

# Literary Theory and Immanent Intelligibility

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**Résumé:** *La «théorie» – soit-elle littéraire, critique ou théorie tout court – a eu ses rebonds, ou rebuffades faites au nom de la «théorie», à partir des plaidoyers pour «le retour de l'auteur» et pour un retour vers l'éthique de la théorie littéraire, à partir d'une nouvelle «théorie élevée», projetée et coagulée autour du concept de «l'inscription», dans la lignée de Walter Benjamin, Bakhtine, Thomas Cohen, jusqu'à «la phénoménologie culturelle» dont Steven Connor parle, qui n'est ni «phénoménologie», ni «culturelle», dans le sens où les études culturelles sont «culturelles». Ayant tout cela en vue, je voudrais parler brièvement de celle qui utilise le syntagme de notre titre, à savoir «l'intelligibilité immanente». En fait, le concept d'intelligibilité immanente porte deux significations distinctes: herméneutique et politique. La question de l'intelligibilité immanente est en fait la question herméneutique de la «compréhension historique».*

**Keywords:** *immanent intelligibility, literary theory, “theory fatigue”, cultural studies, cultural theory, social constructionism*

The recent exhaustion of literary theory spells out melancholy. In the 80s, the discipline still managed to be the target of a frontal siege, directed against its ambition to encompass everything, against the “totality”, in the Levinasian sense of the term, of its regulatory principles. To Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels, literary theory deserved to be preceded by a categorical “against”. In the following decade, the adverbial attributes revolving around the appellation of this theory change in meaning: in 1990, Thomas Docherty attaches before it a strategic “after”, in 1999 Martin McQuillan et al. add the prefix “post-” and speak about the “chronic fatigue” undermining theory, and also about the fatigue we all feel toward it (to catch either suggestion of the phrase “theory fatigue”). About the same time, Antoine Compagnon heaves a sigh, humming Charles Trenet’s line: “*que reste-t-il de nos amours?*”, while in 2000 Judith Butler, John Guillory and Kendall Thomas gather together essays in a collection whose title raises a question, no pathos implied: *What’s Left of Theory?* In 2003, Terry Eagleton also suggests, somehow tardily, an “after theory”, in a book which is both exciting and intriguing, as everything else that bears his signature.

All this talk is not, at a closer look, about the “death” of the theory (although the Hegelian aura of this word haunts and disturbs here and there the above-mentioned diagnoses), but rather about a never-ending weariness, an acetic torpor, interrupted now and then, as it suits best, by semi-hysterical outbursts, by an ongoing delay to put an end

to things, perhaps, due to the impossibility of the *coup de grâce*. An eternised “reserved diagnosis” is scribbled on the clinical sheet at the bedside of theory.

On the other hand, the fact that almost all the aforementioned enterprises speak of attempts to resuscitate theory seems to me likewise symptomatic. Leaving aside their variation range, I would venture only to remark that, in general, counterattacking this “weariness” of (rather than “putting an end to”) theory with re-energising strategies could lead to two statements: firstly, that the question related to the status of theory is that of assisted, upheld survival, and secondly, and somehow paradoxically, that theory has never been in danger of “dying” in the first place (in other words, it can neither be let to die, nor euthanized, whether we like it or not). Leaving aside the medical metaphors I have resorted to so far – and probably stepping into another – we could say that the recent history of the status of literary theory, this entire oscillatory dynamics, suggests that we are dealing with a problem rephrased in a force field (using Adorno’s concept) which recommends itself to be not only broader but also better tuned to the demands of the present. More appropriately: the question related to literary theory has been engulfed and enlisted in the interplay of relations animating this field we might call, without fear of being too wrong, (since it is unclear what the term means, anyway), “culture”, or, to be more specific, “cultural policy”. I would like to bring two small arguments in support of this idea. The first, in keeping with the same note of terminological frivolity which has been informing this article right from the onset, refers to substituting the attribute in the phrase “literary theory” with the attribute “cultural” (cultural theory), a change usually seen to broaden in a salutary and safeguarding way the theoretical interest and interests. This mutation sends back to the privative delegitimising process literary theory was submitted to, and that is the second argument I would like to make. Under it, literary theory was ripped off of its key category and at the same time the efficient reason of its initial project – “literarity”, which, as we all know too well, exists no more. This first delegitimising stage is not recent; nonetheless, it wasn’t so long ago that it was recovered and brandished against literary theory. The second stage, contiguous to the first, meant to delegitimise the specific action field of theory (literature), or, in other words, the loss of a territory ended with a truce under which, yes, literature can still be the object of theory, provided that there is still some room left after other cultural items have been treated theoretically.

Following Adorno, to delegitimise means here – I have in mind both the significance and the direction – “to neutralise”, that is neutralising *la portance* and the importance of the literary theory faced with the “political” emergencies of contemporary culture. All this will go to the rightful heirs of theory – cultural studies – which have the vocabulary and the tools (the mantras, as John Brenkman calls them, “class/gender/race”) necessary to re-connect theoretical narrations to the sphere of (social, political, etc.) action, to make them somehow competitive in “the administered world”, to use an Adornian phrase. The studious culturalists often miss the fact that the “concept” of culture may have also been “neutralised”, narrowed down to what Adorno calls “tolerated negativity”, along with the consequences entailed by this possibility. In fact, Terry Eagleton borrowed Adorno’s idea, and slightly altered it, both in *The Illusions of Postmodernism* and in *After Theory*.

No doubt, “theory” (be it literary, critical, or theory *tout court*) has had its rebounds, or rebuffs made in the name of “theory”, from pleas for “the author’s return” and a return toward the ethics of the literary theory, from a projected new “high theory” coagulated around the concept of “inscription”, in the line of Walter Benjamin, Bakhtin, Thomas Cohen, to “the cultural phenomenology” Steven Connor speaks about, which is neither “a phenomenology”, nor is it „cultural” in the sense in which cultural studies are “cultural”. Out of all these, I would like to briefly discuss the one which uses the syntagm in our title, namely “immanent intelligibility”.

At first sight, the orientation seems less a rebuff than a coming to terms with the situation and the place of literary theory, and an acknowledged lack of interest in action, or to the cultural and political activism, in its turn a “political” gesture, or, if you like, merely a pragmatic one. The concept of “immanent intelligibility” (borrowed by Stanley Fish from an essay by Ernest Weinrib, “Legal Formalism: On the Immanent Rationality of Law”, and discussed in his study, *Professional Correctness*) refers to the way a discipline inevitably internalises its justifications, to the legitimising mechanisms it practices, which are intelligible and applicable only in the closed sphere, the “narrow sphere” of that discipline. Immanent intelligibility results from the tendency of any profession to become “self-referential”, an idea Fish borrows from Alan Sinfield.

In fact, the concept of immanent intelligibility conveys two distinct meanings: hermeneutic and political. As for the first one, immanent intelligibility is a frontier, a regulatory borderline for understanding the field it circumscribes. In other words, the way we see, for instance, “the literary” is determined and modulated by the specific intelligibility of contemporary literary theory. Fish proves this by placing side by side the contents of the “literary” category and the practices of the literary exegesis in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, on the one hand, and those of today, on the other hand, underlining how “literary theory” has built its own intelligibility, which helps put these contents into order.

The issue of immanent intelligibility is in fact the hermeneutic issue of “historical comprehension”: the relation between the theoretical physiognomy and its own historicity, the theoretical reflection on the historicity of theory, although its text is to a great extent opaque to the hermeneutic aperture of immanent intelligibility, maybe because it would involve a “reflexivity”, or, as Fish would call it, a “critical self-consciousness” of the discipline which is also submitted to a long and methodical attack in *Professional Correctness*. The hermeneutic is confined to a virtuous (how else) circularity, which confirms the immanent intelligibility of the theory, to the extent in which “the literary interpretation, like virtue, gets its own reward”. The autotelic hedonism of interpretation, completely but programmatically lacking any political scope, is consumed by its own continuation: I am content, says Fish, “as long as I can carry on” this practice. It is, partly, a satisfied pragmatism, similar to the good disposition *à la* Rorty, and which Fish proposes as a solution instead of the fundamental left-wing discontent of culturology.

The political aspect of immanent intelligibility devolves from what we called the hermeneutic side, because inside the sphere secured by intelligibility the hermeneutic is being reformulated, acquiring a resonance. The immanent intelligibility of the discipline,

also formed and deformed in its controversies with the vocabulary of cultural sciences, contains, among its data, historicity, turned into what Fish calls “the thesis of social constructionism”). In this sense, Fish pinpoints two bad uses of the distinction between what a social construct is (somehow everything from the humanistic disciplines is, in Fish’s opinion, a social construct; therefore, the thesis cannot put their sphere in danger or be used as a differentiation basis) and what it is not. The first meaning employs the distinction so as to accuse (“aha, your agenda or project is socially constructed”, rightfully jokes Fish), the second uses it as a defensive movement. According to the latter, if you are aware that something is a social construct, then you are in “a good position to revise it”. In fact, we might say that the distinction is always just an instrument in cultural political disputes and it produces, in either use, only mental cramps and theoretical headaches. In Fish’s text, the social construct shows up strategically in relation to the effects of humanistic disciplines, effects which are considered, somehow strangely, to be “real”, as they represent the expanding self-sufficient disciplines, as they define and redefine “its internal justification”, its professional hinterland, as they broaden the economic area bordered by immanent intelligibility. Its political effect is, in Fish’s opinion, to narrow down the applicability of certain sentences, of a “vocabulary”, as Rorty says (briefly put, it is about the distorted resonance of hermeneutics *Anwendung*), strictly to the inner sphere of their discipline of origin. It is an argument running against the assumption that prevails over “the political imaginary of ‘cultural studies’” (Thomas Cohen), according to which theoretical battles have produced “real” hard-core effects: social action, institutional changes, shifts beyond the irradiation zone of academic papers. Fish’s sceptical position, similar to Rorty’s, sustains on the contrary that, in the best of cases, it is about “‘trickle-down’ consequences”, and that the fans sustaining the extra-cultural political efficiency of cultural studies deceive themselves, as they are yearning “to be what they are not”: formative public consciousnesses.

By way of conclusion, I would like to mention why this theoretical possibility, which takes into account the concept of “immanent intelligibility” appeals to me. In the first place, because it may question the exteriority of cultural studies as against the sphere they claim to have decisively parted with. If the immanent intelligibility that can be ferreted out of the discursive territories covered by cultural studies resembles that of the old literary theory, not to say that it may be the same (although, professionally speaking, the areas are hard to separate), then another surprising possibility becomes available as a way to diagnose the current condition of theory. We may phrase it as follows: the lethargy it seems to have sunk in is the symptom of a necessary sacrifice. The quasi-vegetative zombie-like subsistence of theory might be determined and imposed by the immanent intelligibility of the discipline. It appears to have sent literary theory into hibernation so as to leave room for a new reconstruction – through cultural studies – of the complexity of “politics” and the inflaming fascination for high-stake battles, inside the sphere it circumvents.

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