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Interlude I: The Cultures of Reflexivity

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One of the programmatic key quotes of the emergent modern culture of reflexivity can be found in the preface to the first edition of Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781): 'Our age is, to a special degree, the age of criticism, and to criticism everything must submit.' (Kant 9) While this observation has frequently been acknowledged as 'the foundation of modern philosophy' (cf. Höffe), its ambiguity rests at the heart of all theoretical enterprises which were to follow (including Kant's own): On the one hand, the formula implies a new understanding of theory predicated on establishing models, systems, schools of thought, or theories by means of questioning the world in order to ascertain unquestionable truth (or at least valid and workable descriptions). In this mould, criticism leads to construction. On the other hand, the formula acknowledges the potential inconclusiveness of the persistent questioning that is at the heart of the critical method. In this dimension, criticism implies perspective and relativity, and theory emerges (in the singular) as an attitude of persistent reflection and (eventually) deconstruction. Modern reflexivity accordingly

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manifests itself in two modes: a constructive one ultimately aiming at applicability and viability (cf. von Glasersfeld), and an ultimately deconstructive one which acknowledges the intractable surplus of complexity in the world. As these two modes are to a certain extent mutually exclusive, they generate an inherently ambiguous understanding of theory which in turn generates a wide spectrum of cultural practices, so much so in fact that one could speak of distinct cultures of reflexivity in different discursive realms of modern culture.

To begin with, this double coding of modern theory clearly indicates the schism between the natural sciences and the human sciences as established by Wilhelm Dilthey in the 1880s and then later broadened into the notion of “the two cultures” by C. P. Snow (1956/1959/1963). As late as 2006, Wolfgang Iser introduces the distinction between “hard-core theory” aimed at prediction and explanation as opposed to “soft theory” aimed at mapping and understanding, and while both varieties figure in the humanities in general and literary and cultural studies in particular, the overall trajectory of theory development in literary and cultural studies is clearly moving from prescriptive, normative, and dogmatic theories via descriptive theories towards tentative, exploratory, and heuristic theories (cf. Iser 5–9). While various object- and application-oriented theories (of poetry, drama, the novel; of narrative in general; of reader reception; etc.) persist in the discipline, the understanding of theory clearly shifted towards the second mode at the end of the twentieth century, insisting that

Theory is interdisciplinary—discourse with effects outside an original discipline. Theory is analytical and speculative—an attempt to work out what is involved in what we call sex or language or writing or meaning or the subject. Theory is a critique of common sense, of concepts taken as natural. Theory is reflexive, thinking about thinking, enquiry into the categories we use in making sense of things, in literature and in other discursive practices. (Culler 14–15)

This development creates tensions between the demands of the science system (which are increasingly modelled on the model of the natural sciences, where a discipline is supposed to have an object of study and theories *of* something) and the role of the humanities as a framework of reflection, including the reflection on theory itself and reflexivity in general.

One of the problems that emerge here is that due to its conceptual detachment from reality, theory in the humanities does not always successfully maintain its distinction from discourse and thus loses its questioning spirit:

Although the boundaries [between theory and discourse] are somewhat contingent, and thus changeable, discourse nevertheless features a definite view of the world we live in, irrespective of whether it is meant to describe this world or is identified with it. Thus discourse is deterministic, whereas theory is explorative. Determination versus exploration marks the essential difference between the two, and it may well be that humans need these contrasting ways of dealing with reality. Discourse draws boundaries, and theory lifts them, thereby opening up new territories of anthropological significance. It is important to register this distinction because the two are sometimes bracketed together as if they were the same thing. (Iser 12)

Iser's example here is the veering of postcolonial theory into a deterministic discourse (cf. Iser 172–86). On a more general note, however, one could ask whether the totalizing “postmodern” culture of reflexivity prevalent in the humanities at the end of the twentieth century did not run a similar risk of metamorphosing into discourse in a final consequence of the continuous history of (and obsession with) representation that effectively shaped a specifically modern worldview by means of media-induced (print!) abstraction, which resulted in a universalism that became ingrained and naturalized in modern culture way beyond its philosophical (and theoretical) explications. What gets lost in the process is reality: Under modern conditions, the word “world” ‘eliminates from the sphere of meaning the whole, actual, “natural” world [in] a paradox that grants to whatever necessarily incomplete world [...] formed by this naming (or named by this forming) the prestige and power of its metaphorical capture of totality’ (Hayot 40). And conversely, ‘self-reflexivity confirms the intensity of modernity’s relationship to the universal, since only through an endless series of self-reflections can modernity include itself in the universal that it aims to describe’ (Hayot 105).

What can be done about this? For one, it seems that an insistence on cultures of reflexivity can be productive, and this is the point that the overall outline of the present volume tries to make: Of course it is necessary to continue the line of reflection opened up with the triumph of capital-T Theory in the 1980s, taking on the mantle of philosophy in its renewed take on problems of ontology, epistemology, and truth against

the background of a new acknowledgement of the foundational role of representation and mediation. However, this dimension of metatheory has to expand its range of reflexivity in order to fully engage with itself. Metatheory is by no means the “highest” order of theory somehow incorporating all the others, but beyond (and as) philosophical reasoning it is also a cultural practice with a more or less pronounced critical agenda, and it always articulates itself as text. In order to escape the universalizing bent of modern culture, metatheory would have to conceive of itself simultaneously in terms of cultural theory, critical theory, and textual theory, thus acknowledging its own contingent position with all its privileges and limitations: Just as the differentiation of theory into metatheory, cultural theory, critical theory, and textual theory provides occasions for mutual observation which can add qualitatively to their respective modes of reflexivity from the inside, as it were, an awareness of the contingency and relativity of cultural practices and positions in the larger context of modern culture with their respective contributions to what we know about the world can serve the same purpose from the outside. Differentiation, one could say, opens up opportunities of comparison and reflexivity in spite of the insurmountable immanence of the modern worldview. Only in such a design can the ideologies of habitus (see Interlude II) of humanities scholars in general and theorists in particular be addressed with regard to how they affect their outlook and practices of interpretation (see Interlude III).

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