

## *THEORY*

When a smart-ass attacks writing programs, I defend them on the grounds that they, we, teach literature. We are literature's last stand for the simple fact that many university English departments seem to have renounced books (poems, stories, novels, plays) in favor of theorizing about them.—David Lehman (Orem 2001, 16)

Having no theory is a dangerous theory because it reinscribes the structures we can't see that nonetheless contain us. . . . Theory helps make the invisible visible. Creative writers need it even if it gives them hives.—Katherine Haake (2000, 240).

### **THE ENVELOPE, PLEASE!**

In the shabby linoleum halls of the academy that many creative writers currently inhabit, we have lots of definitions of, attitudes toward, and

theories about theory. Indeed, no single key term can change the physical face of a writer as much as this one. For most, the immediate response is—if not hives—then a frown, smirk, toss of the head, grimace, body twitch—which indicate attitudes ranging from involuntary rejection to downright revulsion. Like David Lehman, many take the high road, see themselves as writers at the Alamo, united against critics—*we* write it, *they* talk about it (and no one can understand that talk) and even worse, *they* often don't seem to talk at all about what *we* write.

For many, theory is the (arch)enemy of practice, in this case the practice of crafting excellent literary texts. Or perhaps we've (up)dated the OK Corral and (re)turned to a world of battling superheroes at the local academic cinemaplex. Theory is the tool of the reader and the reader/critic, and the critic is eternally opposed to the writer. Writers construct theorists as always already derivative, commentators, reporters or—and worst—imitators (he or she who wishes to be a writer yet has failed and steeped that sorrow in the convoluted opaque antiliterary prose of the academy). Unfortunately, this she or he also appears to have more academic cachet and authority within English department hierarchies, fueling creative writers' sense of battling a foe, fighting against a known evil. David and Goliath. The Wizards of Oz. Theory and theorists are (almost too) easily cast as nemeses.

In a widely circulated article, D. W. Fenza encapsulates what he feels is the generally-held-to-be-true-and-unbridgeable-gulf between writers and their critical readers in this manner: "Scholars, literary theorists, and writers are not compatible in their endeavors or temperaments, and they, necessarily, will be compelled to criticize one another to protect and promote what they believe to be crucial to the enjoyment of literature and its future" (2000). Over the last twenty years (but drawing from a tradition centuries older; see "Reading"), this position has been championed and anatomized in the pages of the AWP journal, which represents the platform of writing programs nationwide (see "Associated Writing Programs"). When the theory that theory is problematic for writers is challenged, this argument is generally raised by the uncombined and mixed forces of maverick creative writers (often those interested in pedagogy), feminist writers, and/or intradisciplinary writers (those who travel comfortably between linguistics and creative writing or composition and creative writing). Notably, most all our discussions continue to be overlooked by those in literature and literary criticism, confirming most writers' sense of alienation when the word comes into town.

However, Katherine Haake argues that creative writers cannot avoid theory in their writing lives even if it does make them uneasy or ill. François Camoin underscores the point by explaining that what most of us assume is theory talk—something done by those other than writers and almost always by the French—Lacan, Derrida, Barthes, Foucault, Cixous—is in fact what we already profess in our own discussions: “Like our critical colleagues, we are faced with texts, and silence is not an option. But we have our own stock of critical terms, familiar and non-threatening. Round and flat characters. Point of view. Narrative persona. Flashbacks. Showing versus telling” (1994, 3). Because we do not name these discussions as theoretical does not excuse us (nor exempt our terms) from the realm of theory. Camoin continues, “The theory (whether we want to call it that or not) is always there, though it’s often suppressed, disguised as craft, or common sense, or literary taste or *what-I-have-learned-in-twenty-years-of-being-a-writer*. But finally, it comes down to speaking about how texts mean, what they do, how they exist in the world, how they function” (5).

#### RASHOMON: (RE)DEFINING TERMS

Here, then, are two new ways to look at theory and theory talk. For the record and simplified, Beth Daniell offers this explanation of the two terms as used by Stanley Fish: “Applying a theory to a particular text . . . in order to explain that text, is theory. Arguing that theory *x* is more useful than theory *y* is theory talk” (1994, 132). First, theory talk is not disinterested. The degree to which we assume theory to be impartial helps construct a status quo. The degree to which we believe theory is a tool for speculation and interrogation helps question the status quo. Overall, a movement from modernism to postmodernism (q.v.) requires a similar move from understanding that our theories represent fixed realities and values to an understanding that our realities and our values are constructed. Theory in the second case now helps us to understand such constructions.

Instead of the writer viewing theory as an aggravated attack on artistic freedom, theory/theories offer ways of thinking about who we are as authors in cultures: “We have been taught that theory, neutral and a-rhetorical, determines knowledge. Yet we discover that theory is determined by and protects beliefs” (Daniell 1994, 131).

Those who have interests not only in producing (creative) writing but also in teaching their art, craft, and most valued (literary) genres find theory a tool for improving their writing and their teaching: “Instead of coming before practice, [as compositionists Knoblauch and Brannon

argue] then, theory comes out of practice—theory helps us explain what we are already doing” (Harris 1994, 147). In fact, as writers accept their responsibilities as teachers (call it, even, the craft of teaching), they are including in their world the need to evaluate literary texts—those constructed by their students. Not to mention the fact that they have always needed to evaluate the effectiveness of their own texts by becoming better readers of them on the long, winding, narrow, yellow brick road to becoming better writers.

A brief review of the complicated term is in order, one that looks and looks again at the way theory performs in the sciences compared to the way it performs in the fine arts, as well as how theory performed half a century ago compared to the way(s) it might perform today. Consider the following arguable points.

- In the fine arts, theory is different than theory in the sciences, yet, for historical reasons, we often apply a science-based understanding to a fine arts-based life.
- Theory can be assumed to be fixed or change-oriented—that is, interpretive and predictive.
- Theory cannot be proved. Theory is contingent. (Theories fail. Theories illuminate.) No one owns theory. Theory is political and rhetorical.

First, most of us have a general idea of what we mean by theory that goes something like this. A theory is a reasoned guess. It’s based on observations. Based on those observations, we generate a hypothesis that—given the same conditions—this or that will always (or for those more postmodern—generally) be true. Say, for a creative writer, the reasoned guess is that writers need readers. We observe that those who read widely write more fluently and flexibly. We study the history of writing and see that well-respected writers note their influences, those writers whom they have read. We find that we often use memory of what we’ve read to help us out of a writing corner. We find that our writing students who have read most widely write best. We firm up our theory, we argue strongly and widely that writers are or should be readers.

Others have a theory that genius and talent matters more than influence and wide acquaintance with reading. They point out to us that many writers (they name some) talk about intentionally avoiding influence, not reading other writers while they write so as not to have that author’s

prose rhythm influence their own, that writers like (they name them) say they don't read widely. And so brews a theory battle: one that writers who prefer to avoid theory walk away from. But can they? And should they? Or, why should they?

In the sciences, the first set of theorists are instantly discredited because "[i]n scientific circles . . . *theory* is distinguished from *hypothesis*, the latter being an educated guess subject to verification through experimentation, the former being a hypothesis that has so far withstood the test of time and experimentation and, consequently, is viewed as a given or a fact. Scientists hypothesize without data, but never theorize without it" (Daniell 1994, 140). Scientific theorizing, Daniell reminds us,

is supposed to move us beyond politics, beyond questions of power; theory, we have been taught, is the way to attain neutrality. . . . The best scientific theories have been thought not only to include all phenomena accounted for by any previous theory but also to explain anomalies that earlier theories failed to account for.

Theorists in the social sciences and the humanities tried to adopt this model, only to find that their theories don't do a very good job of predicting. . . . theories in these fields serve a more interpretive than predictive function. . . . That is, a given interpretive theory may explain the anomalies that a previous theory failed to account for, but it rarely, if ever, explains all the phenomena accounted for by previous theories. (128–129)

And as British philosopher A. J. Ayer has noted, "There never comes a point where a theory can be said to be true. The most that one can claim for any theory is that it has shared the successes of all its rivals and that it has passed at least one test which they have failed" (qtd. in Daniell 1994).

Theorists about theory, then, definers of the same, suggest that our attitude toward the word can change, that there are various ways to look at theory. If we use the scientific or descriptive lens, the second set of theorists may claim our allegiance. If we use an interpretive and predictive lens, the first set of theorists may better serve.

More simply, if we have been raised in a culture that valorizes the scientific approach to meaning making, we tend to import those assumptions about theory to areas where those assumptions don't serve us well. Instead, we might think of other ways theory can and does work. For example, after studying the work of writing researchers Albert Kitzhaber and James Britton, Joseph Harris offers another way of thinking about these seemingly antithetical approaches (the scientific and the interpretive):

And so while Kitzhaber looked to theory for a map of the subject to be studied, for a set of principles that would organize what we need to know about how texts are composed and interpreted, Britton took a more rhetorical or performative view of it as a means to an end, a form of reflection on action whose aim is to change teaching in direct and immediate ways. . . . *the constative view asks whether a certain theory is true or false. It is concerned with theory as knowledge. The performative view looks to the possible effects of holding a theory.* It deals with theory as persuasion. We can of course look at any theory, just as we can analyze any utterance, for how it functions both as a constative statement and as a performative act—for what it says and what it does. We can ask, that is, not only what a theory has to say about the nature of composing or interpreting but also what changes it would have us make in our work as teachers and intellectuals. (1994, 142–143; emphasis added)

When we approach or define theory by asking how it does or might work for writers, we arrive at the third set of observations, outlined above: theory cannot be proved. Theory is contingent. Theories fail. Theories illuminate. No one owns theory. Theory is both political and rhetorical. We are, like it or not, hives or not, theorists.

So what's a creative writer to do?

#### A LITTLE DAB'LL DO YOU VS. WORLD ENOUGH AND TIME FOR THEORY

Some writers benefit from the systematic study of theory. Others eschew it . . . but at their own risk. Our theory claims that, even if she is not closely following these discussions, the not-sold-on-theory writer would still benefit from a working acquaintance, a little dab of theory, for the following practical reasons:

- Theory is political, particularly in the hierarchies of English departments where many writers now house themselves. To feel angry about or indifferent to theory, to lack a bit of theory knowledge and theory talk is to make oneself vulnerable and defensive. To do the reverse is to participate in what is—for now—the lingua franca of these departments.
- Theory is rhetorical and there are any number of genre arguments in contemporary writing programs; knowing which genres have currency for which reasons can matter because “Who owns creative nonfiction?” is revving up to be the next big theoretical debate in these locales (see “Creative Nonfiction”).

- Theory is practical *and* performative (at least in some of its political and rhetorical manifestations), for there are any number of moments (the cover letter, the grants application, the plea for national arts funding) when writers have a need to articulate their practices, their beliefs, their field, their genre, and so on.

While this much of an acquaintance with theory will suffice for many creative writers, both inside and outside the academy, for others, theory can lead into and out of better writing.

- Practice into theory and theory into practice is the normal ebb and flow of excellent teaching. Teachers evaluate student texts and need to have understandings of/ability to articulate their theories of reading, their values and beliefs, their judgments. Teaching is the fastest route into theory, for without theories, teaching practices cannot be tested and improved; curriculums cannot be defended or improved. Any interaction with credentialing (MFA or PhD, undergrad and graduate writing major requirements, and so on) is a result of political and rhetorical representations of theory.
- Theory is a tool for thinking and innovation. There is no experimentation without convention. There is nothing to rebel against without a community to approach or retreat from. Without theories of writing and writers, there are no genre innovations, movements, and schools of writing. Without theory, we could even claim there is no community, no need for writers and readers to meet.
- Theory can be serious but theory can also be play when a writer is not on the run, on the defensive, battling a nemesis. Theory is language and language is the grubstake of writing. Some writers are avid linguists, are word mavens, are fascinated with the deep study of theory. Others take the exploratory approach, valuing the epigraph, the idea, the gesture toward a new facet of practice in a new language for thinking about art and event.

The play of theory may be the newest idea in this entry for many creative writers. For such an approach, we'd suggest beginning with the self-admittedly idiosyncratic initiation to critical terms offered by Katherine Haake in the last chapter in *What Our Speech Disrupts* (2000). Her discussion of sign, difference, supplementarity, and others terms join

story terms like narrate and focalization. Her exercises here and in *Metro* are combinatorial play with language, for the writer, by the writer. She “strips” theory into language exercises that both illuminate it and make it strange—to those who would own it, to those who would avoid it. In so doing, her aims are both rhetorical and political. She theorizes a “radical pedagogy of inclusion that sees the creative writing classroom as an intra- and interdisciplinary site where basic questions of language and discourse can lead to transformed notions of how we know and experience not just our writing but ourselves” (18).

Let’s return to the thorny problem once again, What does theory—Haake’s theory, Foucault’s theory, New Critical theory, practicing writers’ beliefs (even those who say they don’t have or need theory)—have to offer creative writers, and what might be some of the attitudes and relationships writers take toward theory and theory talk?

#### MAKE USE

We take our final subhead from a poem so titled by Raymond Carver in which he suggests that writers/readers/humans look around them and make use of all they observe and experience. We would suggest that theory is for all of us—it is democratic if we make it so. We need to demystify it and decide on degree of investment. Further, those who see theory as the language of opportunity will find added value as they explore its avenues and applications.

Beth Daniell, whom we’ve drawn on usefully here, helps us end this entry with her theory of theories. In the spirit of serious play, we strip and turn her words into a practical checklist. She argues: “Once we understand that theory is rhetorical and political, then our project as intellectuals goes beyond merely formulating theories or applying them. . . . We need to ask”:

- How valid and how rigorous is the research that supports this theory?
- What phenomena does this theory fail to take into account? That is, where does it “leak”?
- Can we state the limitations of the theory, so that we do not claim more for it than it can do, so that we can caution others that this theory works in this domain but not in that one?
- What are the assumptions, both stated and unstated, on which the theory rests? But also:

- What is the hard core of unstated beliefs underlying the theory?
- Whose interests are being served?
- Is the theory consistent with what we say we want to do?
- What are the social and ethical implications of this theory?
- Does it serve our stated beliefs about knowledge, language learning, and the value of human beings?
- Or does it challenge them?
- Are we better off with the theory than we are without it? (1994, 131)

Daniell's questions help us theorize; that is, they can help us consider long-standing claims more systematically: The MFA (rather than the PhD) is the most appropriate terminal degree for creative writing programs. Critical theory has little/has a great deal to offer creative writers. Creative writers are harmed/hurt by (choose: employment in English departments, teaching, the study of theory). Creative writing/writers should/should not be political. National funding for the arts is essential/problematic. Publishing is a crapshoot. The novel is dead. Workshops produce McWriters.

And so our theories grow and go.