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Did It Matter, Does It Now? Literary Theory and English Studies in Germany, 1970-2003

Did it matter? Does it now?
Stephen would answer if he only knew how.

Robert Hunter/The Grateful Dead, "Saint Stephen" (1969)¹

When I was asked about a year in advance whether I could contribute to the 2003 Anglistentag section on "English Studies 1970-2000" and talk about the role of literary theory in English literary studies, I accepted the invitation without hesitation. As happens frequently, however, it was only later that I began to worry: What exactly was I going to say? How could I make this fundamental but potentially boring topic wieldy and perhaps even snappy? While I was worrying, lines from an old Grateful Dead song popped into my head, and the questions posed in these lines provided the key to my topic – and ultimately the title of my paper. "Did it matter? Does it now?" – the temporal difference indicated by these two questions has been at the heart of the ultimately four consecutive Anglistentag sections on *Fachgeschichte* and of every single contribution to these sections. It has also been at the heart of the reflexive turn of modern culture at large which has apparently taken place not too long ago. This reflexive turn introduced the notion of 'theory' in the all-encompassing sense in which I am going to use it in this paper into academic discussions, and, what is more, it also introduced the notion of being "post"-something into our historical frames of reference. In broader cultural terms the late 1960s seem to mark a decisive phase in this development, and so the choice of a leitmotif or framing device from this period seems only apt, even if, or perhaps especially if, its source, the rock commune

¹ Robert Hunter, *A Box of Rain: Lyrics 1965-1993* (New York: Penguin, ²1993): 195-196; at 195.

which called itself the Grateful Dead, was perceived somewhat paradoxically as a 'countercultural' institution at the time. As this indicates, traditional cultural hierarchies finally began to give in to the long term erosive effects of modernization in the 1960s, and the evolution of 'theory' will have to be seen in this larger context.

"The Triumph of Theory" in the English-speaking world of literary studies was proclaimed in 1986 by J. Hillis Miller, who was, at the time, president of the *Modern Language Association*.² As we all know, one person's triumph tends to be another person's crisis and this 'resistance to theory'³ spawned a number of books with such colourful titles as *Against Theory*, *The Limits of Theory*, *Against Deconstruction*, *Not Saussure: A Critique of Post-Saussurean Literary Theory*, or *What's Wrong with Postmodernism* – in the affirmative, not in the questioning sense.⁴ As these examples indicate, the heart of the theoretical revolution was located in French post-structuralist thought as epitomized in Jacques Derrida's deconstruction, and there was a strong sense that these ideas might not only be the outcome of some abstruse academic specialization but rather a postmodernist or perhaps even a 'post-modern' sign of the times. As we can see from today's vantage point, theory was here to stay, even if, as Peter Barry observed as early as 1995, the "1980s probably saw the high-water mark of literary theory. That decade," Barry writes, "was the 'moment' of theory," but

2 J. Hillis Miller, "Presidential Address 1986: The Triumph of Theory, the Resistance to Reading, and the Question of the Material Base", *PMLA* 102.3 (1987): 281-291.

3 Cf. Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1986).

4 Cf. *Against Theory: Literary Studies and the New Pragmatism*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1985); *The Limits of Theory*, ed. Thomas D. Kavanagh (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1989); John M. Ellis, *Against Deconstruction* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1989); Raymond Tallis, *Not Saussure: A Critique of Post-Saussurean Literary Theory* (London: Macmillan, 1988); Christopher Norris, *What's Wrong with Postmodernism: Critical Theory and the Ends of Philosophy* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990).

after the moment of theory there comes, inevitably, the 'hour' of theory, when it ceases to be the exclusive concern of a dedicated minority and enters the intellectual bloodstream as a taken-for-granted aspect of the curriculum. At this stage the glamour fades, the charisma is routinized, and it becomes the day-to-day business of quite a large number of people to learn or teach (or both) this material.⁵

As Barry's book with the title *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* indicates, 'theory' was canonized and institutionalized in the course of the 1990s, not only in the *MLA's* immediate sphere of influence with its deconstructionist bridgehead at Yale University,⁶ but even in Great Britain.⁷ While there is a sense of ongoing negotiation in books with titles such as *After Theory*, *Re-Thinking Theory*, *The State of Theory*, *The Point of Theory* or *The Direction of Literary Theory*,⁸ a great number of introductions, reference books and anthologies testifies to the increasing acceptance of 'theory' in the institutional framework of literary studies in the English-speaking world.⁹

5 Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1995) 1.

6 Cf. Hubert Zapf, "Dekonstruktion in Amerika: Die Yale-Critics", *Kurze Geschichte der anglo-amerikanischen Literaturtheorie* (München: Fink, 1991) 205-219.

7 The most important text for the emergence of literary theory in the British context is arguably Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983).

8 Cf. Thomas Docherty, *After Theory: Postmodernism/Postmarxism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1990); Richard Freadman and Seumas Miller, *Re-Thinking Theory: A Critique of Contemporary Literary Theory and an Alternative Account* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992); *The State of Theory*, ed. Richard Bradford (London: Routledge, 1993); *The Point of Theory: Practices of Cultural Analysis*, ed. Mieke Bal and Inge E. Boer (Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 1994); Steven Earnshaw, *The Direction of Literary Theory* (London: Macmillan, 1996).

9 For early introductions to the field cf. Raman Selden, *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory* (Brighton: Harvester P, 1985); Raman Selden, *Practising Theory and Reading Literature: An Introduction* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989); K. M. Newton, *Interpreting*

In what follows I will try to estimate the degree to which these developments have influenced the institutionalized practice of studying English and American literature in German universities. After an introductory clarification as to what I have in mind when I speak of 'theory' or 'literary theory' (Part 1: From Theories to 'Theory') I will survey various instances of explicit theoretical activity in our discipline with regard to their relationship to an emerging canon of 'theory' (Part 2: Innovation and the Canon). I will end with a general assessment of the role and direction of 'theory' in English studies in Germany.

1. From Theories to 'Theory'

In 1997, Jonathan Culler opened his *Very Short Introduction to Literary Theory* with the following sentences:

In literary and cultural studies these days there is a lot of talk about theory – not theory of literature, mind you; just plain 'theory'. To anyone outside the field, this usage must seem very odd. 'Theory of what?' you want to ask. It's surprisingly hard to say. It is neither the theory of anything in particular, nor a comprehensive theory of things in general. Sometimes theory seems less an account of anything than an activity – something you do or don't do. You can be involved with theory; you can

the Text: A Critical Introduction to the Theory and Practice of Literary Interpretation (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990); David Buchbinder, *Contemporary Literary Theory and the Reading of Poetry* (South Melbourne: Macmillan, 1991). For handbooks affected or spawned by this development cf. the adding of a section on "Modern Theories of Literature and Criticism" in M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace, 1993) 223-286; Jeremy Hawthorn, *A Concise Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory* (London: Arnold, 1992); *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory: Approaches, Scholars, Terms*, ed. Irena R. Makaryk (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1993); *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. M. Grodenand and M. Kreiswirth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1994).

teach or study theory; you can hate theory or be afraid of it. None of this, though, helps much to understand what theory is.¹⁰

Being the first writer of an introductory book on literary theory to avoid the by then customary plod through theoretical schools and approaches, Culler was definitely on to something: 'theory' had, by the late 1990s, become a shorthand for a particular way of going about studying literature and culture, and at its centre was the questioning of traditions and of anything that tried to pass itself off as 'common sense' or 'essentially true'.¹¹ From a theoretical point of view, these seemingly sound foundations for statements of all kinds turned out to be constructions which could in turn be deconstructed, and this was the project that 'theory' went about with relish, opening up new perspectives on more or less everything.

This, of course, could not happen out of the historical blue. That is to say, it could not simply be a faddish conspiracy of eccentric or even perverse French or, as the English have it, continental thinkers, as some of theory's detractors – not only in England – tried to suggest. Instead I would argue against the backdrop of long-term historical developments which emerge ever clearer with the benefit of increasing hindsight that in its ambiguity between construction and deconstruction the theoretical impulse has been a key signature of modernity from the 18th century onwards. For quite a long time, however, intellectual and scientific endeavours were primarily predicated on construction while the deconstructive impulse manifested itself only in flashes such as Immanuel Kant's remark in his 1781 preface to his *Critique of Pure Reason* that – and I quote in German – "Unser Zeitalter ist das eigentliche Zeitalter der Kritik, der sich alles unterwerfen muß."¹² Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* itself is one of the earliest and most sophisticated examples of a fundamental ambivalence in modern culture, an ambivalence which emerges from the paradoxical

10 Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997) 1.

11 Perhaps the best introduction to these concerns can be found in Barry, *Theory*, 11-38.

12 Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, 1781/1787, Bd. 2 A XI, ed. Wilhelm Weischedel (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1956).

role that the concept of critique plays in the project of enlightenment.¹³ On the one hand, the concept of critique inaugurates a new understanding of science predicated on the construction of unquestionable truths, and the results of these construction processes were until very recently generally naturalized as 'discoveries' of truth in the world. This was, of course, a most effective way of immunizing the results of construction processes against further questioning, and thus of enhancing their acceptance and applicability. On the other hand, however, there are passages in Kant's work which, like the one just quoted, acknowledge the potential inconclusiveness of the persistent questioning that is at the heart of the critical method. However, this deconstructive strand of modern culture could only come into prominence when the ongoing evolution of many of the highly successful constructions of modernity spawned incompatibilities or even conflicts between their various spheres of achievement, and in the long run this development established pluralism and relativism in a very literal sense as the signposts of what is by now frequently called, somewhat misleadingly, the post-modern.

Against this backdrop, a shift of emphasis in the meaning of the word 'theory' can be observed: On the one hand, the language of everyday life still insists on an ontological foundation for all theories and thus favours an *inductive* understanding of the word in the sense that there could or should be a theory, based on empirical evidence, for all kinds of phenomena. The *Dictionary of Contemporary English*, for example, defines "theory" first and foremost as "a statement or group of statements established by reasoned argument based on known facts [...]." On the other hand, there has long been an inbuilt bias towards a *deductive* understanding of 'theory' in the academic context, where theories are necessary as frameworks which guide or even govern the study of a subject, and a similar bias has long been the hallmark of theories in art and literature. This turns up, in fact, as definition 2 in the *DCE*, where "theory" is described as "the part of a science or art that deals with general principles and methods as opposed to practice; [a] set of rules or principles for the study of a subject". This constructivist dimension of the term theory, which is, of course, also present in everyday life in sentences like "She has a theory that the man's the

13 Cf. Michel Foucault, *Was ist Kritik?* (1978/1990; Berlin: Merve, 1992).

murderer but I think she's wrong" and defined by the *DCE* as "(3) an opinion based on limited information or knowledge; something supposed", this constructivist dimension has become ever more prominent in recent years, supplanting time-honoured ontological premises even in the natural sciences.¹⁴ It does not come as a surprise, however, that the most elaborate and radical formulations of this new anti-essentialist orientation towards difference as opposed to identity emerged in the context of a philosophy caught up in a linguistic turn from the early 20th century onwards on the one hand¹⁵ and in the context of reflections upon the meaning of literature on the other. Here was a field which had been concerned with the linguistic fabrication of worlds and meaning for ages, and, what is more, with regard to literature the new modes of thinking could be tried out at a doubled remove from reality, as it were, and that is to say: without any immediate practical consequences.

While for a long time there was severe competition not only between traditionalists and theorists, but also between the various schools of advanced literary theory, it is by now possible to see the common ground between the latter: "theory" in the all-encompassing sense hinted at earlier amounts to a reflection upon ultimately insurmountable difference¹⁶ without recourse to the former consolations of closure and principle.¹⁷ It is, as Jonathan Culler sums up, potentially in-

14 For a large-scale sociological description of this development cf. Niklas Luhmann, *Die Wissenschaft der Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1990).

15 By now, however, philosophy seems to have been replaced by the social sciences as the vanguard of a theoretical engagement with de-ontologizing trends in modern culture. See, for example, Jean Clam, *Was heißt, sich an Differenz statt an Identität orientieren? Zur De-ontologisierung in Philosophie und Sozialwissenschaft* (Konstanz: UVK, 2002).

16 Cf. Achim Geisenhanslüke, *Einführung in die Literaturtheorie: Von der Hermeneutik zur Medienwissenschaft* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2003) 7-11.

17 The best introduction to the reformulations of basic terms in literary studies on this basis can be found in *Critical Terms in Literary Studies*, ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (1990; Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2nd 1995).

terdisciplinary, i.e. a “discourse with effects outside an original discipline”, it is an “analytical *and* speculative [...] critique of common sense, of concepts taken as natural”, and it is “reflexive, thinking about thinking, [an] enquiry into the categories we use in making sense of things, in literature and in other discursive practices”¹⁸. As a result, theory is intimidating to this day in its apparent bottom- and boundlessness. The ever-growing body of theoretical work, however, does not only produce disorientation but opens up new chances of orientation, again with the benefit of ever-increasing hindsight. From today’s vantage point, for example, it seems as if the heyday of deconstruction is definitely over. The revolutionary gesture of demonstrating that all aspirations for origins, unity, totality, identity and truth are ultimately untenable because of the fundamentally unstable and unreferential character of language begins to be replaced or at least supplemented by a renewed interest in exactly these categories, albeit on a deconstructive basis. Thus, Rob Pope’s *The English Studies Book: An Introduction to Language, Literature and Culture* observes an overall development from “Formalism into Functionalism” that points “Towards a New Eclecticism”¹⁹, and the most recent German introduction to literary theory identifies media studies as a future point of convergence for “theory”.²⁰ The central question behind this overall development seems to be this: How can it be that the deconstructable linguistic phantasms that answer a cultural need for origins, unity, totality, identity and truth do actually function as the focal points of a cultural framework, acquiring the power of a social and technical reality principle in the process?²¹ On the basis of a guiding question like this, the emergence of “theory” does no longer demar-

18 Culler, *Theory*, 15.

19 See the chapter on “Theoretical Positions and Practical Approaches” in Rob Pope, *The English Studies Book: An Introduction to Language, Literature and Culture* (London: Routledge, 2002) 73-166; esp. 82ff. and 155 ff.

20 cf. Geisenhanslücke, *Einführung*, 137-41.

21 Cf. Albrecht Koschorke’s concept for a ‘mediology’ in his *Körperströme und Schriftverkehr: Mediologie des 18. Jahrhunderts* (München: Fink, 1999). My assessment takes its cue from Koschorke’s methodological reflections 344-45.

cate a complete break with the past. Instead, it calls for a careful re-examination of former findings in the discipline, which turn out to be, after all, as bound up in the overall cultural framework as current practice inevitably is, the difference lying, alas, in the degree of culturally promoted and accepted self-consciousness.

2. Innovation and the Canon

So what about the current practice of studying English and American literature in German universities and its relationship to the preceding thirty years? How were the theoretical innovations outlined so far received? Is there an emerging canon of theory?

In very general terms it seems that the reception of the new mode of literary theory in English and American studies in Germany mirrors developments in the United Kingdom and the United States, respectively. Accordingly, the influence of deconstructionist thought with its subsequent evolution into the New Historicism and new modes of feminist literary theory, gender studies and media studies is much more prominent in American literary studies in Germany with its traditionally strong historical and cultural interests than in English literary studies in Germany with its more pronounced philological tradition. Here, the indifferent to hostile or at any rate belated reaction to theoretical influences in Great Britain may also have played its part,²² and a German reflection of these cultural differences can be found in Ulrich Horstmann’s recent book *Ausgewiesene Experten: Kunstfeindschaft in der Literaturtheorie des 20. Jahrhunderts*, which rejects the frenchified American influence on the current theoretical climate as epitomized by Derrida, Bloom, DeMan and Greenblatt by pitting positive British counterexamples like Lodge, Eagleton and Bradbury against them.²³

22 On the national characteristics of critical styles cf. the brief sketch in Catherine Bernard and Ansgar Nünning, “Introduction: Mapping Critical Theories, Meeting Intellectual Styles”, *EJES – European Journal of English Studies* 6.3 (2002): 247-51.

23 (Frankfurt/M.: Lang, 2003).

At any rate, the emerging canon of theory for the study of all national literatures in Germany is thus to a large extent determined by American influences on the one hand and by the reception of French and American sources in German literary studies (Germanistik) on the other.²⁴ While an institutionalized canon of theory in university courses as practiced in the United States is nowhere in sight,²⁵ its contours are nevertheless clearly discernible in German introductions²⁶ and anthologies.²⁷ They can, I think, be transferred to English studies with only few modifications, and as the role of theory in American studies has already been discussed elsewhere,²⁸ I will focus on the less thoroughly covered field of English literary studies in Germany in the rest of my paper.

24 Cf. Achim Geisenhanslüke, "Der Kanon der Theorie: Mallarmé in Deconstruction". *Literarische Kanonbildung*, ed. Heinz Ludwig Arnold (München: edition text + kritik, 2002) 259-273.

25 On the problems of institutionalizing a canon of theory cf. Katherine Arens and Elizabeth M. Richmond-Garza, "The Canon of Theory: Report on an Institutional Case", *Comparative Literature Studies* 34.4 (1997): 392-427 including responses by Caryl Emerson, John Neubauer, Aparna and Vinay Dharwadker, Caroline D. Eckhardt, and Christine Froula.

26 Cf., for example, *Neue Literaturtheorien: Eine Einführung*, ed. Klaus-Michael Bogdal (1990; Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1997), or Geisenhanslüke, *Einführung*. Complementary volumes introduce the practical aspects in paradigmatic readings: cf. *Neue Literaturtheorien in der Praxis: Textanalysen von Kafkas 'Vor dem Gesetz'*, ed. Klaus-Michael Bogdal (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1993), and the recent volume *Kafkas "Urteil" und die Literaturtheorie: Zehn Modellanalysen*, ed. Oliver Jahraus and Stefan Neuhaus (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2002).

27 Cf., for example, *Texte zur Literaturtheorie der Gegenwart*, ed. Dorothee Kimmich, Rolf Günter Renner and Bernd Stiegler (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1996).

28 Cf., for example, Hubert Zapf, "Zur Bedeutung der neueren Literaturtheorie für die Praxis der amerikanistischen Literaturstudien", *Modernisierung und Literatur: Festschrift für Hans Ulrich Seeber zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. Walter Göbel, Stephan Kohl and Hubert Zapf (Tübingen: Narr, 2000) 93-104.

Slightly later than similar developments in German literary studies,²⁹ a theoretical turn in English literary studies in Germany can first be discerned in the 1970s, when Wolfgang Iser formulated his reception theory,³⁰ Franz K. Stanzel synthesized his earlier publications on the typical forms of the novel into his influential theory of narrative³¹ and Manfred Pfister published his equally influential theory of drama.³² These were texts that explicitly engaged with or even assimilated the influence of structuralism, and they marked a clearly discernible break with the liberal-humanist-turned-new-critical traditions of the English-speaking world of literary studies as well as the hermeneutic traditions of literary studies in Germany. As we all know, the "Stanzel" and the "Pfister" – metonymically speaking – went on to be standard works in our discipline. They represent, however, theories in the traditional sense of the word: 'hands-on' guidelines for analysing texts based on empirical evidence gathered from a broad range of historically far-ranging examples. Even so, there are traces of a functionalist broadening of the formalist perspective in both books, and Stanzel's theory with its inbuilt historical dynamics in particular went on to provide an important foil for the development from 'classical' structuralist narratology into 'postclassical' narrative theory.³³

29 Cf. Klaus-Michael Bogdal, "Wissenskanon und Kanonwissen: Literaturwissenschaftliche Standardwerke in Zeiten disziplinären Umbruchs", *Literarische Kanonbildung*, ed. Heinz Ludwig Arnold (München: edition text + kritik, 2002) 55-89. A similar engagement with matters of institutional history in the aftermath of the 1960s has not yet taken place with regard to English literary studies in Germany.

30 Wolfgang Iser, *Die Appellstruktur der Texte: Unbestimmtheit als Wirkungsbedingung literarischer Prosa* (Konstanz: UVK, 1970); *Der Akt des Lesens: Theorie ästhetischer Wirkung* (München: Fink, 1976).

31 Franz K. Stanzel, *Theorie des Erzählens* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1979).

32 Manfred Pfister, *Das Drama: Theorie und Analyse* (München: Fink, 1977).

33 On the relationship between Stanzel's approach and structuralist narratology cf. Dorrit Cohn, "The Encirclement of Narrative: On Franz Stanzel's *Theorie des Erzählens*", *Poetics Today* 2.2 (1981): 157-82; Matias Martinez and Michael Scheffel, *Einführung in die Erzähltheorie* (Mün-

Wolfgang Iser's reception theory, on the other hand, is less 'hands-on' in its approach, and it implies a number of fundamental questions which Iser addressed throughout his career, moving towards literary anthropology in the process.³⁴ In conjunction with the work of the *Romanist* Hans Robert Jauß Iser's position became a central ingredient in a school of literary theory known as reception theory or the aesthetics of reception,³⁵ a movement which "dominated literary theory in Germany for about a decade" between 1970 and 1980³⁶ and inaugurated the most important forum for work in literary theory across the philological disciplines, a highly successful string of conferences under the heading *Poetik und Hermeneutik*. In the 1980s many of the key texts of what came to be known in English as the "Constance School of Reception Aesthetics"³⁷ were translated into English, and it has been part of what might be called the international canon of literary theory ever since. In our discipline(s), Iser's suggestions were most prominently picked up by Herbert Grabes³⁸ and Winfried Fluck,³⁹

chen: Beck, 1999) 89-95. On the development towards 'postclassical' narrative theory cf. *Neue Ansätze in der Erzähltheorie*, ed. Ansgar und Vera Nünning (Trier: WVT, 2002); *Erzähltheorie transgenerisch, intermedial, interdisziplinär*, ed. Vera and Ansgar Nünning (Trier: WVT, 2002).

34 Cf. *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1989); *Das Fiktive und das Imaginäre: Perspektiven literarischer Anthropologie* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1991). For summary statements of his attitude to literature and literary theory cf. Wolfgang Iser, "Why Literature Matters", *Why Literature Matters: Theories and Functions of Literature*, ed. Rüdiger Ahrens and Laurenz Volkmann (Heidelberg: Winter, 1996) 13-22; and *Theorie der Literatur: Eine Zeitperspektive* (Konstanz: Universitätsverlag, 1992).

35 For some of the most important contributions in this context cf. *Rezeptionsästhetik: Theorie und Praxis*, ed. Rainer Warning (München: Fink, 1979).

36 *Encyclopedia*, ed. Makaryk, 14.

37 Cf. *Encyclopedia*, ed. Makaryk, 14-18.

38 For a list of Grabes's publications, many of which engage with questions of theory, cf. *Critical Interfaces: Contributions in Philosophy, Lit-*

who can certainly be counted among the most theoretically innovative and well-versed scholars in English and American literary studies in the period under scrutiny here.⁴⁰ What is more, Herbert Grabes's 1978 essay "Wie aus Sätzen Personen werden...: Über die Erforschung literarischer Figuren"⁴¹ is a very good example for the subliminal long-term effects of theoretically innovative perspectives: Many of Grabes's suggestions point forward towards Ralf Schneider's comprehensive cognitive theory of literary character, which was, however, not published before the year 2000.⁴²

Long-term effects like these make it hard to assess the ultimate impact of theoretical innovations which are presented as conference papers or journal articles or perhaps even in dissertations. Introductory handbooks and reference works, however, are a comparatively sound indicator of what is taken to be the current canon of theory at the time of publication – or perhaps sometimes a couple of months or even years before publication. To begin with, the admirable *Metzler Lexikon Li-*

erature, and Culture in Honour of Herbert Grabes, ed. Gordon Collier, Klaus Schwank and Franz Wieselhuber (Trier: WVT, 2001) 451-458.

39 See, for example, Winfried Fluck, "The Role of the Reader and the Changing Functions of Literature: Reception Aesthetics, Literary Anthropology, Funktionsgeschichte", *EJES – European Journal of English Studies* 6.3 (2002): 253-271 – a retrospective account of Iser's influence upon his own work and its legacy in general.

40 Another example for Iser's highly productive influence would be Werner Wolf's magisterial *Ästhetische Illusion und Illusionsdurchbrechung in der Erzählkunst: Theorie und Geschichte mit Schwerpunkt auf englischem illusionsstörenden Erzählen* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1993). For a brief introduction to the approach from an English Studies perspective cf. Gerhard Haefner, "Rezeptionsästhetik", *Literaturwissenschaftliche Theorien, Modelle und Methoden*, ed. Ansgar Nünning (Trier: WVT, 1998) 107-118.

41 *Poetica* 10 (1978): 405-28.

42 Cf. *Grundriß zur kognitiven Theorie der Figurenkonzeption am Beispiel des viktorianischen Romans* (Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 2000), and "Toward a Cognitive Theory of Literary Character: The Dynamics of Mental-Model Construction", *Style* 35.4 (2002): 607-40.

teratur- und Kulturtheorie, edited by Ansgar Nünning⁴³ and the first German-language publication of its kind, provides a truly comprehensive overview of the field from a literary studies perspective that is not confined to English literary studies but addresses students and teachers from all disciplines. A closer look at some of the introductory books for students, however, reveals a somewhat different picture. True to the proverbial pragmatic and common-sensical spirit of the English, literary theory is here frequently and very effectively boiled down to a collection of approaches which are then assigned to one of the four categories originally introduced by M. H. Abrams in the 1950s:⁴⁴ accordingly, theoretical approaches can be text-oriented, author-oriented, reader-oriented, or context-oriented, and within these slots the difference between traditional approaches and the so-called new literary theories is only cursorily mentioned – and perhaps rightly so in view of an audience of absolute beginners.⁴⁵ Only Gabriele Müller-Oberhäuser addresses the shift in the meaning of the term theory and the resulting newness of the literary theories emerging in the late 1980s and early 1990s explicitly in her contribution to the completely

43 Metzler *Lexikon Literatur- und Kulturtheorie: Ansätze – Personen – Grundbegriffe*, ed. Ansgar Nünning (1998; Stuttgart: Metzler, ³2004).

44 Cf. “Orientations of Critical Theories”, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Norton, 1953) 3-29.

45 Cf., for example, Manfred Hanowell, Dieter Kranz, Hermann J. Real and Willi Real, *Studium Anglistik* (München: Fink, 1994) 96-109; Mario Klarer, *Einführung in die anglistisch-amerikanistische Literaturwissenschaft* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1994) 10-34 (rev. Engl. version *An Introduction to Literary Studies* [London: Routledge, 1999]); or, less clearly structured but roughly along similar lines, Barbara Korte, Klaus Peter Müller and Josef Schmied, *Einführung in die Anglistik* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1997) 95-105; and *Grundkurs anglistisch-amerikanistische Literaturwissenschaft*, ed. Ansgar and Vera Nünning (Stuttgart: Klett, 2001) 34-46. The time-honoured device can most recently be found in Michael Meyer, *English and American Literatures* (Tübingen: Francke, 2004) 117-151.

revised 7th edition of Bernhard Fabian’s time-honoured *Ein anglistischer Grundkurs*, which came out in 1993.⁴⁶

At that point, the main movements identified by Müller-Oberhäuser are deconstructivism, the New Historicism, and gender studies, and she ends with the slightly worried question whether the emerging plurality in literary theory indicates opportunity or chaos. Only slightly later, an introductory volume on theories, models and methods edited by Ansgar Nünning adds postcolonial theory, the empirical theory of literature and the programme for an *Anglistische Kulturwissenschaft* to the fray.⁴⁷ Of these, postcolonial criticism has impressively carved out a room of its own in our discipline, as a whole string of successful *Anglistentag* sections on postcolonial literature has impressively demonstrated. The blueprint for an *Anglistische Kulturwissenschaft* will definitely be important in the context of the larger-scale movement from literary studies into cultural studies, a development which affects all philological disciplines.⁴⁸ Only the empirical theory of litera-

46 Gabriele Müller-Oberhäuser, “Neuere Literaturtheorien”, *Ein anglistischer Grundkurs: Einführung in die Literaturwissenschaft*, ed. Bernhard Fabian (Berlin: Erich Schmidt, ⁷1993) 204-238.

47 Cf. Eberhard Kreuzer, “Theoretische Grundlagen postkolonialer Literaturkritik”; Gebhard Rusch, “Modelle, Methoden und Probleme der Empirischen Theorie der Literatur”; Ansgar Nünning, “Literatur, Mentalitäten und kulturelles Gedächtnis: Grundriß, Leitbegriffe und Perspektiven einer anglistischen Kulturwissenschaft”, all in *Literaturwissenschaftliche Theorien, Modelle und Methoden: Eine Einführung*, ed. Ansgar Nünning (1995; Trier: WVT, ³1998) 199-213, 215-232, 173-198.

48 See, for example, the discussions in *Anglia* 114.3 (1996): 307-445 (Special Issue “Literaturwissenschaft und/oder Kulturwissenschaft”) and *Jahrbuch der deutschen Schillergesellschaft* 42 (1998): 457-507 (“Kommt der Literaturwissenschaft ihr Gegenstand abhanden?”), as well as, for a ‘separatist’ approach, Hartmut Böhme, Peter Matussek and Lothar Müller, *Orientierung Kulturwissenschaft: Was sie kann, was sie will* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 2000). By the year 2003, however, the first comprehensive introductions to *Kulturwissenschaft/Cultural Studies* within English and German literary studies were published, thus indicating an increasing general acceptance of culture-oriented approaches within these disciplines. Cf. Markus Fauser, *Einführung in die Kultur-*

ture did not manage to make inroads into English literary studies, but there is a fairly strong showing in systems-theoretical approaches to literature, which, interestingly, share some of their premises with the empirical theory of literature, and others with its direct opposite, deconstruction.⁴⁹

Of the first-generation new literary theories, on the other hand, the New Historicism has definitely had a formative influence on German Shakespeare criticism in the 1990s⁵⁰ and is frequently evoked elsewhere,⁵¹ and feminist and gender studies are alive and kicking.⁵² What is conspicuous in all this, however, is a lack of explicit theoretical engagement with the philosophical positions which laid the foundations

wissenschaft (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2003); Roy Sommer, *Grundkurs Cultural Studies/Kulturwissenschaft Großbritannien* (Stuttgart: Klett, 2003).

49 For a brief introduction to this school of literary theory and its specific location between English and German literary studies and in the broader field of contemporary literary theory cf. Christoph Reinfandt, "How German Is It? The Place of Systems-Theoretical Approaches in Literary Studies", *EJES – European Journal of English Studies* 5.3 (2001): 275-88. Proponents in English studies so far are Peter Hühn, Hans-Ulrich Mohr, Stephan Mussil, Dietrich Schwanitz and Philipp Wolf. For a comprehensive bibliography cf. Henk de Berg, "Luhmann's Systems Theory and its Application in Literary Studies: A Bibliography", *EJES – European Journal of English Studies* 5.3 (2001): 385-436.

50 Cf., for example, Andreas Höfele, "New Historicism/Cultural Materialism", *Jahrbuch der deutschen Shakespeare-Gesellschaft West* (1992): 107-23; Annette Simonis, "New Historicism und Poetics of Culture: Renaissance Studies und Shakespeare in neuem Licht", *Literaturwissenschaftliche Theorien*, ed. Nünning, 153-172.

51 Instrumental for the reception of the New Historicism in Germany was *New Historicism: Literaturgeschichte als Poetik der Kultur*, ed. Moritz Baßler (Frankfurt/M.: Fischer, 1995). See also *Verhandlungen mit dem 'New Historicism': Das Text-Kontext-Problem in der Literaturwissenschaft*, ed. Jürg Glauser and Annegreth Heitmann (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1999).

52 See, for example, Ina Schabert, *Englische Literaturgeschichte aus der Sicht der Geschlechterforschung* (Stuttgart: Kröner, 1997).

for this variety of theories. While there is a basic and pragmatic openness for all kinds of ideas and approaches in our discipline, this does not always include, at least with the English Literature people as opposed to American Studies, a willingness to listen to or read lengthy theoretical reflections for their own sake, as I learned from reactions to some of my earlier papers on the application of systems theoretical concepts in literary studies, and contributions of an outright theoretical or even meta-theoretical poststructuralist or deconstructive persuasion tend to suffer a similar fate. To a certain extent this can surely be accounted for by the sane influence of our chosen object of study with its pronounced "No theory, please, we're English"-traditions.⁵³ So I am not arguing that we should all turn to writing esoteric theoretical tracts. I do suggest, however, that theoretical thinking for its own sake can be a worthwhile endeavour in the face of ever-increasing cultural complexity, and while a certain degree of stylistic and terminological complexity is perhaps inevitable in the face of this challenge, there seems no better place than English literary studies in Germany for avoiding what Terence Hawkes from an English (or rather Welsh) perspective called the "frenchified jargon currently fogging the pages of many a literary journal"⁵⁴.

So let me end with a plea for theory, a plea which picks up where Christoph Bode left off a couple of years ago in his impassioned essay entitled "Why Theory Matters"⁵⁵. Then, Bode began with the observation that it seemed "to have become the received opinion in literary studies that no reading of a text and therefore no criticism – and, for that matter, no teaching of literature either – can ever be untheoreti-

53 On this mentality-gap cf. Ansgar Nünning, "No Literary or Cultural History Without Theory: Ten Teutonic Theses on the Deconstruction and Reconceptualization of Two Complex Relationships", *REAL – Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature* 17 (2001): 35-66 and "On the Englishness of English Literary Histories: Where Literature, Philosophy and Nationalism Meet Cultural History", *Interfaces*, ed. Collier/Schwank/Wieselhuber, 55-83.

54 "The Rise of Theory – A Symposium", *Times Literary Supplement* 15.7 (1994): 12.

55 Christoph Bode, "Why Theory Matters", *Why Literature Matters*, ed. Ahrens/Volkman, 87-100.

cal" only to continue that "[o]ne cannot help feeling that theory has won in theory only, that the received opinion is far from being a genuinely appropriated one, and that what is common knowledge is by no means common practice as well"⁵⁶. In the rest of his essay Bode laments the self-affirmative and self-confirmatory poverty of untheoretical readings which subject a text unknowingly, while theory fosters "by definition the very awareness of these limitations"⁵⁷. Thus, the frequently levelled charge that theoretical readings only find the theory in the text should be countered by an understanding of theory as "the self-reflexive assessment of the performance of my approach", or, in other words, as "*the awareness of the contingency of your own practice*"⁵⁸ opposite the text and opposite other possible approaches. It is this dimension of meaning that can never be reached in 'untheoretical' readings, which are, after all, not 'untheoretical' at all but rather unwilling to consider their theoretical underpinnings.⁵⁹ The question whether or how such a degree of self-awareness is possible at all, which Bode addresses in the third part of his essay, leads us back to my little historical sketch earlier in this paper, in which I tried to suggest that it is the evolution of modern culture at large which provides a cultural opening for this kind of self-consciousness, for better or worse, while on the other hand one of the few ideas more or less generally accepted these days is the conviction that a consciousness cannot see through the historical conditions that have formed it.⁶⁰

56 "Theory", 87/88.

57 "Theory", 91.

58 "Theory", 91/92 (emphasis in original).

59 Cf. Terry Eagleton's much quoted quip that "Hostility to theory usually means an opposition to other people's theories and an oblivion of one's own." (*Theory*, viii).

60 For two diametrically opposed assessments of this conundrum and the possibilities opened up by it cf. Stanley Fish, "Critical Self-Consciousness, or Can We Know What We Are Doing?" *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies* (Oxford: Duke UP, 1989) 436-67; Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992) 59-61. See also Bode, "Theory", 92-97.

So after all theory is indeed neither a fixed body of work and achievement nor a pluralistic conglomerate of schools and approaches. It is, instead, a complex cultural practice which is first and foremost predicated on questioning, while the *provisional* answers provided within or by a particular theoretical approach should perhaps be considered as side effects, and, for that matter, as side effects which can, to stick to the medical metaphor, cancel or at least diminish the positive effect of the therapy. This, of course, is bound to happen once theories become canonized and potentially as self-confirmatory as any 'untheoretical' reading. There is a fine balance here which will have to be negotiated carefully. But as we cannot do without theories, we do not have much of a choice. And this brings me back to the Grateful Dead's "Saint Stephen". The main body of the song ends with the following lines which admirably sum up the ever-questioning stance which I have just ascribed to the practice of theory:

Can you answer? Yes, I can
But what would be the answer to the answer man?⁶¹

61 Hunter, *Box*, 196.