-Vincent Leitch debates that *Critical Inquiry* (1977, 1980) sponsored are interesting cases in point.

Theory's ambivalence to literature underscores the fact that any attempt to construct a history of Theory, however sketchy and tentative, cannot afford to ignore these debates between Theory and traditional criticism, and the conflicting impulses within Theory that triggered these debates. In the context of Theory's relation to literature, such an account will not cop out of its responsibility to explain the horns of the dilemma that Theory faced. It will not draw the reader's attention to the hiving off of literary studies into cultural and postcolonial studies on the basis of the choice they exercised to explain away this impasse (Bergonzi 1990). It will acknowledge the fact that twenty-first-century cultural studies and postcolonialism derive their identity through their difference from the cultural studies of the 1960s and the debates on postcolonialism of the 1970s, with the boundaries of the former being demarcated and their practice defined by Theory (Ahmad 1997). Cultural studies and postcolonialism, it will realise, were not hived off Theory but were in fact hived, even made up the queen cells of the hive called Theory. It will recognise the fact that the bureaucratic division of literary studies into cultural and postcolonial studies is but an admission of failure to resolve the impasse. It is a pseudo-solution to the dilemmas facing Theory, which is a far cry from a genuine resolution of these conflicting assumptions about art, criticism and life. This account will not be persuaded by Theory's self-posture, its claim that the shifting stand vis-à-vis literature was a necessity born out of the compulsion to articulate antifoundationalist insights using foundational categories.

Theory's relation to literature, the double bind Theory is under, suggests an unconscious desire that Theory appeared to be at pains to suppress. This desire appears to have been articulated metonymically. The more important of these metonymies is the collapse of literature and criticism into reading in a new conceptualisation of this traditional relation. While Theory acknowledged its project to substitute literature with "reading", it never acknowledged the desire to privilege reading as a part of its effort to



facilitate the process of imagining it as literature. Paul de Man's description of this substitution and Derrida's gloss on de Man's description, and the relation of this gloss to the "original" text, spell out the way an interpretation of a text merges with the text in Theory's representation of it. To quote de Man: "The reading [of Proust's text] is not "our" reading, since it uses only the linguistic elements provided by the text itself; the distinction between author and reader is one of the false distinctions that the reading makes evident. The deconstruction is not something we have added to the text, but it constituted the text in the first place (1979: 17).

Derrida's sympathetic gloss on de Man's statement in *Memoires for de Man* affixes the stamp of approval on de Man's interpretation of deconstruction:

[T]he very condition of a deconstruction may be at work, *within* the system to be deconstructed; it may already be located there, *already* at work, not at the center but in an excentric center, in a corner whose eccentricity assures the solid concentration of the system, participating in the construction of what it at the same time threatens to deconstruct.

(Derrida 1986: 73)

The Derrida-de Man thesis posits a *relation* in place of what was traditionally seen as *entities* – texts and readers. "Texts" cannot be regarded as objects of study, different from the objective tools of analysis; neither can the "reader's consciousness" be separated from the process. The "reader" cannot be a mere observer since without the "reader", the potential for interpretation of a text remains a potential, and no more.

Derrida's gloss on de Man's statement is also a performative thesis on the relation between a literary text and its interpretation, to use the traditional notions "literature" and "criticism". Derrida's text appears to merely reiterate de Man's thesis, but as the reader of this book knows, it is in fact Derrida's thesis that the de Man text restates. Derrida's *Memoir* exploits the possibilities of the genre that allows the mixing of the autobiographical with the scholarly. More importantly, it pays tribute to Paul de Man's memory by reversing the roles in the relation between the texts of Derrida and de Man during de Man's lifetime. With his customary economy, at one stroke Derrida provides a commentary on de Man's work, especially the role of memory in his writings, and subverts the notions of authority and priority that a reader associates with texts and commentaries, literary texts and explications.

While the desire to make reading, which stands for the relation that encompasses texts and readers, the core of the new humanities is clearly discernable, its unstated corollary, the desire to endow it with the privileges once enjoyed by literature, however, has to be located by identifying Theory's "stance" (Bloom 1975: 4) towards "literature". This "stance" can be constructed by assembling the "symptoms", which are Theory's

conflicting responses to literature. These responses manifest Theory's anxiety: its rejection of liberal humanism, and the celebration of the readerly texts that did not seem to problematise the treatment of authors as sole creators of the meaning and value of texts; its bracketing together of Shakespeare with the pamphleteers even while continuing to treat Will as the privileged symbol of "his" world; its gesture of putting canonicity under erasure that somehow seemed to square well with the creation of a canon of previously marginalised texts ... and the list goes on.

This ambivalence cannot be readily attributed to residual foundationalism. Insofar as the defining feature of Theory's practice is using the very categories of foundationalism in its critique of foundationalism, any unconscious, residual foundationalism would render Theory a self-defeating exercise. A self-conscious critique that spent a considerable amount of its critical energies in allowing the play of meaning without sacrificing the rigour of analysis like Theory would have degenerated into a frivolous, even mischievous trick of leading the academic community up the garden path to secure tenure and royalty if it were to harbour the very beliefs it prided on dismantling. None but the extreme conservative critic, whose criticism of Theory is nothing more than visceral anguish at the dismantling of his pet notions, can accuse Theory of this gigantic confidence trick.

Historians of Theory like Jonathan Culler and Anthony Easthope, who deny this tension in Theory with regard to the literary by suggesting an accommodative or transformative relation between Theory and the literary, in fact highlight this very tension.

For Culler, Theory is not dead since Theory is not the Other of literature. Doing Theory is professing literature, and so in literary studies, doing Theory was business as usual. Culler creates a discursive space for his thesis that traditional literary criticism and Theory are eminently compatible by presenting other critic-historians of Theory as the enemies of Theory who, mistaking Theory to be the Other of literary criticism, pronounced the death of Theory and went on to celebrate Theory's demise without bothering to do a reality check. Culler's indictment of critics like Terry Eagleton, Judith Butler, Jean-Michel Rabaté, and Valentine Cunningham, who in fact acknowledge the pervasive presence of Theory even while seeking to investigate the conditions that brought Theory into existence and its impact, tempts the reader to view Culler's pronouncement on these critics as a rhetorical strategy. It becomes obvious to such a reader that the so-called proponents of the "death of Theory" thesis in fact make more or less the same observation as Culler: Theory has now been "domesticated" in being absorbed into critical practice which it may or may not have transformed. In presenting the position of those who insist that the moment of high Theory has passed as the death of high-theory argument, Culler misrepresents their thesis in order to make his voice different from the "chorus" (2006: 1). What these critics in fact suggest, perhaps without being fully aware of the

full import of their argument, is the death of Theory's dream, not the death of Theory. This dream is the dream of replacing literature at the academic pedestal. Theory's hope is dashed by being absorbed by critical practice, practice that stands in the same parasitical relation with the literary work that Theory dreaded. Culler plays down the tension in Theory's relation to literature in order to make Theory appear eminently suitable for literary analysis. Culler's account of Theory is in fact an extension of his thesis on structuralism, structuralism as a natural ally of *nouveau roman* (1988: 39), a thesis that Lentricchia read as an attempt to domesticate Continental Theory to make it suitable for introduction into the American academe (1980: 103-112). His self-declared opponents, on the other hand, highlight Theory's hope, which they mistake for its pretension. What these critics taunt as Theory's tall claim is in fact its unconscious desire to be like literature. Culler validates and valorises his position by hollowing out the complexity of other accounts of Theory. Culler's claim, taken together with his rivals' thesis, suggests the unmistakable tension in Theory vis-à-vis literature.

The plight of the rhetoric of historians of Theory like Anthony Easthope, who announced the metamorphosis of literary studies into cultural studies at the triumphal entry of Theory into the Anglo-American academy that supposedly cleared the mist of the aesthetic as the pure realm of beauty and exposed the true nature of the aesthetic, the "ruse through which the ruling class exercised its hegemony" (Easthope 1991: 70), further confirms the impression that in its relation to literature, Theory was Janus-faced. Practice in the post-Theory Anglo-American academe, even in those academies that were the havens of Theory when it first travelled from Europe to the US and Britain, has treacherously exposed these hurried pronouncements about the transformation of literary studies. Easthope's history now looks no more than a mere rush of intellectual blood at the turn of events, rather than an informed account of the movement called Theory. The replacement of the category "Aesthetics and Literary Criticism" with "Literary Criticism and Literary Theory" in the MLA's annual bibliography, which was portentous of the radical changes in the discipline to many critics in the 1970s and -80s, now appears a cosmetic change, leaving those who hurriedly pronounced the death of literature and traditional criticism gasping for breath.

In the absence of any other credible explanation, Theory's ambivalence to literature can only be attributed to an unconscious desire to occupy the vacant spot that was once associated with literature: as a source of knowledge, as the fountainhead of spiritual or pragmatic values, as a vehicle of vision or at least as a valuable tool for mental training. However, the desire for monoglossia, voice and presence would not have been just embarrassing to Theory. It had the potential to make Theory's postmodern discourse incoherent. It comes as no surprise, then, that this radical desire, the Other of Theory's declared position, was expressed metonymically, through other means. Theory's ambivalence to literature is better understood

in terms of its anxiety, the tension between the expression of this desire and its suppression.

Theory's desire to be both like literature and not like literature is unmistakable. In fact, it is this desire that explains the contradictions at the heart of Theory. Theory's puzzling choices in its treatment of literature suggest Theory's unconscious desire to be a new literature rather than a new science. This desire is analogous to postmodernism's clamouring for the plurality of voices that is in fact a cry born out of the yet-to-be acknowledged desire for a never-to-be-found common humanity, a cry of those locked up in the prison-house of language, race, class and gender (Hassan 2009). The metaphor of an advanced life-form that this paper employs in its representation of Theory is perhaps warranted by this desire at the periphery of postmodern existence that shaped Theory's identity.

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**Thomas Samson**

The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, India  
samthom10@yahoo.com