

"Towards a Critical Theory of 'Theory'"

--draft only: not for citation or circulation--

Part I. 'Theory': Outlines for an Intellectual Phenomenology

I.A. A 'Theoretical' unconscious?

'Theory,' as it has come to known to students of literature and culture for about a generation now, is, to all appearances, a strange and elusive entity. Among the 'theorists' resident within what has been referred to as its 'canon' are some of the most exalted and formidable intellects of modernity (Marx, Freud, Foucault) and the 'theories' it comprises run a gamut stretching (at least) from the philosophies of German Idealism to late-issue vanguards such as eco-feminism. (The *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* begins its chronologically ordered selections with Gorgias the Sophist and ends with Stuart Moulthrop's theory of the hypertext.) Although its quantum of 'cultural capital' has clearly diminished from what was probably a high point reached in the late 1970s and early 1980s—about the time a still adolescent Theory shed its tighter-fitting structuralist and post-structuralist outer skin and grew into its mature, encyclopedic dimensions—it nevertheless persists as a kind of *sanctum sanctorum* of contemporary academic study in the humanities and in certain enclaves of the social sciences. And it counts among its self-acknowledged contemporary representatives at least a handful of 'theorists'—the late Jacques Derrida, say, or Slavoj Žižek and Judith Butler—who have become *bona fide* public intellectuals.

And yet for all of its intellectual potency and range, for all its perennial vanguardism and its claim to know, collectively, about everything from modes of production to the unconscious to the signifiers of gendered and ethnic identities, it appears to know next to nothing about itself. Definitions of 'Theory' are generally as grudgingly matter-of-fact and banal as Theory's intellectual avatars are profound and virtuosic. Meanwhile, among those of us who are expected, always already, to know it, Theory seems to have no need of the calling card that would in any case not do it much good anywhere

else. It is to its middlemen and retailers that it relegates the thankless task of trying to survey half the known intellectual universe and answer the last question generally asked about Theory, even if, logically, it should be the first: what is Theory is a theory of?

The answer, with few exceptions, seems almost invariably that it is *not* a theory of anything, or at least of any one thing. The best one can do if, during one of those proverbial 'cocktail parties,' someone has the naiveté to ask for clarification of that puzzle is to take refuge in the plural: Theory is, in fact, the theory of *many* things-- of discourse, narrative, culture, gender, ideology, coloniality, etc., etc. If pressed on this-- why, if Theory is really just a set of theories, is it still referred to in the singular?--one may have to delve even deeper into Theory's *arcana* and reveal the strange fact that, before it took on its current form, Theory was the theory of something. It was once, ancestrally, the theory of *literature*. If even this revelation is not satisfactory and one is asked why it no longer is the theory of literature, then mere professional embarrassment generally gives way to perplexity and silence. And here an irony of Theory even odder than its lack of a unitary object--perhaps Theory's very own form of 'unconscious'--may be glimpsed on the hither side of its rhetorical eccentricities: Theory's failure to theorize itself, to account for its own possibility. While Theory's already uncertain and multiple objects seem to change with every successive re-edition of its anthologies and textbooks (for Theory, as Jonathan Culler has aptly said--and he should know--is "endless"), all that apparently *can* be said with any certainty about these objects is that Theory itself is not among them. So, for example, *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism*, a broadly representative reference work of Theory, contains, out of dozens of entries, thirty seven in which the term "theory" follows everything from "anthropological" to "Italian" to "translation," but no single entry on "theory" per se. Along with literature, that is, Theory excludes--or represses?--still another object one might have expected to find among its manifold set of conscious predicates: *itself*.

And this theoretical blind spot appears to be under no real threat of exposure in what is now Theory's *status quo*. Whatever it is that Theory is or does is evidently not cancelled or impeded by its own lack of theoretical self-awareness. Why, then, bother to pursue a

theory of Theory at all? Is Theory really worth the effort, really the sort of thing that *could* be theorized? The title of this work obviously indicates my conviction that it is, and I'll anticipate and address some of the more obvious objections to the possibility of a theory of Theory in a moment. But the fullest possible answer to this question, I'm afraid, requires that one follow the construction of the theory of Theory to be argued for here through to its conclusion. The criterion that would justify calling this theory of Theory *critical* is likewise something I have preferred to explicate and justify in the immanent course of the argument itself--see section II, below--rather than posit at the outset

What I can do for the moment is try to answer this question from both a more tactical and a more personal standpoint by invoking the experience that first set me on the path leading to the present work: that of undertaking, for more than a decade now, the teaching of Theory to a regular rotation of both graduate and undergraduate students. For it turns out that in the classroom, unlike in the 'cocktail party,' one cannot simply beg the question of what Theory is the theory of and then try to change the subject. To *teach* Theory--to teach anything, in fact--is *ipso facto* to theorize it. Otherwise teaching itself becomes an exercise in bad faith. Merely repeating, to those expected to learn it, the standard equivocations and evasions that frame the meta-discourse of Theory in its introductions and anthologies seemed to me from the outset to be equivalent to a refusal to teach it at all. If, therefore, in keeping with its form of appearance, Theory in fact had no single object and thus was not, in any nontrivial sense, the theory of anything, then *its* theory would, for pedagogical reasons, have to start with that very negativity as its point of departure. That, in a word, is my point of departure here, and what follows records and further develops a thought-process begun in the classrooms to which I hope it can find its way back.

I.B. Theory under-theorized

But what if Theory really *is* nothing more than a collective noun, a name for a set of individual 'theories' that have their own respective objects but are grouped together because of a mutual affinity that is purely contingent, extrinsic to these objects themselves? One might refer to this argument in its most general form

as the 'generic' hypothesis: Theory needs no theory of itself because Theory is not *itself* theoretical, but only a designation for certain kinds of theories. How else explain the fact that, although it includes what appear to be virtual fixtures (e.g., post-structuralism, Marxism, feminism), the set of individual theories of which Theory is composed is a shifting and, on the whole, an expanding one? A corollary to the generic hypothesis is the no less common sense classification of Theory as essentially an institutional, or disciplinary entity, a genre of 'theories' configured, in the final analysis, by the academic division of labor as it exists within the North American university. It is, as a rule, some version of the 'generic' or the 'disciplinary' hypothesis that predominates in what is now Theory's voluminous instructional literature.

Comment: mainly

But while not false *per se*, the generic hypothesis nevertheless clearly fails as a theory of Theory. For if Theory is self-evidently the name for a set of 'theories' that do not belong to any explicit, overarching theoretical system, it is just as self-evident that Theory also excludes certain theories from this set. So, for example, Freudian psychology, by what seems a virtually universal consensus, belongs to the 'genre' of Theory, but the psychological theories of B.F. Skinner do not. Rational choice models of society and politics are not Theory, while Marxism is. Why these exclusions if Theory is merely a set of theories linked to an open-ended plurality of objects?

Theory's intellectual relationship to the theories composing it is obviously not without its contingent, conventional, nor without its political and ideological mediations. But a theory of Theory that went no further than these mediations would lose sight of their apparent obedience to what is already an implicitly theoretical logic -or so I will argue, in detail, in section III below. However provisional and over-laden with intellectual particularisms, Theory distributes itself over the series of its subsidiary theories as if this series itself were the result of a system. This is implicitly acknowledged whenever it is claimed that a particular reading or interpretation is not sufficiently 'theoretical'-e.g., that a standard, New Critical/formalist reading of a text neglects its ideological or psychoanalytical dimensions. The 'theoretical' content that is found missing refers back, however unconsciously, to something perceived as

common to both Marxism and psychoanalysis, some meta-theoretical factor.

And yet, at the same time, Theory cannot claim to be such a system in any positive sense. Paradoxical as it seems, the equation

Theory = theories

seemingly cannot be reversed; i.e.,

theories ≠ Theory.

Theory, that is, appears to pre-exist the theories of which it is composed: independently, and according to their own inner tendency as theories, the latter do not combine to form Theory. If Theory relates to its component theories as *though* it were their system, it does so only, so to speak, negatively. Although its make-up will obviously vary *ad infinitum* within a certain range, at its limit Theory seems to know what theories do and do not fall within its generic boundaries, even if it does not know how it knows. Theory behaves like a virtual system but does not think like one.

Neither can Theory's regulative exclusions be theorized as the effects of purely institutional or disciplinary constraints, real as these are. Although it is obvious that the rules governing Theory's 'canon'-formation are most immediately a function of institutional or "political" realities--witness the make up of the *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, for example, which seems as much a result of academic deal-brokering as it does of intellectual and pedagogical concerns--this only further begs the question of what determines these extrinsic, institutional variables. It is not for any lack of institutional clout, for example, that rational-choice theories are excluded from the literature of Theory. Whatever explains why, as a rule, *Capital* can be taught in Theory but not in economics courses (unless it is for the purpose of discrediting it intellectually) is *also* what explains the disciplinary division of labor itself. Although a "discipline" on the superficial plane of its curricula and textbooks, Theory obeys none of the intellectual rules of disciplinarity. Theory, at least in my experience, is in fact virtually the only intellectual space within the North American university that preserves something like the possibility of a negative relationship to the reifying and repressive logic of the academic division of labor itself. Contrary to the notion that it must often invoke so as to justify its continued existence institutionally, Theory is not 'multi-' or 'inter-

disciplinary.' It is an anti-discipline, situated not between individual disciplines but over and against disciplinarity as a whole. The superficial checklists of Theory found in its anthologies and in course catalogue descriptions and that have themselves become caricatures of Theory, reflecting its own propensity to self-reification, are nevertheless still a telling index of this. Included on them are works—those of Marx, Freud, radical feminist theory, structuralist linguistics and anthropology and pretty much the whole of continental European philosophy from Kant onwards—that have long since been banished from the official disciplines of psychology, philosophy, linguistics, economics, sociology, etc. To an extent this is true of the humanities as well, but the latter, while the ironic, intellectual beneficiary of increasing marginalization within the contemporary university, earn their negativity vis a vis the neo-positivist logic of the disciplines and “research” only by accident. With Theory, such negativity is constitutive. *Capital* has no more of a home in the humanities than it does in an economics department. The fact that one may find it being taught or at least mentioned in literature or art history curricula—or, for that matter, in the even rarer, dissident enclaves within more left-leaning social sciences such as history, anthropology or geography—generally reflects little more than the circumstance that the humanities have had to take in scholars with a Theory bent because no one else will. To the extent that Theory has slackened its anti-disciplinary resolve and convinced even itself that the multiplication or crossing of disciplines amounts to anything more than the further entrenchment of the reification underlying them—a process that, under administrative as well as ideological pressure may in fact be nearing completion—it becomes...Cultural Studies. Jonathan Culler’s characterization of Theory as a “nickname” that “has come to designate works that succeed in challenging and reorienting thinking in fields other than those in which they apparently belong”—“works regarded as theory,” he writes, “have effects beyond their original field”—captures something of this negative disciplinarity, but then neutralizes it in subservience to the “inter-disciplinary” *fictio juris* according to which all disciplines are equal. In fact, neither Hegel’s *Phenomenology* nor Gayle Rubin’s “The Traffic in Women” can be said to belong to any “field” that actually exists, and they certainly do not “succeed in challenging or reorienting thinking” in philosophy or

anthropology qua "fields." By making Theory out to be a disciplinary broker, buying and selling "effects" on the academic market place, Culler misses the essential fact: Theory designates works whose "challenging" and "reorienting" qualities have no established disciplinary locus in the academic division of labor. Theory designates, if nothing else, the intellectual content of this institutional marginality and negativity.

I.C. Theory as jargon

But even if it can be shown that Theory, over and against its subsidiary 'theories,' has an intellectual dimension that is not exhausted by its generic or disciplinary format, a theory of Theory will have to confront a still harsher, more skeptical judgment often lodged against its object. For the academic particularisms that, up to a point, configure Theory from without also threaten to configure it from within, infiltrating the language of Theory and often making it appear that Theory is finally nothing more than an intellectual fashion statement, a jargon. This is the dismissive, reactionary flipside of the now standard textualist apology for a 'theoretical' hermeticism on the grounds that it is just another instance of 'writing,' a still further slippage of the signifier along an axis shared by 'literature.' Although one can cite as many of Theory's component theories that refute as that uphold this charge, there is an immediate truth to it: Theory epitomizes the seemingly universal tendency of contemporary academic vanguards to invert the relationship of concept and terminology by making the former subservient to the latter. Thus it becomes customary to "debate," as if they were theoretical innovations, terminological novelties (e.g., "postcolonialism" or "agency") that, whatever the real intellectual shifts underlying them, come to function as little more than re-packaged versions of yesterday's 'signifying practices' ("third world" and "freedom")—the latter now, like Sartre after Foucault, having been proscribed for reasons unknown, poorly understood or forgotten. The damning verdict once pronounced by Eagleton in *Literary Theory* (1983)—that your ability to 'speak' the language of Theory will be remembered long after what, if anything, you said with it has been forgotten—seems, if anything, even truer a generation later.

Comment: philistine?

But Theory's calculating obsession with self-designations is nevertheless a reflection of how severely marginalized and isolated from social practice all negative, oppositional consciousness has become, perhaps one of the prices exacted for renewing Theory's lease on life under the *main morte* of neo-positivism and the corporatized "research" university. A theory of Theory could proceed no further if it did not at least attempt to read Theory's appearance as anti-theory and the flattening of theoretical concepts into discursive etiquettes and advertisements for professional group identities as the mediations of something else: a historical-intellectual force field, traversed by contradictions.

With characteristic precision, Adorno, writing in *The Jargon of Authenticity*, characterized the jargon he had in his sights—that of Heidegger and German existentialism—as the "breakdown of language into words themselves" (7)—words that, "stolen from language" and "loaded at the expense of the sentence, its propositional force, and the thought content," (8) undergo what is literally a reification. The Heideggerian jargon shows, according to Adorno, that ideology itself "has shifted into language." (171) And indeed, it is impossible to read *The Jargon of Authenticity* today and not be struck by how closely it anticipates the jargon of contemporary Theory as well, especially in the case of its own neo-Heideggerian, deconstructionist wing. But if, contrary to the reactionary or provincial who condemns as jargon anything that does not possess the banal transparency of what strikes him as self-evident, jargon is linguistic *ideology*, reification on the sub-sentence level, then it follows that as *form* jargon itself has been *historically* determined and that it must be possible to trace one's way back to the no less historically determined truth-content that has called the ideology itself into existence. One can, that is, in Adorno's words, "discover a truth in the determinate negation of the jargon." (xxii)

What is that truth in the case of the jargon of Theory, and in what would consist its determinate negation? That is one way of formulating the central question prompting many of the critical and theoretical considerations to follow—and a question answerable only in the context of a theory of Theory itself. But a moment's reflection here is enough to reveal a fundamental difference between the pseudo-metaphysical and crypto-fascist jargon that takes on, so to speak, an affirmative fetish form in terms like "Being"—a "reinterpretation of

complete negativity into what is positive" (JA, 35)—and the jargon of Theory. The latter, even if it too, like the jargon denounced by Adorno, "refuses all content which would have to be argued against," (93) has assumed what is itself already a *negative* form.

Take, as the simplest indication of this, the jargon that has already, and unavoidably, crept into our own exposition here: a "breakdown of language" that has descended to the level of the morpheme and congealed in the capital "T" in "Theory". The latter allows it to be distinguished from a vernacular, lower-case "theory" with which, however, in speech about Theory (barring the hand gesture indicating the use of scare quotes) and in its adjectival form (I have yet to see "theoretical" capitalized) Theory can, under pressure, seek to camouflage itself. Theory's uncertain negativity, the identifying mark of its very non-self-identity, need never thereby enter the consciousness of those engaged in 'doing' it. But the "Theory/theory" morphology—probably the first thing the aspiring student of Theory learns about the subject—also keeps open the possibility of a relation of non-identity here as well, sensing, unconsciously perhaps, that something in the seemingly more innocent and supposedly jargon-free lower-case term must be treated skeptically. Its cultishness notwithstanding, "Theory," unlike "Being," does not claim for itself a false and (as Adorno alleges against Heidegger) "nonconceptual" transcendence in relation to its vernacular homonym. It does not cancel but rather defers, out of uncertainty and hesitation, the labor of arriving at its own conceptual content. Theory seems more a case of the adolescent and jejune than of corruption. Despite its air of vanguardism, it is always looking over its shoulder at what others are saying about it. Its rhetorical rules of engagement may be those of the euphemism—'Theory' being one way of saying 'theory' without having to argue for itself. But that also makes it into a potential placeholder for something that is negative in relation to the seemingly transparent common sense of its other. The possibility must not be excluded that Theory is *both* jargon and the deferred, negative promise of a truth the jargon itself has failed to convey, of a still unformed concept detectable within the reified label.

I.D. Antinomies of Theory

That is: to the objection that Theory names only a set of loosely identified theories (the generic hypothesis) and/or that, if it is a singular intellectual entity at all, then only in the debased form of a jargon, the properly *theoretical* response is neither to concede nor to formulate immediate counter-arguments. Rather it is, along the lines of an "intellectual phenomenology," to speculate whether these very sub- or anti-theoretical tendencies of Theory are not, in fact, its forms of appearance-immediacies of Theory that, as suggested above by the 'Theory/theory' binary, become the possible indices of a truth-content of which Theory itself remains unconscious--of which, that is, it itself has no theory.

To pursue this hypothesis any further, however, its terms must be made less ambiguous. To that end, I will adopt the following, necessarily inelegant system of notation: I shall designate "theory" in its lower-case, vernacular form as "theory₁" and its upper-case, allegedly empty or counterfeit homonym ("Theory") as "theory₂." The generic hypothesis, or the common sense according to which Theory is not the theory of any one object but merely names a supposedly open-ended set of individual theories with objects such as, e.g., discourse, narrative, gender, ideology, coloniality, etc., would be written as the following two part equation:

- 1) **theory₂ ≠ theory₁;**
- 2) **theory₂ = theory₁DISCOURSE + theory₁NARRATIVE + theory₁GENDER + theory₁IDEOLOGY + theory₁COLONIALITY, etc.**

Or, reduced still further:

- 1) **theory₂ ≠ theory₁**
- 2) **theory₂ = theories₁**

Once expressed in this way, however, the generic hypothesis can be seen to rest on a paradox. No matter how open-ended and variable the set of theoretical objects that together make up the purely composite, serial object of theory₂, it nevertheless still follows: a) that something common to each individual theory₁, some *commensurable* property of all theories₁, constitutes it as a theory₁; and b) that if theory₂ is equal, even if non-exclusively, to any one or any combination of theories₁ then that common element must be present in theory₂ as well. Otherwise, the result would be

$$\mathbf{theory_2 \neq theories_1,}$$

and the second proposition of the generic hypothesis would be contradicted. Thus theory₂ cannot be a purely descriptive or generic category and still be claimed to be whatever it is that all the individual theories₁ have in common with each other *even in a purely contingent or extrinsic sense*. If theory₂ were merely such a transparent receptacle, then there would clearly be no logical reason why it should not include within the set it designates items that are *not* and do not claim to be theories₁ alongside those that are. Again, in the simplest, logical terms, if theory₂ equals a plurality of theories₁ then theory₂ must also equal whatever makes each of these theories₁ a theory₁. Therefore theory₂ must also equal that commensurable property, i.e., must equal theory₁ in the singular. Moreover, it would also follow that if the theories₁ composing theory₂ have unique objects, then theory₂, as itself also a theory₁, must have a unique object as well, even if only in the sense that all the particular objects of theory₂'s composite theories₁ combine to form a more general or universal object. And yet, the generic hypothesis, the most prevalent form of common sense regarding theory₂, denies the existence of any such object, and we are back to denying that theory₂ is equal to theory₁. That is, if, as the generic hypothesis claims, theory₂ = theories₁ then we get the apparently contradictory result that theory₂ is *both* equal to and not equal to theory₁.

If, unhappy with this contradictory result—a contradiction I will refer to, here in only an allusively philosophical sense, as the first 'antinomy' of theory₂—we now reject the generic hypothesis and go in search of the above-mentioned more general or universal object of theory₂, more puzzles and ironies are in store. While certain of the objects of theory₂'s component theories₁ do appear to be more encompassing than others—e.g., culture, discourse or narrative—the result is clearly not some well-ordered, Copernican system of outer and inner orbits, no staggered hierarchy of genera and species. "Culture" and "narrative" are clearly distinct, non-reducible terms—and yet one can as easily argue that all narratives are cultural as one can that all cultures are narratives. No more inclusive, mediating third term or lowest common denominator can transcend what appears to be theory₂'s constitutive lack of a single focal point in relation to its object(s).

Those relatively few attempts to elude this logic and posit such a universal object or unique focal point rapidly come to grief. Take,

for example, Culler's argument in his *Literary Theory* pamphlet that, contrary to introductions that treat theory₂ as

a series of competing "approaches," each with its theoretical positions and commitments [...] the theoretical movements that introductions identify—such as structuralism, deconstruction, feminism, psychoanalysis, Marxism and new historicism—have a lot in common. That is why people talk about 'theory' and not just particular theories. [...] Treating contemporary theory as a set of competing approaches or methods of interpretation misses much of its interest and force, which come from its broad challenge to common sense and its explorations of how meaning is created and how human identities take shape. (pp?)

For Culler, theory₂ = theory₁, hence the distinction, *itself* intrinsic to theory₂, has already fallen away even before it can be claimed (falsely) to be transcendable. But even if one were willing to accept the reduction of what "theory" has in common to the banality of an underlying anti-common sense and an "exploration of how meaning is created," such a notion would not even accord with Culler's own--eminently common sensical--sense of what theory₂ is. There is, first of all, the problem that much of what Culler includes under the heading of theory₂--say Saussure's theory of the arbitrary relation of signifier to signified--has itself become common sense. Does the fact that Freud's theory of dreams has now become something suitable for dialogue in a TV sitcom mean that it should be denied the status of being theory₂? Or to turn this the other way: the theory of quantum mechanics certainly qualifies as a "challenge to common sense." Why is it then--at least the last time I checked--that it hasn't made it into the *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*? Yet even if one gives Culler the benefit of the doubt here and grants to his "anti-common sense" theory of Theory its grain of truth, the non-reducibility of theory₂ to any one theory₁--e.g., the theory that "common sense is often false"--is still not to be circumvented. Culler cites as one example of what would count as "common sense" the "idea that writing is an expression whose truth lies elsewhere." (4) That, in tandem with the "anti-common sense" rule, certainly qualifies deconstruction as Theory--reducing the latter to the former being Culler's covert mission, under cover of *Literary*

Theory's pseudo-ecumenical air of good salesmanship--but nicely rules out Marxism and psychoanalysis, both of which adhere to this item of popular wisdom. If it is protested that the latter also challenge "common sense," then the conclusion to be drawn is evidently that there are as many conflicting instances of "common sense" to be challenged as there are theories₁ within theory₂--and the generic hypothesis is restored.

In the end, all that theory₂'s own "common sense" in relation to itself tells us about the possibility of a universal object, an object that might resolve the paradox of the generic hypothesis, is what this object *cannot* be: "literature." From the Marxist Terry Eagleton's 1983 *Literary Theory*--"I began by arguing that literature did not exist. How in that case can literary theory exist either?" (171)--to the deconstructionist Culler's 1997 tract of the same name--"Theory, we are told, has radically changed the nature of literary studies, but people who say this do not mean *literary theory*..." (1)--the 'post-literary' consensus is virtually universal. No one, of course, would deny that on some level "literature" persists as an object of theory₂. References to literature, to literary categories, genres and terms as well as to particular works of literature are as common in "Theory" as they ever were. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, for example, includes an "alternative" table of contents that organizes the selected material according to "genre," running from "epic and romance" to "novel" and "poetry." But anyone even vaguely acquainted with "Theory" comes to know, as if by instinct, that literature itself is not what theory₂ is the theory₁ of. Although "literary theory" still operates in some contexts as a possible equivalent for "Theory", this usually occurs with defensive or critical qualifications and/or in the protective custody of other, less problematic terms--as, say, in "literary and cultural theory." But "literary theory" in such instances is not to be confused with the "theory of literature." (The term "literature" itself appears just once in the *Norton Anthology's* various tables of contents, in the final position under "Issues and Topics," and here too under escort: "Women's Literature." The *Johns Hopkins Guide*, meanwhile, despite its title, and although full of references to literature and the literary, lacks a separate entry not only for "theory" but also for both "theory of literature" and "literary theory.") To the possible objection, here, that such exclusions are

rhetorical and have little to do with what "Theory" itself allows those who study or invoke its categories to do in relation to avowedly literary objects one may readily agree. But the "literary" property of such objects is not what is of interest here to theory₂. On the contrary, as the objects of theory₂ their "literary" quality is at best accidental and, most often, something to be broken down or rethought according to the more strictly 'theoretical' categories—discourse, culture, narrative, gender, etc.—that are what theory₂ is the theory₁ of.

Using our abbreviated system of notation this 'post-literary' corollary to the generic hypothesis becomes:

theory₂ ≠ theory₁LITERATURE;

or, following from the generic hypothesis itself,

theory₁DISCOURSE + theory₁NARRATIVE + theory₁GENDER + theory₁IDEOLOGY + theory₁COLONIALITY, etc. ≠ theory₁LITERATURE.

But here too a paradox—theory₂'s 'second antinomy'—is immediately discernable. To demonstrate it one need only invoke the now virtually universal common sense underlying the discipline of Cultural Studies, namely that, from the standpoint of theory₂, "literature" must give way—or, at best, be subsumed within—the more general category of "culture." This of course begs the notoriously intractable question of how to theorize culture itself, but there seems to be no disputing the fact that "literature", qua theory₂, must be substituted by the broader, more inclusive category. That is, even if, as we have seen, such an equation cannot claim to exclude others,

theory₂ = theory₁CULTURE

will not strike anyone as a falsification of theory₂, while, on the other hand

theory₂ = theory₁LITERATURE

will bring down immediate suspicions of "elitism" and outmoded-ness onto the head of anyone still foolish enough to propose it. Yet why should this be if, as is generally also accepted, "literature" itself is subsumed within "culture"? That is, if

LITERATURE = CULTURE

(again in the non-exclusive sense that **CULTURE ≥ LITERATURE**)

and

theory₂ = theory₁CULTURE

then how is that

theory₂ ≠ theory₁LITERATURE?

Or, consider, in place of "culture," the no less "theoretically" uncontroversial category of "narrative." This would give us, again in a non-exclusive relation:

theory₂ = theory₁NARRATIVE

There are, obviously enough, many species of "narrative": historical, legal, journalistic, medical, etc., and it would strike no one as contrary to the discursive rules of "Theory" to regard any of these as its proper objects. But from this standpoint it is no less obvious that "literature" is also one of these narrative species. So why, then is theory₂ not just as non-controversially the theory₁ of "literature" as it is the theory₁ of "narrative"? (As we might expect, this antinomy too finds its most perfect, and at the same time unwitting expression in Culler's *Literary Theory*, where it is argued that the question "what is literature?" has ceased to concern theory₂ because "works of theory have discovered what is most simply called the 'literariness' of non-literary phenomena." (18) Good North American deconstructionist that he is, Culler attempts to conclude from this that, therefore, it is this 'literariness' itself that best explains such non-literary phenomena. Because, for example, historical narratives invariably resemble literary ones, it follows, for Culler, that "the model for historical intelligibility...is literary narrative." (19) Apparently, theories of realism, which would hold that both historical and literary narratives are, *mutatis mutandis*, mediations of an objective reality underlying them, are too "common-sensical" and therefore unqualified to be theory₂. But it never seems to occur to Culler that, along with history, the "phenomena" of the world include "literature" itself, and that therefore, by the same logic, the "literariness" of literature ought to be of as much interest to theory₂ as the "literariness" of the non-literary.)

Schematically, then, the two 'antinomies' of theory₂ would be written as follows:

- 1) **theory₂ both = and ≠ theory₁**
- 2) **theory₂ both = and ≠ theory₁ LITERATURE**

Of course, these are not antinomies in the strong, Kantian sense—not the inevitable, logical contradictions of some putative form of 'theoretical₂ reason.' But if, on the other hand, they are no more than the precipitates of a theoretical₂ language game, nothing but theory₂'s

de facto but paradoxical common sense, their very ubiquity and almost pathological consistency surely must have the potential to tell us more about theory₂ than what that common sense itself is willing or able to disclose. Like the Theory/theory morphology-as-jargon, they hint at what may be the negative truth-content, the determinate negation of the jargon itself. Both poles of the second antinomy, for example,

theory₂ = theory₁LITERATURE

theory₂ ≠ theory₁LITERATURE

presuppose as self-evident the underlying logic of the copula theory₁LITERATURE itself. Theory₂ either is or is not (or rather *both* is and is not) theory₁LITERATURE, but either way the very premise that literature itself is a *possible* object of theory₁ remains unquestioned.

Suppose, however, that we do question this premise and consider the possibility that what determines the antinomial relationship of theory₂ to literature reflects a negativity, a kind of prior incommensurability, already present in literature in *its* relation to theory₁? Echoing once again Eagleton's trenchant and memorable articulation in *Literary Theory* of what has since become the common sense of Theory, namely that--paraphrasing--theory₂ cannot be the theory₁ of literature because there is no such thing as literature, we clearly tend to read it, as Eagleton himself did, as if the force of its critical, de-mythologizing argument was literature's alone to bear. Why not, however, re-write the argument as follows: theory₂ cannot be the theory₁ of literature because, in relation to literature, there is no such thing as theory₁?

In the same critical and negative spirit, it can be observed that both poles of theory₂'s 'first antinomy' take as given the existence of the vernacular, default-setting entity we have designated as theory₁. Both presuppose that, whether theory₁ is or is not identical with theory₂, theory₁ is, un-problematically, *self-identical*. Theory₂ may arouse suspicions (including its own) as to its conceptual validity or truth-content *qua* theory₁, but, with an implicit gesture of affirmation that, ironically, is only further strengthened by its own antinomial self-understanding, theory₂ never explicitly directs these suspicions back at theory₁ *per se*. Yet what if the contradictory logic of the generic hypothesis, i.e., what appears to be the simultaneous necessity and yet impossibility of a plural, open-ended object of theory₂, were itself merely an 'unconscious' recognition of a displacement *already*

internal to theory₁ itself—of the possibility that, in fact, theory₁ is negative in relation to itself? Theory₂'s self-apparent need to posit and yet also to refuse any single, stable object (unless, perhaps, we were to grant "not-literature" this status) might, in this case, be understood to reflect its own instinctive but itself pre-theoretical awareness that if

theory₂ = theories₁

and that, therefore,

theory₂ both = and ≠ theory₁

this is so because theory₁ itself is not self-identical, i.e., because

theory₁ ≠ theory₁.

Corresponding to the two 'antinomes' of theory₂, that is, are two theoretical hypotheses. These are, respectively, and in language already employed above:

- 1) "the possibility that theory₁ is negative in relation to itself";
and
- 2) the possibility of a "negativity" (or "prior incommensurability") "already present in literature in its relation to theory₁."

These are the two fundamental hypotheses of the theory of Theory herein proposed, and the respective subjects of the two remaining sections of "Towards a Critical Theory of 'Theory.'" Already, however, they can be somewhat altered in form to produce a single, conditional hypothesis:

- 1) that, discoverable within the theoretical₁ "negativity" of literature there is an object "X" such that theory₂ = theory₁X; but that
- 2) this object can only be discovered on the condition that the seeming paradox of theory₁ ≠ theory₁, of theory₁'s own negative self-relation, is first clarified and resolved.

It is to this clarification and resolution that I now turn.