Gregory Castle's *Literary Theory Handbook* brings his account of theory up to the minute, practically, incorporating—and relating to one another—the most significant developments in literary and cultural theory of the twenty-first century (cognitive theory, the new materialism, disability studies, ecocriticism and animal studies). Castle does justice to the complexity of the issues he covers (his handling of deconstruction and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory is admirable), and one has to marvel at both the impartiality of his account and the lucidity of his writing, with a clear sense throughout of his audience and of what needs to be said.

David Richter, CUNY

Comprehensive and clear, Castle's *Handbook* is essential for students seeking accessible and thorough summaries of all of the schools of contemporary critical thought and analysis. Each chapter covers a lot of material, and each is beautifully written.

Michael Ryan, Temple University

The Literary Theory Handbook provides the ideal starting point to the subject for students at all levels, offering clarity on the history, scope and application of literary theory, and providing four distinct entryways into this vast and varied discourse.

Raising key questions about the nature of theory and literature, individual chapters offer historical, thematic, biographical, and practical perspectives on theoretical concepts, ideas and modes of practice. A chapter on the historical development of theoretical movements, trends, and ideas makes connections between and among theories across a century of development. Separate entries on major theories bring together similar theories under thematic rubrics, such as Ideology/Philosophy/History/Aesthetics and Mind/Body/Gender/Identity, and short biographical sketches provide a handy reference for key theorists and their major works. The final section of the *Handbook* features brief readings of literary texts— including works by Shakespeare, Conrad, Woolf, Beckett, and Rushdie—each informed by multiple perspectives that exemplify theoretical practice.

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This new series offers the student thorough and lively introductions to literary periods, movements, and, in some instances, authors and genres, from Anglo-Saxon to the Postmodern. Each volume is written by a leading specialist to be invitingly accessible and informative. Chapters are devoted to the coverage of cultural context, the provision of brief but detailed biographical essays on the authors concerned, critical coverage of key works, and surveys of themes and topics, together with bibliographies of selected further reading. Students new to a period of study or to a period genre will discover all they need to know to orientate and ground themselves in their studies, in volumes that are as stimulating to read as they are convenient to use.

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The Crime Fiction Handbook
Peter Messent

The Literary Theory Handbook
Gregory Castle
For Ralph and Donna Castle,
whose encouragement and support come without condition

and

Camille Angeles-Castle,
who continues to teach me the theory of love
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contents</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alphabetical Listing of Key Movements and Theories</td>
<td>xii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Nature of Literary Theory</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is Literature?</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Practice of Theory</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How To Use the Handbook</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 The Rise of Literary Theory</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Developments in Literary Theory</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modernism and Formalism, 1890s–1940s</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural and Critical Theory, 1930s–1960s</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Poststructuralist Turn, 1960s–1970s</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture, Gender, and History, 1980s–1990s</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postmodernism and Post-Marxism, 1980s–2000s</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posthumanism: Theory at the Fin de Siècle</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 The Scope of Literary Theory</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Form/Structure/Narrative/Genre</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formalism and Structuralism</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Criticism</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicago School Neo-Aristotelian Theory</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative Theory/Narratology</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theory of the Novel</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Ideology/Philosophy/History/Aesthetics</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marxist Theory</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Theory</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-Marxist Theory</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Historicism/Cultural Poetics</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postmodernism</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Contents

3 **Language/Systems/Texts/Readers**
   - Phenomenology and Hermeneutics 142
   - Reader-Response Theory 153
   - Deconstruction 160
   - Poststructuralism 167

4 **Mind/Body/Gender/Identity**
   - Psychoanalysis 178
   - Feminist Theory 190
   - Gender Studies 198
   - Gay and Lesbian Studies 204
   - Trauma Studies 209

5 **Culture/Ethnicities/Nations/Locations**
   - Cultural Studies 218
   - African American Studies 225
   - Ethnic and Indigenous Studies 231
     - Chicana/o Studies 232
     - Native and Indigenous Studies 235
     - Asian American Studies 237
   - Postcolonial Studies 242
   - Transnationalism 254

6 **People/Places/Bodies/Things**
   - Posthumanism 266
     - Evolutionary Literary Theory 278
     - Object-Oriented Ontologies 283
     - Disability Studies 290
   - Ecocriticism 298

3 **Key Figures in Literary Theory**
   - Theodor Adorno (1903–69) 313
   - Giorgio Agamben (1942– ) 314
   - Louis Althusser (1918–90) 315
   - Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin (1895–1975) 316
   - Roland Barthes (1915–80) 317
   - Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007) 318
   - Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) 319
   - Homi Bhabha (1949– ) 320
   - Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) 321
   - Lawrence Buell (1939– ) 322
   - Judith Butler (1956– ) 323
   - Hélène Cixous (1937– ) 324
   - Lennard Davis (1949– ) 324
   - Teresa de Lauretis (1939– ) 325
   - Gilles Deleuze (1925–95) and Félix Guattari (1930–92) 326
   - Paul de Man (1919–83) 327
   - Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) 328
   - Terry Eagleton (1943– ) 330
   - Frantz Fanon (1925–61) 330
   - Stanley Fish (1938– ) 331
Michel Foucault (1926–84) 332
Henry Louis Gates (1950– ) 333
Sandra Gilbert (1936– ) and Susan Gubar (1944– ) 334
Stephen Greenblatt (1943– ) 335
Elizabeth Grosz (1952– ) 336
Stuart Hall (1932– ) 337
Donna Haraway (1944– ) 338
N. Katherine Hayles (1943– ) 339
bell hooks (1952– ) 340
Luce Irigaray (1930– ) 341
Wolfgang Iser (1926–2007) 342
Fredric Jameson (1934– ) 343
Julia Kristeva (1941– ) 344
Jacques Lacan (1901–81) 345
Bruno Latour (1947– ) 346
Jean-François Lyotard (1924–98) 348
J. Hillis Miller (1928– ) 349
Antonio Negri (1933– ) 350
Jacques Rancière (1940– ) 351
Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1950–2009) 353
Elaine Showalter (1941– ) 354
Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1942– ) 355
Raymond Williams (1921–88) 356
Cary Wolfe (1959– ) 358
Slavoj Žižek (1949– ) 358

4 Reading with Literary Theory 361
William Shakespeare, The Tempest 362
John Keats, “Ode on a Grecian Urn” 364
Charlotte Brontë, Jane Eyre; Jean Rhys, Wide Sargasso Sea 366
Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness; Chinua Achebe, Things Fall Apart 370
Virginia Woolf, To the Lighthouse 374
Zora Neale Hurston, Their Eyes Were Watching God 376
Samuel Beckett, Endgame 378
Salman Rushdie, Midnight’s Children 380

Recommendations for Further Reading 383
Glossary 392
Index 412
Acknowledgments

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Alphabetical Listing of Key Movements and Theories

African American Studies
Chicago School Neo-Aristotelian Theory
Critical Theory
Cultural Studies
Deconstruction
Ethnic and Indigenous Studies
  Asian American Studies
  Chicano/a Studies
  Native and Indigenous
Feminist Theory
Formalism and Structuralism
Gender Studies
  Gay and Lesbian Studies
Marxist Theory
Narrative Theory/Narratology
New Criticism
New Historicism/Cultural Poetics
Phenomenology and Hermeneutics
Postcolonial Studies
Posthumanism
  Disability Studies
  Ecocriticism
  Evolutionary Literary Theory
  Object-Oriented Ontologies
Post-Marxist Theory
Postmodernism
Poststructuralism
Psychoanalysis
Reader-Response Theory
Theory of the Novel
Transnationalism
Trauma Studies
Introduction

And the end of our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

T. S. Eliot, Four Quartets

Nearly a century ago, the English literary critic, I. A. Richards, spoke of a “chaos of critical theories,” an assessment that would not be wide of the mark in the early years of the twenty-first century. The student of literature today is confronted with an array of theoretical approaches that touch on nearly every facet of human experience, from language and history to sexuality and gender, from cognitive science to the environment. How is one to choose? *The Literary Theory Handbook* is designed to help readers find their way through the chaos of theory by providing in-depth overviews of the leading approaches. Most of the theorists discussed in these pages assume that literary texts – and not just books, but other kinds of texts, like film and other works of art – give us pleasure and help us understand the world around us. Some recent theoretical fields, like posthumanism, are profoundly concerned with what it means to be human and what our relation ought to be with the *non-human*. This new emphasis is, in some respects, a return to the humanism that for centuries defined literary and cultural study – but with an important difference. For the posthumanism we find today has learned the lessons of theoretical reflection on humanism, anti-humanism, and a host of other perspectives. My point is that not only does *literature matter* but theory matters too, and not simply because it helps us understand literature. Theory has its own claim on our attention because it seeks, like literature has always done, to make the world come alive in our imaginations. Theory can be hard sometimes, especially when a specialized vocabulary is involved. But any theory worth its salt is finally about human experience and how
Introduction

to make it better. Matthew Arnold, a nineteenth-century English poet and critic, once said that “literature is a criticism of life.” I would like to add that theory, at its best, is always trying to get at the life of literature. The reader of this Handbook is invited to explore in its pages how literature can come alive with a little help from theory.

Since at least 1980, a number of introductory texts have emerged that seek to explain the tenets of the main theoretical trends. The Literary Theory Handbook differs in a number of ways. First, it includes a brief history of theory that gives a broad overview from the classical era to the present, with an emphasis on the twentieth and twenty-first centuries; this is a unique feature. Another feature not found in similar texts is a chapter that includes short biographies of literary theorists, which emphasize the major works and accomplishments of over forty key figures. Many guides and introductions provide discussions of the major theories, but few provide the kind of detailed coverage of a wide range of theories that the reader will find in this Handbook. Each section of chapter two goes into sufficient detail about each theory, including explanations, quotations, and examples, so that the reader gets a good foundation for further reading. Moreover, the sections are organized under broad categories that help the reader to see the interrelations between and among theoretical approaches. Finally, the Handbook offers sample readings (in chapter four) that give the reader a sense of how theoretical analysis works. No other similar book – be it a guide or an introduction – offers all of these features.

The Nature of Literary Theory

The rise of “high theory” in the 1960s and 1970s (think, for example, of deconstruction and feminism) and its popularity in the human and social sciences has changed fundamentally the way we read literature. But theory has been with us since the time of the ancient Greeks, when Aristotle set down his theory of poetics, which was an attempt to understand how tragic drama worked and how it affected its audiences. His Poetics, like so many studies after it, focused on the relationship between literature and life and, even when it related the most terrible events, celebrated life and all of its mysteries. Since Aristotle, literary theory has gone through many changes, sometimes circling back on itself to reclaim an earlier idea, other times leaping ahead according to a new paradigm for understanding language or the human experience. The notion of theory that dominates the humanities and social sciences today really begins with theories of form and structure in the 1920s and 1930s, though some theories (like Marxism, psychoanalysis, and feminism) have roots that go back further into the nineteenth century. The 1960s saw a groundswell of theoretical innovation (and, at times, renovation) that has continued, despite alarming talk of the “death of theory,” until the present day.

Theory is a way of thinking. In fact, one could say that thinking theoretically is a paradigm for thought itself, at least that form of thought used to understand concepts and ideas and to combine them meaningfully. Broadly speaking, theory is deductive or inductive: in the first, the theorist begins with a general idea and then investigates individual instances of it (literary texts) in order to prove its validity; in the second, the study of individual instances leads to the formation of general ideas
based on them. Inductive reasoning is more common in the sciences, though Aristotle’s theory of tragedy and some formalist approaches rely on it. By and large, literary theory is deductive, in that a general idea governs our analysis of individual texts. In deduction, knowledge is built up through generalizations that test the limits of what can be included in general categories. Deductive reasoning, particularly in literary analysis, assumes the possibility of alternative viewpoints and thus requires the power of persuasion to make an argument based on a general idea, because other general ideas could account equally well for the same individual texts. Despite this openness to alternatives, the thought process in literary theory remains the same in large part because we are always moving from general principles to particular instances, from general ideas to individual texts. Even theories that attack generalization are grounded on the general principle that generalities ought to be avoided.

One reason literary theory appears so forbidding or impenetrable to so many readers is that it asks us to manage multiple general ideas and devise multiple strategies of interpretation. The tendency toward theoretical collaboration – for example, postcolonial feminism, Marxist deconstruction, posthumanism – has enriched our sense of how theory can be used but it also challenges us to juggle multiple analytical strategies and technical vocabularies. The good news is that the difficulty is one of degree rather than kind, for theoretical thought functions in the same way no matter how many ideas we juggle. The Literary Theory Handbook seeks to make this theoretical juggling easier by showing how complex ideas work singly and in combination. Of course, literary theory neither seeks nor can achieve the kind of stability, uniformity, consistency, and universality that is the aim of scientific inquiry. While scientists cannot ignore such things as ideology, social changes, and political pressures, the scientific method insures that, in the proper conditions, objectivity can be achieved. With literary theory, aspects of society and politics are often the focus of analysis. This does not mean that theory is free of norms and rules or that it is totally subjective; the point is rather that the norms and principles of theory are constructed precisely in order to take the measure of social and political influences on literature. While literary theory involves a subjective element, traditions of practice have made possible a certain consistency that enables readers and theorists alike to share their experience with literary texts. It also allows teachers and writers like myself to communicate fundamental theoretical ideas, concepts, and methods. Literary theory therefore resembles the literary text because the very fact that the latter is a product of a particular person or persons in a particular society and culture at a particular time is vitally important.

In the sciences, a new theory can displace an old one, relegating the older theory to the history of science. This rarely happens in literary theory. We might find that a particular theory (say, formalism) falls out of fashion, but in the humanities, there is always a chance that an “outdated” theory will be revived, often in connection with new ideas (as when narrative theorists use formalist concepts). Another thing that distinguishes literary theory is its openness to a wide variety of disciplines, including anthropology, architecture, biology, communications, design, economics, history, international relations, linguistics, mathematics, music, philosophy, physics, political science, psychology, semiotics, sociology, and theatre. Because literature, and the
human experience it both represents and creates, is rich and various, literary theory has found it both useful and invigorating to borrow methods and ideas from these disciplines. In a world that has become increasingly specialized, in which our own experience is often limited to our workplace and own small field of expertise, literary theory makes other forms of expertise available to us and reminds us, by virtue of its openness and adaptability, of the wider world in which we each play our small but significant role.

This leads me to address two problem areas in literary theory that, for some readers, can be a stumbling block: terminology and style. Some theories – for example, deconstruction, Lacanian psychoanalysis, Marxist theory, phenomenology, postcolonial theory, narrative theory – could be faulted for stylistic extravagance, for having a specialized vocabulary, or for close adherence to a specific doctrine. There are sound reasons for each of these qualities, particularly if a given theory (say, Marxism or postcolonial theory) seeks to question conventional modes of writing, thinking, or organizing knowledge. In fact, many contemporary literary theorists seek to subvert or challenge Enlightenment thought, which is typically characterized by a stable and unified subject of knowledge, and a belief in the primacy of reason and in concepts like universality. The style and vocabulary of Jacques Derrida’s deconstructionist criticism is in part designed to circumvent easy answers to complex questions about language, just as the difficulties of Luce Irigaray’s feminist psychoanalysis are the result of her avoidance of traditional notions of gender, sexuality, and psychology. To be sure, some theorists use obscure terminology or affect a difficult style to mask a trivial or incoherent argument. In these cases, readers are not to be faulted for complaining about jargon or obscurantism.

What is Literature?

An important question needs to be raised at this point, one that is often felt, by readers of all kinds, to be self-evident: what is the object of literary theory? The obvious answer is literature. But this obvious answer fails to satisfy readers, especially those who have been engaged in teaching and writing about it for years! So it is worthwhile asking, what do we mean when we use terms like literature and literary? From the time of Aristotle to the present, philosophers have recognized the preeminence of literature, particularly poetry, in aesthetic theory. “Poetry,” writes G. W. F. Hegel, “is adequate to all forms of the beautiful and extends over all of them, because its proper element is the beautiful imagination, and imagination is indispensable for every beautiful production, no matter to what form of art it belongs” (1: 90). Hegel was pretty sure he knew what literature was, as were most critics and readers until the modernist era, when novelists, poets, and playwrights began to experiment with traditional literary forms and raised all sorts of questions about what constitutes a specifically literary work. Postmodernism and cultural studies have only made these questions more urgent by expanding our conception of what constitutes a literary object (that is, one that can be read) to include television shows, advertisements, video games, internet sites, musical compositions, newspapers, cookbooks, and so much more.
Despite a long tradition of regarding literature as a fine art and despite the consensus in previous historical eras that literature is imaginative writing – a consensus based on Aristotle’s distinction between history and poetry: “the former relates things that have happened, the latter things that may happen” (12) – literary theory has, throughout the twentieth century, called into question the special status of both fine art and literature. Anyone who has read a major anthology of literature will notice that a substantial amount of the material in it is not literary in the sense of poems or fictional stories. One is as likely to find political, historical, or scientific writings as poetry, fiction, and drama. And many of these works are “imaginative” in the sense that they use language in “artistic” ways (that is, they rely on the connotative or suggestive meanings as often as the denotative or specific meanings of a word). All sorts of fine writing qualifies as literary, which is why we find works by John Stuart Mill, Cotton Mather, Margaret Fuller, and Charles Darwin in literature anthologies. We cannot stop here, however, for the criterion of “fine” or “imaginative” writing has changed over the years and not everyone agrees about how to make judgments about such writing, other than to say it is literary, which brings us back to the original question: but why is this kind of writing literary?

If we cannot rely on a special or “fine” use of language or specifically literary genres (e.g., fiction, poetry, drama) as a foundation for defining literature, perhaps we could find what we are looking for by asking whether an author intended to create literature. But this, too, is untenable, for it presupposes that we can know such intentions reliably enough to provide a basis for theoretical analysis; in any case, there is no good reason to think that literary authors have any special authority on this matter.

For many readers, literature is that which has stood the test of time, the “classics.” But this criterion is unsatisfactory, for one of the reasons a text becomes a “classic” is that it has been kept in print and in the classroom. And until very recently, this meant a process of selection and exclusion by cultural elites (publishers, professors, editors, agents) who created canons of literature that reflect their values and vision of the world. Ralph Rader, a Chicago School Neo-Aristotelian critic, puts the case strongly: “writers and works” are “ ruthlessly winnowed by the collective judgment and the survivors arranged in a relatively fixed honorific hierarchy of status and value (247). This kind of thinking tends to keep literature cordoned off in privileged spaces (e.g., universities, art schools, literary societies, coteries, and the like) where it is explained by experts (hence, Harold Bloom’s idea that literary critics are a kind of secular clergy). Common sense tells us that literature is not restricted to a certain kind of reader, though an English major might have an advantage by virtue of spending a lot of time reading literature and literary criticism. But this advantage does not change the nature of the books she might read, for it is simply a means of access to literature. Few readers, though, will be happy with a definition of literature that is grounded in the marketplace or on admissions standards at universities. Nor will they be happy with a definition that limits literature to fiction, poetry, and drama. After all, today’s newspaper may be tomorrow’s literature, as was the case with Joseph Addison and Richard Steele’s essays in the eighteenth-century periodical The Spectator. Or it may remain, as most journalistic writing remains, ephemeral,
useful primarily to historians. By the same token, what is considered the highest literary achievement today may become a classic; but it is just as likely (if not more so) to be forgotten tomorrow. This is a problem of genre as well, for literary history reveals a complex web of influences in which we see the ascendancy now of poetry, now of the novel as the paradigmatic form for “literature” for a given age. The contemporaries of Addison and Steele did not regard their works as literature, nor were their works written in the forms great literature typically took for their age. Saying this is saying nothing about the quality of their work, its popularity, or its influence. That we do tend to value their work now as literature, however, says a great deal about twenty-first-century reading habits.

So we are back to our question, which we might answer by considering a definition of literature that emphasizes perennial themes and subject matter. Fair enough, but who is to decide what the important subjects and themes are? Even a cursory glance at literary history shows that themes and subjects change constantly; and while some themes and subjects are consistently treated over the years, they are rarely treated in the same way. Would John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, which deals with the theme of humankind’s fall from heavenly grace, be more “literary” than Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*, which focuses on AIDS and the nature of gay experience in late twentieth-century United States? As with the problem of defining what “fine writing” is, so with this problem: there is simply no way to define a truly literary theme.

These unsatisfactory answers to our question share one thing in common: they presuppose that literature is separate from other forms of representation, protected by its autonomy from the corrosive effects of social and political life. On this view, the literary text is an autonomous text, an idea that has its roots in German idealist philosophy, particularly Immanuel Kant’s notion of the art-object as self-contained and self-governing. But we might well ask how autonomy can be realized if the art-object – in the present context, the literary text – is so bound up with publishing, marketing, reviewing, and teaching? Even if we argue that literature is autonomous in the sense that it works according to its own inner laws and principles, we must contend with the objection that authors and readers are inextricably caught up in complex ideological and cultural ideas that have powerful effects on how they read and write. One of the most profound achievements of literary theory has been to challenge this idea of autonomy by analyzing ideology, culture, politics, and other elements that we once confidently thought lay outside the sphere of art. Let’s go so far as to grant that literature is “relatively” autonomous, that literary language does more than merely serve as a mode of communication in or reference to the external world. What would be the limits of such an autonomy? Who or what would set those limits? In the end, the argument that literature is radically separate from other spheres of life violates good sense as well as logic.

One answer to our question, what is literature, does not seem to go away, no matter how hard literary theorists try to disprove it. For some people would have us believe that literature is “high-brow,” that it somehow transcends the interests and concerns of the majority of people. If we believed this, we would have to see literature at the top of a hierarchy, below which would be popular forms of writing (low- or middle-brow writing, so-called genre fiction, song lyrics, graphic novels, and the
What is Literature?

like). If we look at literary history, we see that such a distinction falls apart, for it is at bottom a distinction dependent on fluctuations of taste and the nature of textual production. The example of Addison and Steele illustrates this. So too does a novelist like Charles Dickens, whose work was once regarded as “popular” rather than “literary,” but is now regarded as one of the great literary giants of the nineteenth century. These criteria having to do with the value of literature – that it is better (morally, aesthetically, or socially) than other forms of writing – are often unconsciously assumed by the same readers and teachers who might consciously condemn them.

Even if we could agree what “good” and “bad” corresponded to and could agree further that such judgments were worth making, how do we select our criteria: those that existed at the time of publication or those in place at the time of the critic’s judgment? Are such criteria, no matter where they originate, a function of purely aesthetic elements, like style and form, or are they a function of social or political ideas? As Friedrich Nietzsche has argued, values are never intrinsic to a work or an action, nor do they come to us from a transcendent source and nor are they universal in character. Our literary values, like our moral ones, are developed in order to preserve our sense of cultural and personal well-being; our judgments are therefore partial and interested, contingent on historically conditioned aesthetic, social, and political attitudes. For some people, this realization leads to the conclusion that all values are relative, and to a point, that is the case. Yet, some values seem to prevail over others and some works inspire the same sense of value in a given community (say, among English majors or among members of a book club). So how do we determine if a book is valuable as literature? What makes us so confident, generation after generation, that some works (for example, Shakespeare’s plays, Emily Dickinson’s poems, Herman Melville’s Moby Dick, or James Joyce’s Ulysses) are clearly literature while others (the mass of out of print and forgotten books languishing in secondhand book shops) are clearly not? Part of the reason is that readers recognize in such works the innovation and creativity, the love of language and exuberance in its use, and for these reasons want to continue reading and talking about them. These readers have not necessarily judged these features good or bad, but they do seem to have consistently found in them a certain kind of pleasure, have regarded them as part of a tradition that includes novels, poems, and plays, but also histories, sermons, essays, and other forms of writing. Readers keep coming back to this tradition and the pleasures it offers, even if what they find is not quite the same as what a prior generation found. Readers who love dramatic characters who speak well of life’s joys and vicissitudes are as likely to appreciate Oscar Wilde as Shakespeare, as likely to find Virginia Woolf as compelling as Nathaniel Hawthorne.

Literature, then, might well be that form of writing that engages with life in the most exciting, innovative, creative, and mind-altering ways. It is a way of seeing and being in the world that we find so attractive because it allows us to see the world in a new way. Literature is, as Wolfgang Iser has noted, a kind of anthropological investigation, for it goes into areas of life that are left unexplored by science, philosophy, religion, or politics. Literature, then, is the most fully human way of seeing and understanding the world.
The Practice of Theory

Even if we accept this definition of literature, we are left with the question of how to interpret it, for like our experience with the world, our reading practices vary from person to person. Theoretically, we could have a different reading of a given text for every reader, but what we more often find are common modes of interpretation used by multiple readers who share reading experiences. Stanley Fish, a pragmatist and reader-response theorist, calls these “interpretive communities.” Though we often think of such communities in connection with schools, they exist at all levels of society; they exist even when we are not made aware of them, as when readers of crime fiction respond in similar ways to generic conventions. A chemistry textbook, a novel by Virginia Woolf, a cookbook, Kant’s philosophy, a Volkswagen manual, the LA Times, a back issue of Star! magazine: these all require certain conventions of reading and understanding. In each case, the generic expectations of a certain kind of text will be more or less apparent to readers of it, though the communities that read Kant and Woolf will often be more formal, and the members of it more likely to communicate with each other (through criticism, reviews, discussion, and so on). And while such communities have the virtue of creating shared habits of reading, they can run the danger of assuming that their mode of reading is a natural one, even the “best” or “authorized” one (the latter is often the case with respect to sacred texts). Literary theory, particularly in the late twentieth century, seeks to avert this danger and to celebrate the multiplicity of reading standpoints and interpretive communities.

Interpreting literature is a way of raising questions about it. The more questions raised, and the more difficult they are to answer, the more likely we are going to be tempted to want some kind of “toolkit,” and theory provides just the variety of tools that readers can employ to answer the questions that literature raise. These questions can be about the form or genre of a text, or about the way gender and sexuality are represented, or about how language works to communicate emotion and states of consciousness, or about how political ideas and ideology are reflected or produced by the text. The range of questions corresponds very closely to the range of our experiences in the world. Formalist and structuralist theorists tend to emphasize a predictable relationship between the reader and the language of literature because individual readers, as Roland Barthes has pointed out, “cannot by [themselves] either create or modify” language, for “it is essentially a collective contract which one must accept in its entirety if one wishes to communicate” (14). At the same time, as poststructuralists emphasize, language can be slippery and unstable, because the signifiers (the words in the text) lack a clear and direct relation to what we think (or hope) are the signifieds (the ideas or concepts) to which they refer. For some of these theorists, language refers only to itself (that is, signifiers refer to other signifiers), which means that, theoretically, meaning can proliferate endlessly. Both of these positions are valid and valuable ways of reading literature; they respond to different perspectives on the world, on language, and on reading practices. The Literary Theory Handbook explores these and myriad other theoretical positions and emphasizes their coexistence not their exclusive authority.
The practice of literary theory is, therefore, not a matter of following an orthodoxy, but of finding the best way to open the text to the questions we want to ask about it. The literary critic who uses theory (either explicitly or implicitly) is free to be creative, to express herself and her own values in the process of answering the questions she poses about the text. Oscar Wilde understood this well when he linked the artist and the critic in terms of their shared creation of a new aesthetic experience. For him, the best criticism treats the work of art “as a starting point for a new creation” and, further, the highest criticism “fills with wonder a form which the artist may have left void, or not understood, or understood incompletely” (150). Wilde’s insight is very close to that of hermeneutical critics, who devised techniques for reading sacred and historical texts, for both insist that the reader must listen to what the text has to tell us.

If there is “truth” to be had from literature, it is very much bound up with our ways of reading, which are not all that different from our ways of understanding the world around us. The “special” status of the literary text, then, is attributable not to its essential qualities but rather to the reader’s own reading practices and experiences. The task of the critical reader is not to pass judgment on the text but to enjoy the reading process in a disciplined way and to share that pleasure with others.

How to Use the Handbook

The Literary Theory Handbook is designed to help readers with this task. One can begin with the historical overview in chapter one, “The Rise of Literary Theory,” in order to get a sense of how theory has developed and the relations between and among theories. Another strategy is to consult individual theoretical fields in chapter two, “The Scope of Literary Theory,” either by reading a single entry or the entries clustered in one of the six parts. Chapter three, “Key Figures in Literary Theory,” and the “Recommendations for Further Reading” are research tools designed to provide biographical and bibliographical information in a quick and accessible fashion. The “Glossary” is a valuable resource that can accompany just about any reading task in literary criticism and theory. Finally, readers who wish to see how theory is used in literary analysis can consult the sample interpretations in chapter four, “Reading with Literary Theory.” The Literary Theory Handbook provides multiple points of entry for readers of all kinds and for every stage of the process of learning about and enjoying the experience of theory.

To make the Handbook a more effective reference tool, I have used a system of cross-referencing. SMALL CAPITALS are used to indicate terms that can be found listed in the glossary. Boldface type is used to indicate that a theorist is treated at length in chapter three, “Key Figures in Literary Theory.” Generally, I cross-reference the first use of a name or term in any given section. A similar system of cross-referencing terms and concepts is employed in the glossary and index. In chapter two, parenthetical cross-references refer to relevant discussions of a given topic, figure, or concept elsewhere in the Handbook, while the “note” at the end of each section points the reader to related sections in the chapter.
Introduction

Note on Sources

Throughout this *Handbook*, I have supplied the date of first publication in the original language; for texts not originally written in English, I have supplied the title used for the first English translation. Bibliographies, including both works cited and recommend readings, follow each entry on a theory or theorist. For more titles, and a list of anthologies and general collections of literary theory, see the “Recommendations for Further Reading.”

Works Cited

Fish, Stanley. *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980.
The one duty we owe to history is to rewrite it.

Oscar Wilde, “The Critic as Artist”

The historical life of ideas is neither straightforward nor causal. Ideas from one era are revived and revised for a new generation of thinkers, while new ones emerge from both predictable and surprising sources. This is certainly the case with the history of literary theory. As the twentieth century unfolded, literary theory took on a momentum that might be called progressive, each movement or trend building on the blind spots and logical flaws in those that had come before. But there was also a fair amount of recursive movement – doubling back to pick up a forgotten or misunderstood idea – as well as lateral forays into new terrain. Throughout this history, we find instances of innovation, both new combinations of existing theoretical ideas (for example, Marxist deconstruction) or the emergence of new areas of study (for example, cognitive studies); we also find projects of renovation, in which prior theoretical models (for example, materialist criticism or psychoanalysis) were given a new lease on life. These various modes of historical change were often happening simultaneously, so that we find clusters of intense growth and activity in key periods, especially in the modernist period (1920s and 1930s), the era of “high theory” (the 1960s and 1970s), and the posthumanist revolution that began to gain ground in the 1990s.

From the era of formalism and critical theory to the mid-century flourishing of poststructuralism and feminism to the rise of cultural studies, postcolonial studies, and myriad theories under the banner of posthumanism, we see a rich and complex historical development. One cannot help but notice that from mid-century, the variety of theories increases dramatically, which means that this development is difficult to chart chronologically. For that reason, this history will attempt to
illustrate the simultaneity as well as the progression of theoretical change and renewal. It will also draw attention to recursive tendencies, those moments when theoretical development appears to turn back on itself to reclaim earlier modes of thought and methodologies (as we see in the 1990s with a reinvigorated Marxist theory). Indeed, the game-changing ideas in the posthumanist movement frequently take us back to Friedrich Nietzsche and Charles Darwin, those nineteenth-century “prolegomenal thinkers,” as Margo Norris calls them (6), who were products of their time but also, paradoxically, way ahead of it. This temporal paradox defines a good deal of literary theory and serves as a reminder of the importance of untimely experience, which Nietzsche describes as “acting counter to our time and thereby acting on our time and, let us hope, for the benefit of a time to come” (“On the Uses” 60).

**Early Developments in Literary Theory**

Literary theory has its roots in Greek and Roman philosophy, principally Plato’s ideas on mimesis and Aristotle’s *Poetics*, though there were many competing Athenian thinkers until the time of the Romans. Of special note among the latter is Pseudo-Longinus, whose *On the Sublime* (first century CE) put forward the idea of an aesthetic experience that we might today call “the beautiful” and thereby marked the beginning of aesthetic theory. Ideas about art and literature changed little until the Renaissance era, though medieval refinements, like anagogical and allegorical modes of interpretation, were to prove important for hermeneutics and for various schools of formalist and archetypal criticism. The period from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries produced a number of important treatises on literary art. Sir Philip Sidney’s *Defence of Poesie* (1595) was instrumental in establishing the importance of the literary artist as an “inventor” or “maker,” while John Dryden, in his *Essay on Dramatic Poesy* (1668), followed the lead of Pierre Corneille, whose *Of the Three Unities of Action, Time, and Place* (1660) established the principles of a neoclassical theory of drama and thereby formalized modern dramatic art. English neoclassicism reached its height in Alexander Pope’s *Essay on Criticism* (1711), which articulates a view of the critic who aspires toward the perfection of “Unerring nature,” a “clear, unchang’d universal light.” For Pope, the task of the critic is to follow the guidelines of those who have come before, for “Those rules of old, discover’d, not devis’d, / Are Nature still, but Nature Methodiz’d” (ll.70–1, 88–9). The balanced and measured harmony of Pope’s couplets give a pleasing aesthetic form to a general neoclassical view of art as an improvement upon nature, a view that in the eighteenth century conformed to the Enlightenment principle of human perfectibility.

In the last quarter of the eighteenth century, English and German Romantic literature challenged the neoclassical vision of art by giving voice to human striving for what lay beyond measure and balance, beyond formal perfection. At the same time, German idealist philosophy developed new theories of aesthetics. Most commentators today regard Alexander Baumgarten’s *Aesthetica* (1750) as the starting point of modern aesthetic theories. Baumgarten’s task was to find a way to bridge the gap between sensation and reason, a bridge he found in *aesthetics*, which is
Early Developments in Literary Theory

derived from the Greek αἰσθητός, “sensible, perceptible” [OED]). The first major work in this new field was Edmund Burke’s A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful (1757), which sought to establish the general outlines of a theory of taste and aesthetic judgment. Burke uses the term “taste” to mean “that faculty, or those faculties of the mind which are affected with, or which form a judgment of the works of imagination and the elegant arts” (6). Like Baumgarten, Burke proceeds from the assumption that taste is bound up with sensation; but he is not content with establishing aesthetics as an inferior kind of cognition. The faculty of imagination becomes an important feature of aesthetic judgment, for “the mind of man possesses a sort of creative power of its own” separate from sensation, “either in representing at pleasure the images of things in the order and manner in which they were received by the sense, or in combining those images in a new manner, according to a different order” (15–16). Burke was able to link empiricism and aesthetics in a systematic way, and his theories of art, particularly of the sublime, which emphasized affective states like terror and pain, were to prove immensely influential. Some years later, Immanuel Kant’s Critique of Judgment (1790) moved away from the English empirical tradition and Burkean aesthetic sensibility and established the importance of cognition in aesthetic judgments. For Kant, aesthetic judgments, though a “freer” form of ordinary cognition, are grounded in an a priori concept of taste that is analogous to the concepts that govern understanding and moral judgment. For Kant, aesthetic judgment resembles moral judgment, in that both have to take place outside the determinate concept, which is essential to reason. We know things because we have concepts for them, categories of understanding, but art, Kant says, does not become known in this conceptual way. All aesthetic judgments are reflective, not cognitive, and are deeply grounded in subjectivity; they are also singular because they cannot be defined under a general concept. An aesthetic idea “cannot become cognition because it is an intuition (of the imagination) for which an adequate concept can never be found” (215). But Kant required a universal ground or common sense (sensus communis) for artistic judgment. He found it in the idea of an indeterminate concept of Beauty (one that has the quality of a concept without being determined by reason), which allowed him to posit a “supersensible substrate of humanity” that grants aesthetic judgment universal validity. It is a necessary illusion, Kant admits, “the best we can do” (213). Kant’s theory of the sublime attempted to move past the emphasis on feeling in Burke’s philosophy. For both thinkers, the sublime defies the imagination’s power to conceive of an object or experience, but Kant tried to show how this failure of the imagination can be overcome by reason. The aesthetic judgment of the sublime, he argued, involves the judgment not of an object but of the relationship between an object’s overwhelming presence or force and the ability of the imagination to invoke a concept of “absolute freedom” or “absolute totality” that could assimilate it. When imagination is overwhelmed by perceptions (typically, natural and of the sort Burke describes as terrifying or awesome), reason steps in and “cognizes” what imagination has failed to grasp and thus shows its power over nature. This triumph of reason generates the sublime effect.

The concept of the beautiful is central to Kantian and neo-Kantian aesthetics, according to which judgments of the beautiful are disinterested, universal, and necessary; they
The Rise of Literary Theory

present the beautiful object as possessing “purposiveness without purpose” – that is, it appears to have a purpose, it is driven by *seeming to possess* the quality of purposiveness, but it has no *determinate* purpose, no *telos* or goal, and it corresponds to no determinate concept. Friedrich Schiller’s *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795) departs from Kant’s aesthetics by sidestepping the problem of the concept and concentrating on the dialectical interplay of reason and imagination. He thus develops the Kantian idea of “play” well beyond where Kant himself wished to take it. In fine art, Kant notes, “the purposiveness in its form must seem as free from all constraint of chosen rules as if it were a product of mere nature” – a *free play* that is also purposive – and it must not “seem intentional; i.e., fine art must have the *look* of nature even though we are conscious of it as art: it must not appear painstaking” (16). Schiller develops the idea of a “play impulse,” a state in which artistic play, rather than serving the function of a paradoxical purposiveness without purpose, mediates between sense and reason. By reconciling “becoming with absolute being, of variation with identity,” the play-drive mediates the sense-drive and form-drive, by enabling both to “act in concert” and thereby “introduce form into matter and reality into form” (97–9). Schiller’s thought was influential among German and English Romantic writers and artists who sought to bring together the material realm of the sensible and the spiritual realm of pure thought. Indeed, the concept of play enabled a new way of “distributing the sensible,” as Jacques Rancière puts it. “Minimally defined,” he writes, “play is any activity that has no end other than itself, that does not intend to gain any effective power over things or persons.” The “inactive activity” of the “player” (as opposed to, say, the worker) is a suspension of both the “cognitive power of understanding” and the “sensibility that requires an object of desire” (30). Kant and Schiller remain important among post-Marxist theorists, especially Rancière who argues that their work articulates “the new and paradoxical regime for identifying what is recognizable as art . . . the aesthetic regime” (*Aesthetics* 8), one which persists in framing our contemporary discussions of art and aesthetics. (On the aesthetic regime, see Post-Marxist Theory 114–15.)

G. W. F. Hegel answers what he considers to be the key questions confronting Kant and Schiller: Can we speak of universal assent to any aesthetic judgment without a concept of the beautiful or of the artwork? Can art be its own concept? Hegel thought that it could and developed a concept of art that is both true and necessary but that emerges in the same temporal and dialectical process as thought itself. Art aspires to the highest form of Spirit, for “the loftiness and excellence of art in attaining a reality adequate to its Concept will depend on the degree of inwardness and unity in which Idea and shape appear fused in one” (1: 72). Romantic art best exemplifies this notion of the artistic concept as part of the general process of Spirit (or Reason): rather than the “undivided unity of classical art” (a “unity of divine and human nature,” which is realized in a “sensuous immediate existence”), we find in Romantic art the “*inwardness of self-consciousness*” that “celebrates its triumph over the external and manifests its victory in and on the external itself, whereby what is apparent to the senses alone sinks into worthlessness” (1: 80–1).

The German idealist tradition exerted a powerful influence on English Romanticism, which in its turn inaugurated a tradition of critical reflection on literature and culture that influenced much of twentieth-century literary theory. One of the chief “conductors” of German aesthetic theory was Samuel Taylor Coleridge,
whose *Biographia Literaria* (1817) successfully translated German aesthetics into English terms. The division of imagination into primary and secondary modes and the distinction between imagination and fancy are two of the most famous propositions in that volume, and both are grounded in the aesthetics of Kant, Schiller, and Friedrich Schelling. For Coleridge, the primary imagination is “the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I am” (295–6). The secondary imagination is an “echo” of this primary form, differing only in degree “and in the mode of its operation.” *Fancy* differs by virtue of its “play” within “fixities and definites,” a “mode of Memory emancipated from the order of time and space” (296). William Wordsworth was also influenced by Schiller, particularly his theory of aesthetic “play,” and in the distinction he drew between naïve and sentimental poetry, the latter characterized by reflective and skeptical self-consciousness, the former by “natural genius” and spontaneous, unselfconsciousness. The preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (co-authored by Wordsworth and Coleridge, 1800) expounds on the nature and function of literary art and the role of the artist in society; it also rejects neoclassical theories of poetic practice and turns to the “natural genius” of the “rustic” man as a model for the poet’s aesthetic sensibility. For Wordsworth, the poet is a hypersensitive individual, one “who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him” and who is “affected more than other men by absent things as if they were present” (xxviii). The poet finds in the “the native and naked dignity of man” and in divine Nature the “grand elementary principle of pleasure, by which he knows, and feels, and lives, and moves” (xxxiii–xxxiv). The poem written by such a sensitive individual is the product of “emotion recollected in tranquility.” Percy Shelley’s *Defense of Poetry* puts forward a similar view of the poet as a sensitive participant in an “unremitting interchange” (“Mont Blanc”) with the natural world. For Shelley, poets “are the unacknowledged legislators of the world,” for they produce an aesthetic object that “is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth” (46, 10). A more radical statement of poetic sensitivity at the time was John Keats’ “negative capability,” which refers to the imaginative absorption in the world outside of oneself, a capacity for surrendering one’s personality in the contemplation of an object.

Romantic notions of art and the beautiful persisted throughout the nineteenth century and constituted a kind of secular spiritualism in the arts that reached a high point in the poetry of Alfred Lord Tennyson, Walt Whitman, and Emily Dickinson. However, not all writers of the era appreciated the Romantic emphasis on feeling and striving for the infinite. The critic and poet Matthew Arnold was ambivalent about Wordsworth, for example, though he admired him as he did the other major Romantics. As Michael O’Neill notes, Arnold “democratizes Romantic longing, presenting it as an all-pervasive emotion [in which] the special fate of the artist merges into [a] depiction of a general lot” (111). In fact, one of the problems for the Romantics was that they “did not know enough”: they “lacked “materials and a basis; a thorough interpretation of the world was necessarily denied to it” (Arnold 262–3). He believed that poetry, indeed all of literature, could serve an important function as a stabilizing influence in a society that was becoming increasingly less reliant on the church as the source of moral and ethical principles. His
The Rise of Literary Theory

“post-Romanticism” may have as much to do with the turmoil of mid-century Europe – marked by the wave of revolutions of 1848 – as with aesthetic concerns. Though much maligned for his cultural conservatism, Arnold may well have been the first literary theorist to recognize the deep connections between aesthetics and culture and, more important, between the critic and society. However, Arnold’s privileged position in nineteenth-century English society (his father was headmaster at Rugby School) gave him a somewhat restricted view of how literature could improve social conditions. His influential *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) considers the threat to society in class terms and offers what had become, by the late nineteenth century, a quintessentially liberal humanist solution to the problem. On the one hand, education, redesigned along humanist lines, should provide the kind of cultural knowledge necessary for a rapidly evolving industrial society; on the other hand, criticism should perform the function of recognizing and preserving “the best that is known and thought in the world” (268). Arnold held that “the critical power is of lower rank than the creative,” but he also held that criticism (along with philosophy) created “an intellectual situation of which the creative power can profitably avail itself” (260–1). Criticism should be free of Romantic emotionalism, for its chief endeavor is “to see the object as in itself it really is” (258). In order to do this, it must be informed by the “disinterested love of a free play of the mind on all subjects, for its own sake” (268). In a sense, Arnold rewrites Schiller’s idea of “play” in a way that resolves the paradox at its heart by making it a function of critical clear-sightedness.

According to Linda Dowling, Arnold and his contemporaries in the mid-nineteenth century, especially writers like John Ruskin and William Morris, embraced a form of artistic democracy, that she calls “Whig aesthetics,” rooted in the moral philosophy of the Earl of Shaftesbury and the aesthetics of Schiller. Whig aesthetics promoted the social and ethical utility of art but it also led to its putative opposite, the AESTHETICISM of the fin de siècle. For Dowling, Whig aestheticism encompasses such late nineteenth-century figures as Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde. Pater, an Oxford professor who made his reputation as an art historian and critic, had a powerful effect on young artists and writers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. His *Studies in the Renaissance* calls our attention to the “passage and dissolution of impressions, images, sensations” and argues for a perspective toward experience that is immediate and vital. But the aestheticism he advocates is not entirely a withdrawal from the world into the rarified realm of art – the usual meaning attached to the infamous “Conclusion,” in which Pater argues that art proposes to give us nothing “but the highest quality to [our] moments as they pass, and simply for those moments’ sake” (190). In fact, Dowling argues that some Victorian readers would not have seen a break in continuity between Pater and his contemporaries, for they saw “an identical impulse toward restored community” rather than an “Aestheticist withdrawal into art.” In short, Pater too was motivated by “the liberal spirit of Victorian culture” (xi).

Far more radical were Wilde, Pater’s student at Oxford, and Friedrich Nietzsche, who in very similar ways point decisively toward the main concerns of twentieth-century literary theory. Nietzsche and Wilde were great shatterers of tradition; they warned us to go beyond the mere reversal of conventional values