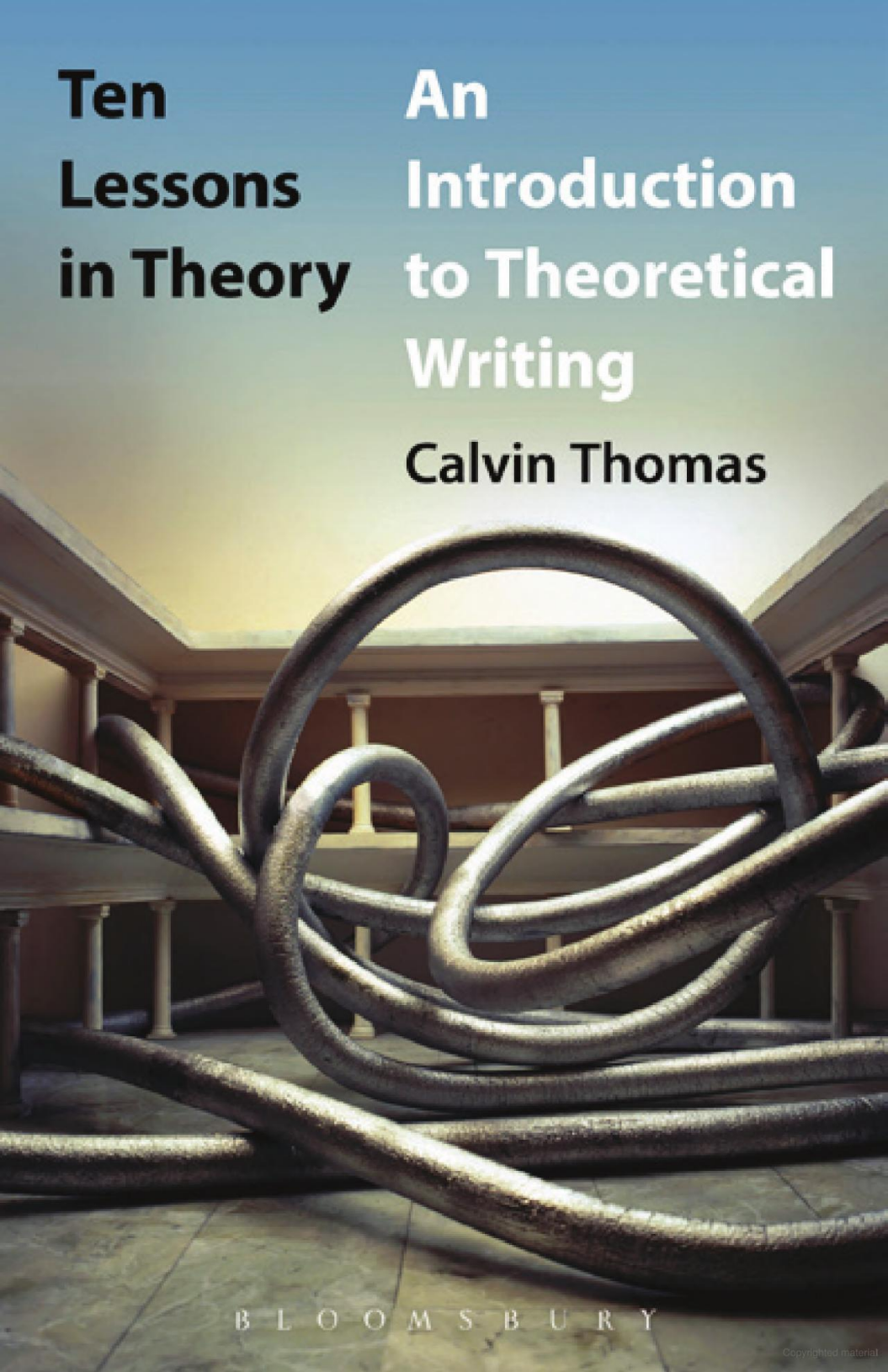
Ten Lessons in Theory

An Introduction to Theoretical Writing

Calvin Thomas



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Preface

"Something worth reading": Theory and/as the Art of the Sentence

Toward the end of Samuel Beckett's novel *Molloy*, the narrator, who calls himself Jacques Moran, encounters a strange man on a lonely road. Words are somewhat nonsensically exchanged, and violence of some extreme sort apparently ensues. For as Moran rather vaguely reports:

> I do not know what happened then. But a little later, perhaps a long time later, I found him stretched on the ground, his head in a pulp. I am sorry I cannot indicate more clearly how this result was obtained, it would have been something worth reading. But it is not at this late stage of my relation that I intend to give way to literature. (1955: 151)

Nor at this early stage of *my* relation do I intend to linger with this bit of Beckettian pulp fiction. But I would like to note the neat definition of "literature" that Beckett's Moran provides—"literature," we are told, is "something worth reading."

Toward the beginning of *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Terry Eagleton offers a similarly simple definition, a "purely formal, empty sort of definition," of the word "literature"—"Perhaps," writes Eagleton, "'literature' means . . . any kind of writing which for some reason or another somebody values highly" (1983/1996: 8). This "functionalist" definition, as he calls it, doesn't quite satisfy Eagleton, but it works well enough for my purposes here, mainly because it allows me—at the outset of this book, *Ten Lessons in Theory*—to begin troubling the definitional distinction between "literature" and "theory," to begin introducing "literary theory" as a particular kind of writing that "for some reason or another" more than a few people have valued highly (even if others have loathed and reviled it). Taken together, Eagleton's and Beckett's definitions of "literature" give me license to suggest that "theory," like "literature," is "something worth reading," that "giving way to literature" and "falling into theory" (Richter 1999) can be intimately related responses to remarkably similar temptations.

Written as a "literary" introduction to "the activities that have come to answer to the nickname *theory*" (Culler 2007: 1), this book stakes itself upon three major premises. The first premise is that a genuinely productive

understanding of theoretical activities depends upon a much more sustained encounter with the foundational writings of Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud than any reader is likely to get from the standardized introductions to theory currently available; discourse concerning these four writers thus pervades *Ten Lessons in Theory*. The second premise involves what Fredric Jameson describes as "the conviction that of all the writing called theoretical, [Jacques] Lacan's is the richest" (2006: 365–6); holding to this conviction pretty much throughout, *Ten Lessons* pays more (and more careful) attention to the richness of Lacan's psychoanalytic writings than does any other introduction to theory (that isn't specifically an introduction to Lacan). The book's third premise, already introduced above, is that "literary theory" isn't simply highfalutin speculation "about" literature, but that theory fundamentally *is* literature, after all—something worth reading, a genre of writing that considerable numbers of readers have, for some time now, valued highly, even enjoyed immensely. The book not only argues but attempts to demonstrate that "the writing called theoretical" is nothing if not a specific type of "creative writing," a particular way of engaging with the *art* of the sentence, the art of making sentences that make *trouble*—sentences that articulate the desire to make radical *changes* in the very fabric, or fabrication, of social reality. As presented and performed here, theoretical writing involves writing *about* "writing as the very possibility of change" (Cixous 1975/2007: 1646).

Both the presentation and the performance of the book are consistent with this emphasis on sentence-making as trouble-making transformation. As its title indicates, the book proceeds in the form of ten "lessons," each based on an axiomatic sentence or "truth-claim" selected from the more or less established canon of theoretical writing. Each lesson works by extensively "unpacking" its featured sentence, exploring the sentence's conditions of possibility and most radical implications, asking what it means to say that "the world must be made to mean" (Stuart Hall), that "meaning is the polite word for pleasure" (Adam Philips), that "language is by nature fictional" (Roland Barthes), and so on. In the course of exploring the conditions and consequences of these sentences, the ten lessons work and play together to articulate the most basic assumptions and motivations supporting theoretical writing, from its earliest stirrings to its most current turbulences. Provided in each lesson is a working glossary—specific critical keywords (like "reification" or "*jouissance*") are **boldfaced** on their first appearance and defined either in the text or in a footnote.

But while each lesson constitutes a precise explication of the working terms and core tenets of theoretical writing as such, each also attempts to *exemplify* theory as a "practice of creativity" (Foucault 1983/1997: 262) in

itself. And so, while the book as a whole constitutes a novel approach to theory, it also asks to be approached as a sort of theoretical novel. In other words, *Ten Lessons* is a textbook, to be sure, but a textbook written to be read closely, not (or so its writer dares to hope) as yet another routine, academically commodified, and dutifully "historicized" rehearsal of the now-standard "theories of literature," and not as a guide to the practical "application" of theory *to* literature, but rather as a set of extended pedagogical prose poems or experimental fictions or variations on the theme of theory *as* literature, of "life as literature" (Nehamas 1987) and of "the world as text" (Barthes 1968/1977: 147).

The ten lessons are divided into two parts. Part 1 is called "Antiphysis: Five Lessons in Textual Anthropogenesis." The word **antiphysis** actually appears but rarely in the canon of theoretical writing; the word isn't glossed in any of the critical dictionaries that I've employed here to explicate key theoretical terms. And yet the word antiphysis does quite nicely express the core tenet of what's called "historical materialism" —Karl Marx's permanently revolutionary argument that humans distinguish themselves from animals, and that human history as such begins, when people first start *working* to *produce* the very conditions of their human existence. The word antiphysis thus concerns the rudimentary but transformative *labor*—the actual work on or *against* physical nature—that *must* be performed for any "human reality" ever to form itself, bring itself into being. And in this argument, *all* human realities do, in fact, actively and transformatively bring themselves into being; all human realities are restless exercises in **anthropogenesis**, a word that concerns the human causality, the human origins or human geneses, of the human *qua* human. The phrase "*textual* anthropogenesis," then, involves what's called linguistic determinism, or what I'll call semiotic materialism, the argument, also to my mind permanently revolutionary, that any human reality, and any individual subject thereof, must be made out of *language* as a specifically "antinatural"—unreal or "antireal"—form of productive labor. Thus the book's first five lessons, all in various ways, concern "the virtual character of the symbolic order" of language as "the very condition of human historicity" (Žižek 1999/2002: 241); they all concern the difference between human and non-human animals, between human reality and "the real," as well as the constitutive interrelations between historical and semiotic materialisms; they all address the linguistic formations and transformations, the political inscriptions and ideological interpellations, of the specifically human subject, the "animal at the mercy of language" (Lacan 1966f/2006: 525), the animal sentenced to keep making sentences in the purely anthropogenetic, socio-symbolic, textual or virtual reality that is, so to speak, ours.

Part 2 is called "Extimacy: Five Lessons in the Utter Alterity of Absolute Proximity." A key Lacanian neologism, the word **extimacy** mixes "exteriority" with "intimacy," and thereby "neatly expresses the way in which psychoanalysis problematizes the opposition between the inside and the outside, between container and contained" (Evans 1996: 58). The word "extimacy" signifies the unsettling idea that "the innermost, intimate core of a person's psychical being is, at root, an alien, foreign 'thing.'" (Johnston 2009: 86): "extimacy" involves the strange "coincidence of utter alterity with absolute proximity" and "brings us close to what, in ourselves, must remain at a distance if we are to sustain the consistency of our symbolic universe" (Žižek 1999/2008: 368). And so, here, the word "extimacy" marks the various ways theoretical writing tends, rather like the Mobius strip so beloved by Lacan, to turn itself and its readers inside out and outside in; "extimacy" serves to condense the various concerns with alienation, alterity, foreignness, defamiliarization, constitutive otherness, difference, *différance,* queerness, and so forth, which continue to pervade and motivate theoretical writing.

While Part 2 of *Ten Lessons* is similar to Part 1 in that it strives to explicate and perform theoretical writing as a "practice of creativity" in itself, Part 2, despite its alienating title, also serves as a *slightly* more orthodox introduction to and survey of "the history of literary theory," addressing certain "schools" or "approaches" that have by now acquired perhaps a bit too much "name recognition" —formalism, structuralism, semiotics, poststructuralism, postmodernism, postcolonial theory, feminism, gender studies, and finally, queer theory. But what initially sets this section of the book apart from other, more routinely "historicizing" introductions to theory is that it begins with a full lesson devoted to Hegel. Major theorists from Althusser to Žižek acknowledge Hegel's importance to their writing. Jean-Michel Rabaté insists "that a patient reading of Hegel . . . is, if not a prerequisite, at least an essential step on the way to an understanding of theory" (2002: 21) as such. And yet, no introduction to theory to date devotes more than a few sentences, if that much, to Hegel's work. The lesson on Hegel given here attempts to rectify this situation, letting some prolonged exposure to the ever-pertinent Hegel serve the book's readers as "an essential step on the way" to better understanding not only the lessons on formalism, structuralism, poststructuralism, etc., that are to follow, but also, retroactively, the five lessons on "antiphysis" that precede.

"Antiphysis" and "extimacy" are, of course, intimately interrelated matters, so much so that we might here borrow the phrasing of one of our lesson's guiding sentences and say that there is no lesson in "antiphysis" that is not, at the same time, a lesson in "extimacy," and vice versa, so

that a productive understanding of this book wouldn't in my estimation be seriously damaged by your reading Part 2 before Part 1. Before getting to either portion of our lessons, however, we have to consider the question of why any of us should even be studying "theory" anymore in the first place; we must work through an introductory chapter that explains why theory isn't dead—even if certain readers have long wished it were. The introduction accounts for this "death-wish" against theory and takes up several descriptions (from Jonathan Culler, Michael Hardt, Slavoj Žižek, Judith Halberstam, Fredric Jameson, and others) of what theory has done and must continue to do to "stay alive," explaining why theoretical writing always attempts to "shatter and undermine our common perceptions" (Žižek 2006: ix), usually by taking any and all "meaning as a problem rather than a given" (Culler 2007: 85). The introduction accounts for theory's necessarily *antagonistic* stances, exploring the various motivations behind theoretical writing as a mode of creative abrasion, a means of relentlessly *writing against* (against common-sense assumptions, against given meanings, against "things as they are," etc.). The chapter concludes with a justification of theory's notorious "difficulty," its discursive warfare against "clarity," and ends by insisting that theoretical writing's inevitable mission is to try "to keep open the difference between things as they are and things as they might otherwise be" (Critchley 1997: 22).

As for the individual lessons themselves, let's let the following serve as a preview:

Lesson 1: "The world must be made to mean"—*or, in(tro)ducing the subject of human reality*

The guiding sentence for the first lesson comes from Stuart Hall. The lesson explains how the sentence's first clause, "the world must be *made*," expresses the principal assertion of historical materialism and then posits the ending infinitive—"to *mean*"—as a sort of semiotic kicker. The lesson presents historical/semiotic materialism (the constitutive interrelation between labor and language) as the grounding "antiphysical" assumption of theoretical writing, the twin foundations of anti-foundationalism, so to speak. Here, we begin to unpack this word "antiphysis," to understand why theoretical writers think that human reality can never be taken "naturally," as a given, and can never be understood as biologically determined or theologically guaranteed. Here also, with a nod to Lacan's insistence on our species' universal "prematurity at birth," are we introduced to the idea that the "subject of human reality"—the specifically human individual—must always be *induced*, must always be brought into being not merely physically, but through labor and language, "work with words."

Lesson 2: "Meaning is the polite word for pleasure"—*or, how the beast in the nursery learns to read*

This lesson's guiding sentence comes from Adam Phillips' *The Beast in the Nursery: On Curiosity and Other Appetites*. The lesson begins with the curiously *unappetizing* assertion that we are never simply "born human" but must always be meaningfully *made* that way. The lesson expands upon Lacan's suggestion of human prematurity at birth and discusses the various "orthopedic" processes by which, as Louis Althusser puts it, the "small animal produced by the union of a man and a woman" must be *turned* into "a small human child" (1971: 205). For a historical/semiotic materialist conversant with Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, this "turn" is always laboriously linguistic—it always involves both the adjustment of the pleasure principle to the reality principle and the sacrifice of animal "being" to human "meaning." Freud, as we'll see, posits that "whoever understands the human mind knows that hardly anything is harder for [us] than to give up a pleasure which [we have] once experienced. Actually, we never give anything up; we only exchange one thing for another" (1907/1989: 437–8). Lacan, as we'll read, casts this exchange of "one thing for another" in terms of a sacrifice of real "being" (*l'être*) for symbolic "meaning" (*la lettre*). Phillips' sentence merges these articulations, revealing "politeness"—the discursively orthopedic politics of self-policing—as that arena of exchange in which the pleasures of animality (such as they are for us) must be traded up for "meaningful" participation in the *polis*.

Lesson 3: "Language is, by nature, fictional"—*or, why the word for moonlight can't be moonlight*

Although it was Nietzsche who first stressed the radically figurative nature of language— the utterly metaphorical condition of any articulated "truth"—our guiding sentence here comes from Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*. Readers of Lesson Three are asked to consider the disturbing propositions that we are all "made out" of language *and* that language itself simply isn't real (or isn't simply real). Language exists, to be sure, but it cannot be real; language exists only ever "antiphysically," precisely by virtue of *not* being real, by never quite failing to *negate* the real. Along the lines of Lacan's assertion that "the symbol first manifests itself as the killing of the thing" (1966d/2006: 262), this lesson posits a certain murderous or prohibitory "no to the real thing" as any noun's structural condition of possibility. The lesson rehearses several elementary examples to illustrate the "antiphysical" point (the word "elephant" can't really be an elephant, the word "dirt" etched into real dirt isn't really dirt, a pointing finger must be *read* as something other than just real flesh in

order to function as a sign, etc.). The lesson also adumbrates Lacan's take on the linguistic subject as a subject of desire, his "oedipalization" of language acquisition, the way he links language's "no to the real" with the metaphorical "no of the father," connecting the "paternal" prohibition against incest to the figurative "bar" that separates signifier from signified, preventing any word from ever completely *being* the thing that it *means*. The lesson closes with a riff on a passage from Don DeLillo's postmodern ghost story *The Body Artist* and with the suggestion that while it might seem like a "bad thing" that the word for moonlight can never really be moonlight, it's probably a "good thing" that words for excrement aren't really excremental—in other words, the lesson closes by suggesting that we "animals at the mercy of language" should be more gratefully relieved than fundamentally disturbed to be told that we are made out of words, that words aren't really real, and that language is literally nothing.

Lesson 4: "Desire must be taken literally"—*a few words on death, sex, and interpretation*

The lead sentence here is from Lacan, for whom "to take literally" means to take "to the letter," and so this lesson thoroughly unpacks the various structural coimplications of language and desire, starting with the uncanny resemblance between Alexandre Kojève's Hegelian description of desire as "an emptiness, the presence of the absence of a reality" (1947/1980: 5) and Lacan's formulation of the signifier as a literal "presence made of absence" (1966d/2006: 228). In the first section, on words, the lesson maps Lacan's trio of need, demand, and desire onto his three psychic registers of the real, the imaginary, and the symbolic; the lesson also takes up Freud's key distinction between "thing-presentations" and "word-presentations." In the second section, on death, the lesson gets at the notion of the death-drive in the same way Freud did in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, by taking up that famous bit of child's play called "the fort-da"; this section also addresses the relation between the death-drive and narrative (as per the analysis of Peter Brooks). The section on "sex" attempts to justify, or at least cogently explain, the Lacanian assertion that human sex is a problem of speech and that speech itself is a sexual dilemma. As the lesson spells out, the English word "sex" itself comes from the Latin *secare*, "to cut." Because the word "sex" shares its root, so to speak, with other "cutting" words (scission, scissoring, sectioning), the "meaning of sex" can be said to involve nothing but "coming to terms" with "the cut" of materialist language, in which not just "sex" or "scissors" but *all* words in *all* languages are serrated, castrating: so much, then, for any retrograde notion of some "completely natural" sexual desire among humans. In this section, however, the problem of sex is "taken to the letter"

by being taken as a problem of *writing*, the literal forming of written letters on the page. A few passages of literary writing from Poe and Faulkner that thematize incestuous desire are briefly *interpreted*, and this move takes us into the fourth section, on the relation between *interpretation* and desire. Here, however, we turn away from the explicitly psychoanalytic register, away from Lacan's matter-of-fact assertion that "desire, in fact, is interpretation itself" (Lacan 1973/1981: 176) and toward a consideration of Nietzsche's quip that there are no facts, only interpretations, and his interpretation of the "will to truth" as a form of the "will to death." The lesson ends with Michel Foucault's discussion of the "life and death" of interpretation and his Nietzschean or "aestheticist" insistence on writing as an art of self-transformation.

Lesson 5: "You are not yourself"—*or, I (think, therefore I) is an other*

This lesson explores the politically anti-identitarian strains of theoretical writing. The lead sentence is the slogan that appears on the famous Barbara Kruger text-art photograph (woman's face in shattered mirror), but it also relates to Rimbaud's "*Je est un autre*" or "I is an other" (which insight appears, mashed-up with the Cartesian *cogito*, in the lesson's subtitle).

After introducing some of the ethical motivations behind theoretical anti-identitarianism, the lesson performs a close reading of Kruger's jagged edges, then moves to a thorough explication of Lacan's essay on the mirror-stage. The second section is an extensive explication of Althusser's essay "Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses," while the third section returns to Nietzsche and Foucault and to the question of an effective "aesthetics of resistance" to the ideological interpellation of the subject.

Lesson 6: "This restlessness is us"—*or, the least that can be said about Hegel*

This lesson's lead sentence comes from Jean-Luc Nancy's *Hegel: The Restlessness of the Negative*, and the lesson begins with a question: if Hegel is in fact what Nancy calls him—"the inaugural thinker of the contemporary world" (2002: 3)—and if Jean-Michel Rabaté is right to insist that reading Hegel is "an essential step on the way to an understanding of theory" (2002: 21), why do most introductions to theory slight Hegel so drastically, saying very little about his writing, if even mentioning his name at all? This widespread neglect of a crucial theoretical figure is best explained by Fredric Jameson, who warns that "the attempt to do justice to the most random observation of Hegel ends up drawing the whole tangled, dripping mass of the Hegelian sequence of forms out into the light with it" (1971: 306). This lesson attempts to do justice, not to a random observation of Hegel, but to the crucial Hegelian concept of *Aufhebung,* or "sublation." While the lesson doesn't consider the whole Hegelian sequence of forms, it does

attempt to chart some of the key movements of the dialectic, taking up, in particular, Hegel's theoretical sublation of Christianity and his rehearsal of the struggle between "lord and bondsman" or "master and slave." The lesson ends with an attempt to demonstrate the political pertinence of a restlessly Hegelian analysis with a close reading of the famous photograph of the 1968 sanitation workers' strike in Memphis, Tennessee, the stark depiction of the "I am a man" placards held up against the fixed bayonets of the state militia.

Lesson 7: "There is no document of civilization that is not at the same time a document of barbarism"—*or, the fates of literary formalism*

The lead sentence here is from Walter Benjamin, but the lesson begins with Terry Eagleton's assertion that all the readers and writers of all the civilized documents in the world basically fall into two groups—those who actually understand Benjamin's dialectical observation and those who simply don't get it. Historically speaking, the latter group tends to be populated by literary formalists, particularly the Anglo-American New Critics, who arguably made attempting to *prevent* our understanding of Benjamin's sentence their critical mission in life. Thus, the first section of this lesson examines the standard definitions of (and political charges against) literary formalism, taking up, in particular, the way the New Critical concern with *formal* control and containment mirrored an underlying and reactionary interest in *social* containment and control. The section also shows how Virginia Woolf practically demolished New Criticism in advance with certain passages from *A Room of One's Own*. The second section of this lesson performs a close reading of two often-anthologized essays by Cleanth Brooks— "Irony as a Principle of Structure" and "My Credo"—demonstrating Brooks' investment in using formalist methods of reading poetry to transubstantiate "new" literary criticism into orthodox religious devotion. The third section pits Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky's "defamiliarization" against Brooks' new critical "faith," arguing that Shklovsky's resolutely secular (actually, quite Nietzschean) conception of formalism—and particularly, his attention to the distinction between "poetical" metaphor and "prosaic" metonymy—is still quite pertinent to and compatible with contemporary materialist semiotics and poetics.

Lesson 8: "The unconscious is structured like a language"—*or, invasions of the signifier*

In this lesson, we return to Lacan, at least with the guiding sentence, and more or less with a vengeance in Section Three. But the first two sections are devoted to explaining the developments in structural linguistics

that made Lacan's trademark assertion possible, to begin with. Here, we distinguish formalism from structuralism and examine the interdependence of structuralism and semiotics. We necessarily spend some time with Ferdinand de Saussure, charting the signifier/signified and syntagm/paradigm distinctions, mainly as a way of seeing how Roman Jakobson is able to connect metaphor and metonymy to condensation and displacement in Freudian dream analysis (thus enabling Lacan's signature claim). We also spend some time exploring the most radical implications—particularly for considerations of sex, sexual difference, and gender identity—of Saussure's insight that language is a differential system "without positive terms" (1959: 120). This discussion, of course, takes us back to "the structuralist Lacan," to the famous "twin doors" (Ladies and Gents) in "The Instance of the Letter" and, inevitably, to "The Meaning of the Phallus." The lesson ends with an attempt to establish: (1) that the phallus really isn't the penis any more than the word moonlight really is moonlight, and for much the same reason; (2) that Lacan's writings ultimately expose, rather than perpetuate, so-called phallogocentrism, that his writings describe, rather than prescribe, a patriarchal unconscious "structured like a language"; and that (3) we may already find in the allegedly "structuralist" Lacan the strong possibility of what Judith Butler calls "a queer poststructuralism of the psyche" (2004: 44).

Lesson 9: "There is nothing outside the text"—*or, fear of the proliferation of meaning*

The ninth lesson concerns poststructuralism, postmodernism, and postcolonial theory. Poststructuralism and postmodernism have been branded as "trendy nihilisms" that deny life or literature any significance whatsoever. But poststructuralist and postmodernist writers actually fall quite short of affirming that "life" has "no meaning." Rather, such writers examine our pervasive *fear* that human reality generates far *too many* meanings, far *too much* interpretation— they trace and engage with our anxieties about *semiotic excess*, what Jacques Derrida (who is, of course, responsible for the lesson's guiding sentence) calls "the *overabundance* of the signifier" (1966/1978: 290). To see how poststructuralism concerns our "fear of the proliferation of meaning" (Foucault 1969/1998: 222), the first section of this lesson begins with a necessary revisiting of Nietzsche, with specific attention to key moments in "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense" and the *Genealogy of Morals*. We then move through Derrida's deconstruction of metaphysics, his attempted evaporation of "the center" and his abolition of the "transcendental signified," and then to Roland Barthes' and Michel Foucault's interrogations of "the author." The second section gets into postmodernism

by way of the Habermas/Lyotard debate, but then more carefully explicates "the postmodern" by considering "the modern" in three aspects—socio-economic *modernization*, philosophical *modernity*, and aesthetic *modernism*. Section three, on postcolonial theory, begins—on what some will, no doubt, consider an inappropriately Eurocentric and "queerly" Foucauldian note—by pointing out the strong similarities between Edward Said's anti-imperialist descriptions of "Orientalism" and Eve Sedgwick's anti-homophobic limning of "sex." We then look at some queerly Orientalist moments in Hollywood film-noir, specifically the Geiger Bookstore sequence in Hawks' *The Big Sleep* and the entrance of Joel Cairo in Huston's *The Maltese Falcon*. We *then* consider the reasons why some postcolonial theorists aligned with Marxism (Lazarus, Ahmed, Almond) would have major problems with what we've just done, why they rail against the "*culturalist* emphasis in postcolonial studies" (Lazarus 2004a: 9), why they think the hybrid intermingling of poststructuralist, postmodernist, and postcolonial theory destroys the very possibility of intellectual *critique* in the sense that Marxism inherits from the Enlightenment. We close, however, by giving Foucault the final word, and his final word is, once again, "Nietzsche."

Lesson 10: "One is not born a woman"—*on making the world queerer than ever*

The lead sentence for this lesson is, of course, from Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (while the subtitle hails from Michael Warner's introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet*). The lesson begins by considering a quite recent objection to Beauvoir's axiom, articulated by Francine du Plessix Gray in the pages of the *New York Times*. Laying waste to Gray's objection, and to other similarly clueless resistances to basic feminist analysis, allows me to pay ironic homage to Cleanth Brooks by posting four "articles of faith" in what I call "My (male feminist) Credo." Here, I argue that to become not a woman, but a feminist theorist, one must learn:

1. *To become relentlessly anti-essentialist, except when it's "strategically" interesting not to be.* (Elaborating on this article takes us to Diana Fuss, Gayle Rubin, Gayatri Spivak, Judith Butler, Martha Nussbaum *contra* Butler, etc.)
2. *To become relentlessly anti-theological: no gods (or goddesses), no masters—no exceptions.* (Elaborating on this article takes us from Marx and Nietzsche, briefly, to Hélène Cixous and Donna Haraway, at greater length.)
3. *To become relentlessly "anti-universalizing" in one's critical endeavors, except when to do so effectively disables critical endeavor.* (This article

involves an extensive and unapologetically non-historicizing critique of Chandra Mohanty's "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses".)

4. *To do one's part to help "make the world queerer than ever."*

The last "article of faith" takes us directly to the lesson's second section, called "The Future is Kid's Stuff" (after Lee Edelman). The section begins with Gayle Rubin's assessment of the analytical limitations of feminism in her essay "Thinking Sex," charts the way theorists like Edelman, Lauren Berlant, Michael Warner, David Halperin, Eve Sedgwick, Carla Freccero, and others have redefined and redeployed the word "queer," and ends with an extensive consideration of Edelman's rudely worded and identity-disturbing critique of "reproductive futurism" in his incomparably "negative" *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*.

The last lesson, and the book itself, would thus seem to end on a note of death and destruction. But the book also ends with my resurrection of the claim, first made in the introductory chapter, that theoretical writing, as a vital mode of *writing against*, is not only "not dead," but will most likely "live forever"—or at least, for as long as "the humanities" remain an ongoing concern within a recognizably human reality. For as Jean-Michel Rabaté puts it in his book *The Future of Theory*, theory is that relentless kind of writing that "never stops coming back" (2002: 10).

In the end, *Ten Lessons* is a textbook that never stops coming back to "the basics" of literary theory; it is written to serve as a stylistically performative introduction to the most fundamental assumptions, motivations, tenets, and terminologies of theoretical writing. In other words, believe it or not, *Ten Lessons* is written to *give pleasure*. Of course, the book's overarching aims are pedagogical; these are indeed *lessons* that are made of *sentences* that are written to be *studied*. But these sentences are written quite particularly for those diligent students who can delight in difficult instruction, who can engage in close but identity-disturbing reading, who are capable of learning to relish the experience of letting their common-sense perceptions and assumptions be completely shattered and undermined, and who may be willing to risk "losing their religion" in order to find what they might not have otherwise known they had—not exactly the courage of their convictions, but, as Nietzsche somewhere puts it, the courage for an *attack* on all their convictions.

In other words, the sentences in this book are written for "good students" who aren't so thoroughly "good" that they can't finally bring themselves to "give way to literature." On the one hand, though clearly "instructional," *Ten Lessons* is not written as a facilely commodified "user-friendly guide"

to theory or as an overly convenient theoretical "tool-box." On the other hand, while not without its practical uses, the book *is* written to be enjoyed, even if "enjoyment" of the sort *this* writing aspires to provide proves arduous and unsettling. As a professor of theory, I hope that you'll learn to enjoy the genuine difficulties, the "provocative and perverse challenge[s]" (Jameson 2009: 4), of this genre of writing. As a theoretical writer, I hope that you'll simply like the writing itself, that you'll end up falling for it, that "for some reason or another" you'll value it highly. As one animal at the mercy of language writing to another, I hope you'll find "something worth reading" in these *Ten Lessons in Theory*.

Introductory Matters: What Theory Does, Why Theory Lives

I. "Theory is [undead] everywhere"

On the first page of his book *The Literary in Theory*, veteran theorist Jonathan Culler takes up the question of his discipline's decline. Acknowledging that "the heyday of so-called high theory" is over, Culler concedes that "the activities that have come to answer to the nickname *theory* are no longer the latest thing in the humanities" (2007: 1).

Most up-to-date observers in and of the humanities would agree with Culler's assessment. Some have concluded, and not exactly sadly, that theory has had it, that "theory is dead" (2007: 1). Others—who had never been all that fond of "the activities" Culler designates anyway—no doubt believe that "this thing called theory" (Surin 2011: 6) never should have "lived" in the first place, that "the thing" never should have gained its prominence in literary studies, much less its supposed dominance of the field. Thus, Kenneth Surin, reporting on theory's present condition in a special issue of the *South Atlantic Quarterly* entitled "Theory Now," describes the current academic situation in terms of a "presumed or merely posited 'after' of theory, now fashionable in certain parts of the profession (as in 'the days of theory are over, so let's get back to doing literary studies in a way that really focuses on novels, plays, and poems, etc.')." Surin also describes the long-smoldering "ressentiment of intellectual conservatives who detest theory because for them it ensued in the alleged sidelining of Sophocles, Shakespeare, Goethe, and so on (as in 'how dare you place this Egyptian or Pakistani novelist in the same literary-analytical framework as Faulkner or Günter Grass?')" (2011: 3).

Here, Surin alerts us to two related aspects of the death-wish against theory—theory-haters hate theory and are more than happy to think it dead because "the thing" in its heyday debased, degraded, or "decentered" literary studies, spoiling intellectually conservative parties either by taking the focus away from novels, poems, and plays *as* novels, poems, and plays (in order to harp on "non-literary" matters such as popular culture, identity politics, class struggle, etc.), or by staying more or less *in* the literary ballpark, but sidelining the canonical figures of Great Literature's all-star team (Surin's

famously named white male players), sticking in a slew of non-white and perhaps non-male "others" in their stead (Surin's unnamed and ungendered Egyptians and Pakistanis).

But let's not fail to mention a third, "aesthetic" or "stylistic" factor in the longstanding resentment against theory—the obstreperous complaints about the sheer ugliness of theoretical writing, its abrasively off-putting opacity, its outrageous dependence on "specialized terminology," on bloated and clunky "in-group jargon," cumbersome "critical keywords" such as "defamiliarization" and "reification" that not only sound unlovely to belletristic ears but refuse all nimble definition.

Little wonder, then, given such unforgiven trespasses against all the finer things in academic life, if no few "intellectual conservatives" think their world a better place for theory's being dead. But while the actual extent of its dominion over literary studies, or the exact duration of its heyday, or the aesthetic or even ethical value of its stylistic infractions against clarity and grace may all be open to debate, it's surely premature for intellectuals of any stripe to mourn or celebrate the expiration of theory, to wring or clap our hands about theory's demise. Like it or not, "the thing" still lives. Theory persists. Theory abides. Granted, the activities that answer to the nickname "theory" may no longer be the *latest* thing in the humanities, but they do seem to have become *lasting* things. They endure—though not, let's note, as stony monuments of unageing intellect or otherwise solidified *things* (after all, resisting so-called **reification** remains one of theory's most vital and pressing assignments). Rather, theoretical activities continue as, precisely, *activities*, actions, restlessly critical *procedures* producing "insights which completely shatter and undermine our common perceptions" (Žižek 2006: ix). Extending its shelf-life beyond any number of sell-by dates, theory survives as a battery of disturbing *questions*, an unsettled and unsettling set of strategies for enabling what Culler calls "reflection on meaning as a problem rather than a given" (2007: 85).[1]

[1] **Reification** (from *res*, Latin for *thing*) is a Marxist term designating "the way that commodification reduces social relations, ideas, and even people to things" (Parker 2008: 193). Theoretical writing exposes and opposes this baleful reduction to commodified thing-iness and attempts, against heavy odds, to rescue itself and its objects of analysis from reification, to keep itself *unreified*. For some theoretical writers, this effort against reification actually *constitutes* "theory" as such. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, one of the founding documents of contemporary critical theory, Horkheimer and Adorno write that "Intellect's true concern is a negation of reification. It must perish when it is solidified into a cultural asset and handed out for consumption purposes. The flood of precise information and brand-new amusements make [*sic*] people smarter and more stupid at once" (1947/2002: xvii). More recently, in *Valences of the Dialectic*, Fredric

Given reasonable suspicion that "meaning" may never cease to be a "problem," given reasonable confidence that there will never spring from the earth nor fall from the sky some "completely meaningful" and universally satisfying answer that would lay all critical inquiry to eternal rest, given reasonable doubt that "common sense, or even reification itself, can ever permanently be dissipated" (Jameson 2009: 4), one might brashly forecast that "this thing called theory" will go on forever—or at least, for as long as "the humanities" remain an ongoing concern within a recognizably human reality. For even if "theory itself is [no longer] seen as the cutting edge . . . of literary and cultural studies," even if theory is no longer considered "prominent as a vanguard movement" within these fields, the fields themselves nonetheless "take place within a space articulated by theory, or theories, theoretical discourses, theoretical debates." Those of us who still work "in the humanities" are "ineluctably in theory," as Culler writes, for in the humanities, "theory is everywhere" (2007: 3, 2). Or, as Jean-Michel Rabaté puts it in his book *The Future of Theory*, "theory never stops coming back" (2002: 10).

Far from having kicked the bucket, then, theory is resolutely *undead*, permanently relevant and perpetually revenant—if not "everywhere" that

Jameson writes "that theory is to be grasped as the perpetual and impossible attempt to dereify the language of thought, and to preempt all the systems and ideologies which inevitably result from the establishment of this or that fixed terminology." And yet, because the working lexicon of any theory can coagulate into a "fixed terminology"—the word "reification" has, for example, a specific and precise, if not "fixedly" *economic* meaning in the language of Marxist thought—Jameson warns that any "theoretical process of undoing terminologies [can], by virtue of the elaboration of the terminology that very process requires, become . . . an ideology in its own turn and congeal into the very type of system it sought to undermine." Thus, Jameson notes "the hopelessness of the nonetheless unavoidable aim of theoretical writing to escape the reifications [and] commodifications of the intellectual marketplace today" (2009: 9). As these two examples of "theoretical writing" *qua* writing against reification should suggest, to say that theory was ever "the latest *thing* in the humanities" or to characterize theory, as I have above, in the mercantile terms of "shelf-life" and "sell-by dates" is to leave it open to the charge of having failed to stay frosty against reification, as if theory had never been anything more than a steaming chunk of cultural capital, a hotly commodified intellectual amusement, rather like a computer game requiring "advanced" skills, but very little wisdom, a product making "consumers" (teachers and students) at once "smarter" (more technically savvy) and "stupider" (less perceptive about their actual conditions of existence, and hence more compliant with the dominant—reified and reifying—social order). As for theory's hopeful project of successfully "dereifying the language of thought," Jameson soberly suggests that "theory" cannot "expect to supplant the multitudinous forms of reified thinking and named and commodified thoughts on the intellectual marketplace today, but only to wage persistent and local guerilla warfare against their hegemony" (2009: 61).

can be imagined, then at least in and to "the humanities" as they are still being imagined and re-imagined. For in Culler's words:

> the position of theory as an institutional and disciplinary presence now seems well established in the American university . . . It now seems widely accepted that any intellectual project has a basis in theory of some sort, that graduate students need to be aware of theoretical debates in their fields and able to situate themselves and their work within the changing intellectual structures of the professional landscape, and that theory, far from being 'too difficult' for undergraduates, is the sort of thing they ought to explore as one of the most exciting and socially pertinent dimensions of the humanities. (Culler 2011: 224)

This book hopes to serve participants in the humanities at all levels as both an introduction and an inducement to theoretical writing *as* writing against reification, writing against the commodification of writing and of thought. Of course, resisting the commodification *of* writing *in* writing isn't particularly easy these days, especially not if one feels compelled, for professional reasons, to present the putative resistance in a commodified form—to publish, that is, one's writing as a book that one "naturally" hopes will be commercially successful, that is, "widely adopted" as a textbook. And of course, there are many textbooks, many introductions and inducements to theory, available in "the intellectual marketplace today" (Jameson 2009: 61). Most of these begin with matters of definition; they attempt to describe *what theory is* and to provide an historical narrative about how this thing came to be such a strong (or insidious) "institutional and disciplinary presence." In this introduction, however, we'll be concerned less with *what theory is* and more with *what theory does.* Our most vital concern will be with the question of *why theory lives* or *why theory matters*, why theory excitingly pertains not only to students "of the humanities," but to all "the undead"—to everyone, that is, who still actively participates in our specifically human reality, if only in the *spectral* form of writing.

Culler, for one, writes that theory can be understood as an interdisciplinary "genre of works," as a "name for a mixture of philosophy, psychoanalysis, linguistics, aesthetics, poetics, and political and social thought" (2011: 230). But again, we might more productively understand theoretical writing less as an institutionally generic *thing* (even an academically mixed-up thing) than as an "exciting and socially pertinent" intellectual *activity.* For Culler, *what theory is* is the activity of "thinking about thinking"; correspondingly, in his words, the "impetus to theory is a desire to understand what one is doing"

when one is thinking. Culler thinks that theory, as a particularly challenging way of "thinking about thinking,"

> is driven by the impossible desire to step outside one's thought, both to place it and to understand it, and also by a desire—a possible desire—for change, both in the ways of one's own thought, which always could be sharper, more knowledgeable and capacious, more self-reflecting, and in the world our thought engages. (2011: 224–5)

Here, Culler's thinking (about thinking) about theory in terms of a desire for *change* "in the ways of one's own thought" might make one think of the following bit of wisdom from Michel Foucault—"There are times in life when the question of knowing if one can think differently than one thinks and perceive differently than one sees is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking and reflecting at all" (1986: 7). But thinking about theoretical writing in terms of desire for change—change not simply in our own individual modes of cognition *but "in the world" itself*—might also bring to mind the revolutionary slogan carved in marble at the tomb of Karl Marx—"The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it" (1845/1978: 145). Culler's thinking, however, leads him to quote a somewhat more densely packed sentence from Michael Hardt, who, in an essay called "The Militancy of Theory," writes that "the task of theory is *to make* the present and thus to . . . invent the subject of that making, a 'we' characterized not only by our belonging to the present but by our making it" (2011: 21). Culler goes on to suggest that Hardt here "makes explicit what is only implicit in a lot of theory: the attempt to produce a collective subject, a 'we,' through argument about how things should be conceived or understood" (2011: 225).

Now, while Hardt clearly owes his theoretical militancy both to Marx and to Foucault, his quoted *sentence* might require a bit more "unpacking" than either one of theirs. And indeed we'll be returning throughout this book to the question of what it might mean to argue (1) that what Hardt calls "the present" is never simply *given* but must always be *made*; (2) that a collectively subjective "we" both *belongs to* and is *responsible for* making "the present" historical moment; (3) that the "we" in question must itself be *invented* or *produced*; and (4) that theoretical writing is somehow constitutively involved in this vital activity or *task*, this job of *our* self-actualizing "the world," of our restlessly *producing the very subject of human reality*—in other words, "ourselves."

As I said, Hardt's sentence calls for some strenuous and extended unpacking. Here, though, let's linger on that last phrase from Culler concerning

the desired "production" of this collective subject, a certain "we ourselves" that somehow gets produced "through argument about how things should be conceived or understood," and let's ask ourselves how, in theory, things arguably *should* be conceived or understood. What's the difference, after all, between the way things *should* theoretically be conceived or understood and the *normal* or *given* way in which things *are* commonly conceived or understood? Moreover, how does our recognizing this difference—this discrepancy between the good or rich or productive understanding that arguably *should be* and the bad or impoverished or reified understanding that commonly *is*—impel us toward what Slavoj Žižek is happy to call "insights which completely shatter and undermine our common perceptions" (2006: ix)? What allows a theoretical writer like Žižek to propose that "our common perceptions" really *should be* "short-circuited," as he puts it, that they really *ought* to be utterly shattered and undermined?[2]

These questions bring us back to the matter of "reification," as that crucial term is defined above, and to Horkheimer and Adorno's insistence that the "true concern" of any bona fide theoretical work is "the negation of reification" (1947/2002: xvii). For theorists like Žižek and Hardt, who write in the critical tradition of Horkheimer and Adorno, of Marx and of Foucault, "reification" and its "common-sense" confederates pose fairly formidable obstacles to theory's most militant task, diligently working to try to block "our" collective and transformative remaking of the present historical moment. For whenever "we" find ourselves doing the business of "thinking" within an utterly reified social order—the current global capitalist "mode of production," for example, "a world in which corporate Capital [has] succeeded in penetrating and dominating the very fantasy-kernel of our being" (Žižek 1993: 10)—chances are mighty high that "our common perceptions" of that social order, not to mention of "our being," will be pretty much "reified" themselves, and thus the odds of our finding ways to think or dream or use our critical imaginations *against* that order can grow quite dismally slim. Arguably, our habitual tendency to conceive or understand "things as they are" in our given human reality *as things*—specifically, as *commodities* to be purchased (if only we can afford them), and not as productively human and collectively humanizing

[2] Žižek explains that "a short circuit occurs when there is a faulty connection in the network—faulty, of course, from the standpoint of the network's smooth functioning. Is not the shock of short-circuiting, therefore, one of the best metaphors for a critical reading?" This critical short-circuiting, writes Žižek, "is what Marx, among others, did with philosophy and religion" and "what Freud and Nietzsche did with morality." Žižek writes that "the aim of such an approach is . . . the inherent decentering of the interpreted text, which brings to light its 'unthought,' its disavowed presuppositions and consequences" (2006: ix).

processes—is symptomatic of "our" pervasive cognitive and affective reification today. For are we not commonly "encouraged" by "corporate Capital" to conceive absolutely "everything" imaginable in commodified or globally "free market" terms, and to perceive "ourselves," in our very being, as primarily and essentially *consumers* (with or without purchasing power) rather than as subjectively collective *makers* of the present, much less as "citizens of the world" empowered and engendered by the work of our own self-reflective understanding?

Theory, as Culler notes, is indeed driven by the desire for *change* both *in* ourselves and *of* "the world," and so the *task* of theory, as Hardt insists, is indeed to *make* the present—or better, to participate in the radical transformation of the present by negating regnant reifications, by working to shatter and undermine our common and congealed perceptions, particularly the all too common-sense view that "we ourselves" are not the actual (and sole) producers of our present (and future) human realities but merely passive consumers of "things as they are," customers who are "always right" (to think of themselves as customers) and who are thus all too well accustomed to taking or buying into "the world" *as given*.

II. The problem with givens

Describing what he calls "the duty of the critical intellectual," and using the words "theory" and "philosophy" more or less interchangeably, Žižek writes that

> philosophy begins the moment we do not accept what exists as given ("It's like that!", "Law is law!", etc.), but raise the question of how is what we encounter as actual also possible. What characterizes philosophy is this "step back" from actuality into possibility . . . Theory involves the power to abstract from our starting point in order to reconstruct it subsequently on the basis of its presuppositions, its transcendental "conditions of possibility." (1993: 2)

Žižek, then, would pretty much agree with Culler's point that theory's central task is to reflect "on meaning as a problem rather than a given" (Culler 2007: 85). But how might this job-description relate to the more militant claim that theory's most serious business is negating reification? Since both activities would seem to constitute the real *work* of theoretical writing, shouldn't we ask how reflecting on "meaning as a problem rather than a given" and "negating reification" might be practically related? The quickest answer to

this question would of course be that "taking meaning as a given" essentially *equals* accepting or "buying into" reification. But since we wouldn't be doing our homework if we were simply to accept that quick answer, take that neat equation as a given, we must rather address it as a problem, must explore its problematic "conditions of possibility."

To proceed with this labor, let's put aside the term "reification" for the moment and focus instead on this tension between "the given" and "the problematic" in the general field of "meaning." What might it mean to reflect on "meaning" as a problem rather than a given? What might it mean to take some specific instance of meaning "as a given" in the first place? Well, even in our common understanding, wouldn't our accepting any piece of meaning as "a given" actually mean our taking its "actuality" pretty easily, with little or no questioning about its conditions of possibility? And wouldn't that "easiness" entail that the more we take a particular piece of "meaning" as "a given," the *fewer* the questions we're likely to raise about it? What "given meanings" would thus seem to *be* given, whenever such easy reception prevails, is a facile sort of freedom from analysis, a reprieve from "thinking about thinking," a sort of well-lubricated immunity from any abrasive "problematization."

In theory, however, no meaning should ever be taken as a given. No piece of meaning, no particular idea, ever gets a free pass. Or, paradoxically, the only idea that might safely be taken as a given is the idea that *no* idea should ever be so taken. The only idea that isn't open to question, the only idea that isn't problematic, is the idea that *any* idea can and *should* be frequently and vigorously problematized, if not completely shattered and undermined.

But let's consider a specific example of a "given" whose license to be taken as "given" theoretical writing has attempted to revoke. For quite some time, "in the humanities" and elsewhere, it was pretty much taken as a given that the word "Man" simply meant all the human beings in the history of the world—the total "horizon of humanity," as Jacques Derrida once put it (1972: 116). The usage ranges from early to late modernity, from Prince Hamlet's "what a piece of work is man" (*Hamlet* 2.2. 303) to Karl Marx's "man makes religion; religion does not make man" (1844/1978: 53) to astronaut Neil Armstrong's moonwalking soliloquy describing, albeit somewhat confusingly, "one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind." The "given" here is (or maybe *was*) that the word "Man" could self-confidently represent *all* human beings *universally*—even though, at any given time, well over half the human beings in the world aren't exactly men, and even though only a minority of actual men resemble the generically "Anglo-European" image that tends to

be conjured by the word "Man."[3] Our taking this "blanched" meaning of the word "Man" as "a given" has always tended to involve "our" either ignoring these contradictions or not seeing them as causing "us" any problems.

Another example—for some time, "in the humanities" and elsewhere, it was taken as a given that the word "Woman" could be deployed to designate not some individual woman or the entirety of the human group "women" (and not, to be sure, "the total horizon of humanity") but rather some universal and eternal "essence" of "womanliness" or "femininity." *This* meaning of the word "Woman" could be taken as a given despite rather glaringly evident tensions between this "essential" determination "Woman" (which for some reason usually involved such dispositions as passivity, masochism, or infinite willingness to self-sacrifice) and the characteristics, situations, experiences, or desires of actual women.

Considering these two examples together, then, we might belabor the obvious—that the heretofore "given" meanings of "Man" and "Woman" have involved a pervasive inequality, that what this particular "given" has historically given "us" is the strong impression that the phrase "Man and Woman" has always meant and should forever inevitably mean the hierarchical difference between the one's taking giant steps and the other's being stepped on or over. In other words, here the "given meaning" has done its bit to "naturalize" or "inevitable-ize" or "eternalize" systemic male dominance, sexism, racism, and so on. If the situation today has to some extent been altered—at least "in the humanities," if not elsewhere, and thanks mainly to feminist, postcolonial, and critical race theorists—then the words "Man" and "Woman" are no longer employed quite so facilely in these **essentialized** senses, no longer taken quite so broadly as givens.[4]

As these examples suggest, *what theory does* when reflecting on meaning as a problem rather than a given is to foreground the *contradictions* embedded in the "meaning" under consideration. We might note, for another example, a contradiction in Culler's very phrase, for arguably one *actively reflects* on "meaning" *only* as a problem—that is, *critically* "reflecting on" and "problematizing" are pretty much the same procedure—whereas

[3] In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha nicely specifies one of the key differences between "Man" and actual men by rewriting the phrase "almost the same, but not quite" as "almost the same, but not white" (1994: 89).

[4] In *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature, Difference*, Diana Fuss describes **essentialism** as "belief in the real, true essence of things, the invariable and fixed properties which define the 'whatness' of a given entity." For feminist theory, essentialism involves "the idea that men and women . . . are identified as such on the basis of transhistorical, eternal, immutable essences." Theory is "anti-essentialist" in that it rejects "any attempts to naturalize human nature" (1989: xi).

to take meaning "as a given" is precisely *not* to reflect *on* it but merely to *reflect* it, to repeat and reproduce it, like a mirror, without question, without *friction*. In this sense, a successfully "given" meaning is (rather like a sexually transmitted disease) the gift that keeps on giving. If I myself should take some piece of meaning as given, I will probably expect you to partake as well, to "repeat after me," to join me as I have joined others in a reified set of "common perceptions," a coagulated sort of "common sense," "a stagnant confirmation of inherited thinking, its presuppositions, and its dogma" (Derrida 2008: 120).

Theory, however, isn't going to take it. In *actively* reflecting on meaning as problem, theoretical writing attempts to disrupt or short circuit the reproduction of "common sense." Theory, writes Culler, must always engage in the "critique of common sense, of concepts taken as natural" (1997: 15). Theoretical writers in fact decline to take *any* human activity "naturally," for "as long as one assumes that what one does is natural it is difficult to gain any understanding of it" (Culler 1975: 129). And, as Michael Bérubé has recently put it, "It is very difficult to get a man to understand something when his tribal sense of his identity depends on his not understanding it. But," Bérubé adds, "there are few tasks so urgent" (2011: 74) for theoretical writers and readers—few tasks so urgent or so arduous as trying to get ourselves to understand arguments that our "tribal" or inherited sense of identity, our stable or "naturalized" common sense, necessitates our *not* understanding. Fredric Jameson thus writes of the daunting "un-naturality" of theoretical writing, "its provocative and perverse challenge to common sense as such" (2009: 4). Abrading, then, any and all "natural" or common-sense assumptions, theoretical writing promotes instead an unnatural and uncommon sensibility, an extraordinary or even *anti-ordinary* understanding. Theory, that is, endeavors to **defamiliarize** all the settled normalities of the given world.[5] And this "creative abrasion" (Hall 2003: 71) of "common sense" constitutes the primary reason theoretical writing isn't often "easily understood"—theoretical writing is by definition *hostile* to "normal" understanding and to

[5] For Russian formalist Victor Shklovsky, **defamiliarization** (*ostranenie*, or "making strange") defines not theoretical writing but *literary* discourse as such. For Shklovsky, whose 1917 essay "Art as Technique" we'll consider more thoroughly in Lesson Seven, literature "defamiliarizes" in that it "disrupts ordinary language and habitual modes of perception." The term describes "literature's ability to disrupt through its representation of reality the dominant ideas of society" (Childers and Hentzi 1995: 76). For Shklovsky, "defamiliarization" pertains to "literature" and not "theory" per se, but contemporary theoretical writers often employ this word to argue that theoretical writing performs the most radical *work* of literature, as for example, when Jameson writes that the aim of theoretical writing is "to defamiliarize our ordinary habits of mind and to make us suddenly conscious not only of our own . . . obtuseness but also of the strangeness of reality as such" (2009: 50).

the familiar versions of "the normal world" such understanding attempts to secure, and this very hostility makes it difficult for us to *be* secure in our understanding of theory.[6]

We'll return to the matter of theory's alienating "difficulty" anon. Here, though, let's pause to mull over yet another contradiction—this one located in my *own* exposition of theory's self-reflections. A moment ago, I gave you "Man" and "Woman" as examples of meanings that had until recently been taken as givens in the humanities but that had gotten themselves roundly "problematized" at the hands of "high theory." My intent was to offer the following as quick examples of theoretical "problematizations" of these given terms.

In regard to "Man," I intended to quote from the final pages of *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*, where Michel Foucault writes that "man is neither the oldest nor the most constant problem that has been posed for human knowledge," that "man is an invention of recent date," that the invented convention of man is "perhaps nearing its end," and that the figure of man will someday "be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea" (1966/1973: 386, 387). But I intended to stress that when Foucault heralds the erasure of "man," he isn't predicting or calling for the extinction of the human species; rather, Foucault is signaling that a particular figure of meaning that had for some time been taken as *the* most central and meaningful figure in "the human sciences" and in **humanism** in general now no longer could or should be.[7]

Regarding "Woman," I intended to point out that when Jacques Lacan proclaims that "Woman does not exist" (1975/1998: 7) he is not insanely positing that there are no *women* in the world. Rather, he is asserting

[6] To make this difficult point more or less understandable, let's borrow and alter some language from Jean-Luc Nancy and write that "If the strictest [and strangest] formulations of [theory] often inspire perplexity, annoyance, and refusal, it is because . . . these formulations . . . wish to make understood that they cannot be, as they are, understood by [our normal] understanding, but rather demand that [such] understanding relinquish itself." (2002: 63) Nancy's language will appear again in unaltered form in a footnote in Lesson Six.

[7] Childers and Hentzi write that "in current critical debates **humanism** usually refers to an anthropocentric view of the world that asserts the existence of a universal human nature informing all actions and decisions." (1995: 140) "Anti-humanist" theorists don't hate humans, but question the existence of any such "universal human nature" or at least reject "Man" as this universal's standard-bearer. Specifically, "feminists, black activist, postcolonial critics, and gay and lesbian critics have argued that the 'man' at the heart of humanism is not free of the limitations of limiting interests resulting from the specifics of a particular gender, class, race, or sexual orientation; on the contrary, this 'man' is male, white, middle-class, Anglo, and heterosexual. For these [anti-humanist] critics, the attempt to pass off such a limited viewpoint as universal is covertly, if not overtly, oppressive." (1995: 141) Anti-humanist writing thus desires, as Derrida puts it, to "pass beyond man and humanism" (1966/1978: 292).

that "Woman"—specifically, *the* eternally, masochistically self-sacrificing Woman—is "essentially" a fiction, if not a pathologically self-serving male fantasy.[8] I also intended to explain that when Monique Wittig avers that a "lesbian" is "*not* a woman" (1981/2007: 1642), she doesn't mean that "lesbians" are not "chromosomally female" or don't "have vaginas," and so on and so forth, but rather that "woman" is a *political* category invented by men for the purpose of maintaining systemic male dominance, and that lesbians, by definition, refuse the category as well as the system (not to mention the men).

But here's the problem. By introducing these particular examples, I basically wanted to tout my investment in feminist, psychoanalytic, and queer disturbances of the "given" meanings of gender and sexuality as among the most excitingly and politically pertinent *activities* that theoretical writing brings to the table. And yet, in the very gesture of offering these examples, I unintentionally reproduced one of the primary "givens" of masculinist privilege itself. I trotted out "Man" *first,* because, for some strange reason, that example *occurred* to me first. And in maintaining this particular order of introduction, I unconsciously repeated—and effectively reinforced or "re-reified"—an ancient order of male priority, a dogmatic fable as old as Adam. In attempting, that is, to *conscientiously* reflect on "Man" as a problem rather than a given, I *unconsciously* reflected "Man" as *the* given rather than as an outdated problem.

Now, upon recognizing my own *complicity* with the very order of systemic male privilege and priority that I was ostensibly writing against, I could have easily revised my writing, resituated the examples, let "Woman" come first, given Wittig the first or only words, and so on. I could have neatly hidden the traces of my being unconsciously in cahoots with patriarchy, and no reader of my work would have been any the wiser. But since I should aspire to make my readers at least somewhat wiser—or, since theory's purpose is to "negate reification," and reification can be defined not only as commodified "thingification" but "as the removal of traces of production from the product" (Jameson 2010: 124)—I've chosen to let these infelicitous "traces of production" stand and to call your attention to them. I do so not to make myself momentarily look "bad" for having made the mistake and then "good" for having "politically corrected" it but rather to attempt further to illuminate *what theory does*, to describe theoretical activities while attempting in the process to *do* some theory, to attend to a contradiction and elucidate (but not exactly solve) a problem. "Theory," writes Culler, "is reflexive, thinking about

[8] In *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes diagnoses what he calls "this disease of thinking in essences, which is at the bottom of every bourgeois mythology of man" (1957/1985: 75).

thinking, enquiry into the categories we use in making sense of things, in literature and in other discursive practices" (1997: 15). But theoretical writing is also always necessarily *self*-reflexive critique; it devotes considerable energy to thinking about (its own thinking about) thinking. Reflecting on meaning as problem rather than as naturalized given, theoretical writing is given or driven not only to reflect upon but also to interrogate, if not to torture, its own reflections—apparently to cause yet more problems.

But why keep causing problems? Why this endless "problematization" of "meanings" that might just as well be taken for granted? Why not let just a few things go without saying? Why keep trying to make sense (or mincemeat) of the categories we use to make sense of things? Why not just keep using these categories if they have heretofore served us well? In regard to "literature and other discursive practices," why all the "complicated fuss about things that really should be simply consumed" (Culler 2007: 251) or unproblematically enjoyed? Why not simply relish reading for the sake of reading, literature for the sake of literature? Why not gratefully accept "the pleasure of the text" as *gift*, pure and simple?

A short response to these questions would be that there is really no such thing as *pure* enjoyment, or *simple* pleasure, much less *simple* meaning, for any specifically human being. To say so is not bleakly to proclaim that there is absolutely no enjoyment, pleasure, value, or meaning ever to be had (contrary to rumor, that is, theory is not a thoroughly anhedonic nihilism); rather, it is "simply" to say, with Jacques Derrida, that "things are very complicated" (1994: 110); it is "simply" to say, with Jean-Luc Nancy, that "the given *always gives itself as something other than simply given*" (2002: 52), that human experiences *qua* human are never pure or simple, if only because in reality a human being is "an animal at the mercy of language" (Lacan 1966e/2006: 525) and "language being what it is, we shall find nothing simple in it" (Saussure 1959: 122). In other words, given this radical *absence* of simplicity in language, given the irremediable *loss* of immediately natural life for any speaking being as such, the *gift* of the text can never be a simple *present*, for "what opens meaning and language is writing as the disappearance of natural presence" (Derrida 1967/1997: 159). Or, in the words of Marjorie Garber:

> Language is not a secondary but a primary constituent of human nature . . . Language is not transparent, though fantasies of its transparency, its merely denotative role, have always attracted and misled some of its users, both writers and readers. (2003/2008: 437–8)

So much, then, for any short sweet reply to the question of simple enjoyment; evidently, a more extensive response is needed. And indeed, this more

extensive response, which must account for *why* all of the preceding might actually be the case, which must explain *why* writing involves the disappearance of natural presence, why simplicity has gone forever missing from language, why speaking can be said to necessitate a loss of immediacy, why the transparency of language is an attractive but misleading fantasy, why the terms "human," "being," "meaning," "nature," "presence," "language," "text," "writers," "readers," "enjoyment," and so on, must all ceaselessly be called into complicated question—"dereifed into a complex set of human acts" (Jameson 2009: 47) rather than simply taken as natural givens—will take up the remainder of *Ten Lessons in Theory*.

III. Just being difficult/difficultly being just

If language itself "is not transparent," as Marjorie Garber stresses, theoretical writing is rather notoriously not so even more so, and in his introduction to *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, Thomas McLaughlin provides some clear and compelling explanations for theory's abrasive complexities and opacities. McLaughlin writes that "the very project of theory is unsettling. It brings assumptions into question. It creates more problems than it solves. And, to top it off, it does so in what is often a forbidding and arcane style." But McLaughlin maintains that "theory isn't difficult out of spite." Rather, theoretical writing is always rough going

> because it has proceeded on the premise that language itself ought to be its focus of attention; that ordinary language is an embodiment of an extremely powerful and usually unquestioned system of values and beliefs; and that using ordinary language catches you up in that system. Any discourse that was to uncover and question that system had to find a language, a style, that broke from the constraints of common sense and ordinary language. Theory set out to produce texts that could not be processed successfully by the commonsensical assumptions that ordinary language puts into play. There are texts of theory that resist meaning so powerfully . . . that the very process of failing to comprehend the text is part of what it has to offer. (1995: 2)

For Culler, as we've seen, *what theory does* is reflect on meaning as a problem rather than a given. McLaughlin, however, puts Culler's case more strongly, asserting that theoretical texts do not merely *reflect* on meaning but sometimes go so far as to "powerfully" *resist* it. And these texts don't just resist some specific *instance* of meaning; rather, theoretical texts "resist meaning" altogether, resist meaning *itself*. They attempt to break free from those

"constraints of common sense and ordinary language" that systematically regulate the ostensible given-ness of meaning, that work to make sure "our common perceptions" pretty much *stay* common. Theoretical texts attempt to liberate us as readers from these commonly normative constraints since our very use of ordinary language is said to catch us up in this disciplinary system. Moreover, in their attempted break with conventionalized meaning, these texts endeavor to provoke in their readers a salutary *failure* to comprehend the very discourses that are offered up for comprehension. Promising a strange sort of freedom through cognitive failure, theoretical texts attempt to engage us in what Gayatri Spivak calls "moments of productive bafflement" (1999: 273).

Should readers, then, take these baffling texts up on their offers and feel licensed to give up even trying to comprehend their meanings? By no means, for the unsettling "freedom through failure" of which I write above has nothing to do with the normalizing "freedom from analysis" to which I earlier alluded. Theory, that is, never gets us out of *work*, never frees us from the responsibility to *read*. Even in their most rebarbative moments of unreadability, theoretical texts mean not to repel readers but rather to *encourage* us to take the risk of getting caught up in the potentially productive process of unsuccessful processing. Theoretical writing offers us the opportunity to reflect not only on comprehensible meaning but on the very conventions of comprehension that make "meaning itself" possible. Ceaselessly questioning what it means to mean, theory provocatively and perversely encourages us to challenge "the categories we use in making sense of things" (Culler 1997: 15), to inquire into the origin of these categories and of our places within them, to ask about *their* conditions of possibility as well as our own. Theory encourages such inquiry even if it involves the risk of comprehensive failure, the risk of "not getting it," of losing certainty, losing "clarity," losing the ability to "make sense" in the ways to which we're *normally* accustomed, the ways in which we've in fact been *formally* trained. I repeat the word "encourages" here because I believe it requires something like courage to go against one's training, to risk losing or disrupting one's ability to "make sense of things" in one's accustomed or inherited or "tribal" ways. But what makes the risk worth taking is the possibility of discovering new and different ways of making sense of things—of the world, of the text, of oneself, of one's life—in this "unprocessable" process. For once again, "There are times in life when the question of knowing if one can think differently than one thinks and perceive differently than one sees is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking and reflecting at all" (Foucault 1986: 7).

Before going on with these reflections, however, I'd like to touch on two theses regarding the way theoretical writing disturbs our normal

procedures of "making sense" and provokes us to "think differently," to see "things as they are" otherwise. The first thesis—to my mind, a permanently and radically "de-reifying" one—is that "sense" must indeed always be *made,* must always be fashioned or fabricated or produced, and by none other than our own all-too-human hands. Making sense—like "making the present" in Michael Hardt's theoretically militant sense—is nothing if not human labor; human reality is nothing if not a piece of *work*. To employ a sentence from Stuart Hall that will be put to much more strenuous labor in this book's first lesson—"The world must be made to mean" (1998: 1050), which means that neither "sense" nor "meaning" ever grows on trees or falls from the sky, that there's nothing "natural" or "supernatural" about these phenomena. To be sure, *common* sense and *given* meaning have often relied upon ideas of "nature" and/or the Deity to guarantee, legitimate, or otherwise prop up their own reproduction, to stabilize or "fix" themselves as steadily lucid signs. Be forewarned, however, that theoretical writing constitutively refuses "nature" and "God," emphatically rejects both "biological determinism" and "divine will" as causal factors or explanatory solutions to any of the problems of human meaning. If it weren't for the fact that theoretical writing also jettisons "Man"—erasing that little stick-figure "like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea" (Foucault 1966/1973: 387)—we might say that theory is a form of secular humanism. Of course, theory is nothing if not secular; it is "firmly and rightly committed to renewing the necessary conviction . . . that thought only begins on the further side of religion" (Gibson 2006: 5); but theoretical writing is often just as resolutely "anti-humanist" as it is decidedly "antinaturalist" and deicidally "anti-theological" (Barthes 1968/1977: 147).

Designating these antagonistic stances as such leads to my second thesis, which is that "theory" is most productively encountered as a "practice of creativity" (Foucault 1983/1997: 262) in itself, a genre of so-called creative writing, an interventional exercise in the art of the sentence. Theoretical writing, that is, warrants being read in the same "close" way that "defamiliarizingly" imaginative literature demands to be read. Indeed, the main premise of this book is that the risk we take in engaging with theoretical writing, the risk of losing the ability to "make sense of things" in our normalized, habituated ways, is intimately related to the risk we take in that "encounter with strangeness" (Bloom 1994: 3), which is (or can be) "the literary experience" itself. Theory, my friends, assumes "the world as text" (Barthes 1968/1977: 147). It engages with a world that must be made to mean as a problem to be interpreted or thought through rather than as a given that "just naturally" goes without saying. Theory is a de-reifying procedure of reading and writing that "refuses to fix meaning"

(Barthes 1968/1977: 147) and which, by virtue of that refusal, *affirms* a world that can only ever be experienced as text, affirms "the very text of your existence" (Lacan 2008: 78), affirms a subjective existence that can only ever be lived "extimately," inter-textually, as "interpretive experience" (Derrida 1988: 148).

But these affirmations can never be purely "positive." Theoretical affirmation always depends upon *active* negation. Theory, that is, *enacts* or *actualizes* itself by being antinaturalizing, anti-humanist, anti-theological, anti-essentialist, anti-normative, anti-**metaphysical**, and so on.[9] But to the extent that "negativity can be positively exhilarating" to "a properly literary understanding" (Culler 2011: 228), this actively negative dependence marks theory's radical affinity with "creative writing," with "literature." Theoretical writing, perhaps like all *actually* creative writing, only ever agonistically affirms. It must negate or say "no" to a host of "givens" in order to say "yes" to what it takes to be the fundamental problem.

But what, for theory, *is* the fundamental problem? McLaughlin has already told us by pointing out that theory's enabling premise is "that language itself ought to be its focus of attention"; he further specifies that "the *experience* of theory . . . ought to engage the reader in a struggle over language and with language" (1995: 3). But we should hastily add that much more is at stake in this "struggle over language" than just some "ivory tower" tussle with terminology. For theoretical writers, this *wordy* conflict is intimately connected to *worldly* struggles involving relations of *power*. Theoretical writing, that is, conceives and understands the fundamental problem as the human power-struggle over meaning, the conflictually "interpretive experience" of all our struggles with and over *signs*. This *agon* among animals at the mercy of language is always, at the same time, *both* a real power-struggle *and* a "matter of interpretation," for power, as theoretical writing interprets it, "is both part of material, social reality, and also available to comprehension as a profoundly complex textual structure, operating differentially and discursively" (Wolfreys 2004: 197). In examining and challenging the workings of power, theoretical writers conflate these complex textual or discursive structures with more self-evidently "real world" forms of social, economic, political, and historical striving and strife, those forms of *real* human suffering, those matters of *real* life and death, that don't "normally" seem to have much to do with sentences or textuality or

[9] **Metaphysics** "usually refers to philosophical attempts to establish indisputable first principles as a foundation for all knowledge" and involves belief in "the existence of absolute entities" (Childer and Hentzi 1995: 186). Metaphysics also involves "belief in something unconditioned, i.e., something which would be true, absolutely and unconditionally, outside of all temporal and perspectival conditions" (Pearson and Large 2006: xxxi).

semiotics or **discourse**—the really important matters that "people in the real world" typically don't like being "reduced" to "mere words."[10]

For theoretical writers, however, the fundamental problem is precisely that these down-to-earth *agons* never *cease* to have to do with words, have never been *exterior* to language, are "always already" irreducibly semiotic. For theoretical writers, the struggle over meaning—a problem as old as *polis* and papyrus and as new as Derrida's "*there is nothing outside the text*" (1967/1997: 158)—is what constitutes *any* human **subject**, individual or collective, and *all* human reality *as such*.[11] Theory, that is, interprets the whole of human reality as a "signifying structure" constituting itself through the social production, proliferation, and exchange of signs. But because this totally interpretive experience of socio-symbolic reality is seen in terms of "real-world" struggles over power, most theoretical writing situates a "**political** perspective" on language, literature, and culture as "the absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation" (Jameson 1981: 17).[12]

Although postmodern theorists tend, as we'll see, to abjure any "universal," "totalizing," or "absolute" claims about human reality, we might note that the preceding paragraph describes little else *but* universalizing absolutes.

[10] "Real-world people"—a category normally understood to exclude academics in general and "English majors" in particular—dislike having *themselves* "reduced" to mere words as well. Even students of literature, who supposedly "love language," don't always relish the thought that that's the stuff all people in the real world are made of. But such radically "linguistic determinism" is pretty much the message of **semiotics**—the study of signs and signification—as it regards all selfhood or subjectivity or "personal identity" whatsoever. As for **discourse**, Wolfreys defines it as "the work of specific language practice: that is, language as it is used by and within various constituencies (e.g., the law, medicine, and the church) for purposes to do with power relations between people" (2004: 65). He also writes that "human subjectivity and identity itself is produced out of various discursive formations as a result of the subject's entry into language always already shot through and informed by figurations and encryptions of power, politics, historical, cultural and ideological remainders organized through particular relationships and networks" (2004: 66).

[11] Theoretical writers use the term **subject** to designate the human individual as constituted by linguistic, discursive, and sociocultural practices (which is to say, the human individual as such); in theory, humans or "subjects" exist only by virtue of being "subjected" to these practices—hence, as Louis Althusser puts it, "the ambiguity of the term *subject*" (1971/2001: 123). The term "subject" sometimes refers to "the rational, active mind of the human individual" and is "defined in opposition to the object—that which is other than consciousness" (Malpas and Wake 2006: 256). But what interests most theoretical writers is the weird permeability of the boundary between conscious and unconscious, subject and object, self and other, particularly, as we'll see, in ambiguous moments of "writing or self-representation" when "the *I* is the self-present subject of the sentence as well as the subject 'subjected' to the symbolic order of the language in which [it] is writing" (Gagnier 1991: 9).

[12] The **political** in the theoretical sense exceeds our "normal" (and hence impoverished) concepts of electoral politics, political parties, and so on. Rather, theoretical writers "understand *political* in its deeper meaning, as describing the whole of human relations in their real, social structure, in their power of making the world" (Barthes 1957/1985: 143).

Indeed, the word "theory" itself might be considered a "nickname" for all the critical activities that begin to crank up at that moment when, as Derrida puts it, "language invaded the *universal* problematic and *everything* became discourse" (1966/1978: 280, my emphases). The "moment" or "event" that Derrida describes is sometimes called "the linguistic turn in the human sciences," and we could probably do worse than consider the historical emergence of "theory" itself in terms of this all-encompassing "turn." Jameson, for example, tags the linguistic turn as the very genesis of theory when he writes that "theory begins . . . at the moment it is realized that thought is linguistic or material and that concepts cannot exist independently of their linguistic expression." Jameson thus describes theory's inauguration as well as its continuation "as the coming to terms with **materialist** language" (2004: 403).[13] The postcolonial theorist Rey Chow also commemorates the linguistic turn when she uses the term theory "to mark the paradigm shift . . . whereby the study of language, literature, and cultural forms becomes irrevocably obligated to attend to the semiotic operations involved in the production of meanings, meanings that can no longer be assumed to be natural." Chow, like Jameson, defines theory as a coming to terms with materialist semiotics, as a way of paying "tenacious attention to the **materiality** of human signification" (2002/2007:1910).[14]

Arguably, then, it is through pushing "the linguistic turn" to the extreme—through trying to grasp the most radical consequences of the idea that

[13] For Jameson, "coming to terms with materialist language" involves the "attempt to dereify the language of thought" (2009: 9) and entails that "the traditional relationship between language and thought is to be reversed . . .: not language as an instrument or a vehicle for conceptuality, but, rather, the way in which the conditions and form of representation (speaking and writing) determine the concepts themselves, and constitute at one and the same time their conditions of possibility and also their limits, inflecting their shape and development" (2006: 365).

[14] The words **materialist** and **materiality** deserve some definition here, but I am going to defer elaborating on them until the next chapter's discussion of the sentence "The world must be made to mean"—a "materialist" assertion, if there ever was one. Here, let it suffice to say that one is well on one's way to being "materialist" or "coming to terms with materialist language" when one attends to the production of meaning in a way that no longer assumes meaning or sense to have any "natural" or "supernatural" guarantee, when one begins to grasp the whole of human reality as an ongoing historical process of materialization or dynamic realization or actualization that originates in and depends upon nothing other than human productivity. Conceptualizing a world that must be made to mean, materialism "has to do with the humanization of that world and its de-naturalization, that is to say, with our recognition of that entire post-natural world [i.e., human reality itself] as the product of human praxis and production" (Jameson 2010: 108). Now, if this brief explanation of materialism doesn't suffice, see Žižek's long response to Adrian Johnston's question "*What does it mean to be a materialist in the early twenty-first century?*" (Johnston 2009: 214), or consider the "antinatural" implications of the following from Catherine Malabou's *What Should We Do With Our Brain?*: "A reasonable materialism, in my view, would posit that the natural contradicts itself and that thought is the fruit of this contradiction" (2004/2008: 82).

"everything" has *become* discourse, has always *been* discourse, will always *be* discourse—that theoretical writing both universalizes its political claims and politicizes its universal claims (even its paradoxically universal claims against universalization). Tenaciously attending to the materiality and historicity of *all* human signification whatsoever, assiduously connecting "all aspects of life and consciousness to the material conditions of existence" (Childers and Hentzi 1995: 181), theoretical writing attempts to respond to the contradictions and conflicts embedded in the variously discursive ways in which the world must be made to mean. But responding *responsibly* to the ways our world means *means* more than just subjecting it to gnarly "academic" analysis. For Marx, as we've read, philosophers have only interpreted the world, while the point must be to change it. In the text called *Specters of Marx*, however, Derrida writes of "the dimension of performative interpretation, that is, of an interpretation that transforms the very thing that it interprets" (1994: 51). For theoretical writers, then, to interpret the world *really* can mean to change it—that is, to substantially *rewrite* it—for the "real world" is "always already" nothing but actively and collectively performative interpretation. If theoretical interpretation involves *transformative* "thinking about thinking," theoretical writing involves writing *about* "writing as *the very possibility of change*, the [discursive] space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures" (Cixous 1975/2007: 1646).[15]

With such subversive thoughts in mind, let's return to the question of theory's difficulty, to what we might call its guerilla warfare on "clarity." McLaughlin, as we've read, asserts that theory "isn't difficult out of spite," but, to be quite honest, when considering all the possible motivating factors involved in theoretical militancy, I'm not so sure we should rule out "spite" altogether. Nietzsche no doubt had our number when, in the *Genealogy of Morals*, he linked our most rigorously "objective" intellectual procedures to extremely *personal* feelings of pique and *ressentiment*. And no doubt there are some really mean-spirited theoretical writers out there who like nothing better than to shatter your poor common-sense perceptions simply because

[15] A major caveat here: please note that the operative word in Cixous' promising phrase about "writing as the possibility of change" is *possibility*, not "certainty" or "inevitability." Nor can theoretical writing guarantee in advance that any "changes" wrought by your "coming to terms with materialist language" will necessarily be useful or progressive in any conventional political sense or that letting your common-sense perceptions be shattered and undermined will be "good for you" in any conventional moral sense. As we'll be exploring, there are ethical as well as aesthetic and political dimensions to theory's attempt to "de-reify the language of thought," but the ethics of the attempt aren't always transparent. And so, please recall this caveat—"change" is neither painless nor necessarily "for the common good"—anytime that I seem in this book to be crowing too loudly about the "transformative" potential of theory.

they *can* be shattered. But setting aside as much as I can my own considerable meanness of spirit, I would like to suggest that theory's opacity, while perhaps partly rooted in all-too-human *ressentiment*, also involves ethical obligation, a sense of political responsibility or social justice. I would like to suggest that what animates most theoretical writing is not a spiteful insistence on "just being difficult" but rather a strenuous commitment to *difficultly being just.*

To explain this suggestion, I turn back to Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment.* I have already quoted this resolutely "difficult" duo to the effect that "Intellect's true concern is a negation of reification." Now, on the same page in which they express this concern, Horkheimer and Adorno also write that "False clarity is only another name for myth" (1947/2002: xvii). By *this* claim, the authors mean that we may never be more mystified, more benighted by our "primitive" or "tribal" mythologies, than during those still moments when everything seems perfectly obvious, completely unproblematical, when our "common sense" tells us that some premise or perception is *clearly* absolutely right and true. By the word "myth," the authors refer specifically to the sort of fearfully reactionary and religious/superstitious worldviews that "enlightenment" thinking (ostensibly rationalist modern philosophy) sought to escape, defeat, or crush (as per the slogan "*écrasez l'infáme*"—we must crush the infamy!—with which the arch-*philosophe* Voltaire reportedly signed his letters). In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno are concerned with what they call "enlightenment's relapse into mythology" (xvi), the way purportedly fearless modern rationalism devolves into a fear-based "instrumental reason" as bloody and oppressive as anything practiced under any *ancien regime*. Other than mention that the authors see both the rise of European fascism and standardized post-World War II American mass culture (particularly the Hollywood film) as expressions of this intellectual and moral disaster, we can't rehearse their arguments about enlightenment's mythological relapses here.

We *can* note, however, that Horkheimer and Adorno consider "myth" the symptom *par excellence* of reified thinking. If *critical* intellect's true concern is to *negate* reification, and if "clarity" can function as the calling card of reifying myth, then critical intellect should always be prepared to challenge "clarity" itself. Because in an utterly reified social order, any instance of "clarity" stands a splendid chance of being a myrmidon of "false consciousness," a promoter of "mass delusion," the critical intellectual is always obliged to try to kick "clarity" in its transparent pants. In other words, in any culture in which reification reigns, the "duty of the critical intellectual" is to learn to suspect an ideological shell-game at work in the very insistence upon linguistic transparency, to smell something fishy whenever words and sentences appear "to mean" all too axiomatically, all too unproblematically, "all by themselves." Obviously, then, since "clarity" itself can be the symptom

of reification, it follows that one's attempt to negate reification, to de-reify the language of thought, isn't likely to be very clear. Indeed, one's articulation is obligated to be strategically difficult, baffling, defamiliarizing, resistant to facile processing or immediate comprehension.

Of course, for Horkheimer and Adorno, not every single instance of "clarity" in the world of discourse is necessarily "false"; for these guys, clarity is mythological, and hence false, only when it aids and abets reification. But we might understand clarity's abetting function more clearly if we momentarily drop "reification," Marxism's preferred term for the undesirable "fixing" or coagulation of cognitive processes, and employ another word (viz. **sedimentation),** drawn from a different intellectual tradition (viz. **phenomenology**), instead. This terminological shift might give us some clarity about what's at stake in both the formation and the attempted negation of clarity.[16]

Imagine, if you will, a firmly sedimented foundation at the bottom of some body of standing water. To call this foundation "sedimented" is to say that over a period of time a certain amount of particulate matter has settled down and become stably impacted therein. A direct *result* of this sedimentary process is that the water above the foundation remains relatively clear. Clearly, however, the water's *present* transparency is an *effect* dependent upon the accomplished sedimentation, upon the previous "settling of matters." In other words, "clarity" (figured here by the unclouded water) depends upon the sedimentation of complexity (figured here by these particulate "matters" which have been put out of sight, which seem to have just "naturally" gotten themselves "settled"). But if this sedimentary foundation were to be in some way unsettled or *de-sedimented*—if some trickster were to poke a stick into this soggy bottom and give it a vigorous stir—then all the gritty matters that had long been settled down would come swirling back up into *play.* And the necessary consequence of this agitation would be the water's corresponding *loss* of clarity.

Theory, if you hadn't guessed, is the stick that stirs this dirty analogy, which is why we should stick with thinking of the very project of theory

[16] **Phenomenology** involves the analysis of "human consciousness as 'lived experience'" (Childers and Hentzi 1995: 227) and is usually associated with "the canonical three H's of German philosophy" (Rabaté 2002: 47)—Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger. The phenomenological term **sedimentation** appears in the later work of Husserl and, somewhat like "reification," refers to a sort of spatial transformation of active perception into "settled" knowledge. David Carr writes that Husserl's "geological metaphor suggests that which has sunk below the surface [of human consciousness as lived experience] but continues to support what is on the surface. Husserl availed himself of this metaphor in his later work precisely to elucidate what has the status of knowledge or belief rather than perception, but which recedes into a position comparable to a spatial horizon. It is that which *figures* in my awareness of the present, frames or sets it off without my having to think about it explicitly" (1987: 263).

as unsettling—theoretical writing involves de-sedimenting or disturbingly **deconstructive** thinking about thinking.[17] But contrary to the scatological allegations of those who despise theory and rejoice at the thought of its demise, the main impetus behind the theoretical "movement" in literary studies was never simply to dump a load of "fashionable nonsense" into the ordinarily clear and calm waters of thoughtful minds. Despite appearances, theory does not aspire to foul placidly apodictic streams of consciousness, but it very much desires to disturb the waters, to stir up matters seemingly long settled, all the better to "completely shatter and undermine our common perceptions" (Žižek 2006: ix). Or, in somewhat ruder words, originally issuing from the lips of queer theorist Judith Halberstam, theoretical writing really just wants "to fuck shit up" (2006: 824), and so this writing sticks its abrasive questions and irritating keywords deep into the sedimented foundations and mythological fantasies that underpin ideational clarity—which means that we can basically stick "anti-foundationalism" pretty high up on our expanding list of theory's antagonistic stances.

In the following pages, we'll explore the dire consequences of what is no doubt theory's most radically "anti-foundational" insight, emerging directly from the aforementioned linguistic turn—this would be the "structuralist" perception that signs "do not have essences but are defined by a network of relations" (Culler 1975: 5), that "in language there are only differences without positive terms" (Saussure 1972/1986: 118), that "no signification can be sustained except by reference to another signification" (Lacan 1966e/2006: 415), and so on. For now, we'll "simply" observe that, from a theoretical perspective, no single instance of linguistic or ideational "clarity" can ever just simply, transparently, meaningfully *be*; nor can "meaning" ever securely rest upon a naturally or supernaturally firm foundation, some reassuringly "real bedrock" of metaphysical truth. Rather, from a theoretical perspective, a perspective which always desires to bring about "a desedimentation of . . . encrusted determinations" (Smith 2002: xi), mythological clarity, ordinary language, plain common sense, given meaning, absolute truth, and so on—this whole crusty and determined gang—are all only the ideological effects of a naturalizing, essentializing, familiarizing, or normalizing

[17] Although I defer describing **deconstruction** until later pages, I will here share David Richter's story that Derrida at one point wanted to replace the word deconstruction with "de-sedimentation"—although "that word never caught on" (827). In fact, early in *Of Grammatology*, Derrida uses the words interchangeably: he writes of an "enlarged and radicalized" writing that "no longer issues from a logos" (that is, from any consciously rational center of intention, either human or divine), and he writes that "this writing inaugurates the destruction, not the demolition but the de-sedimentation, the de-construction, of all significations that have their source in that of the logos. Particularly the signification of *truth*" (1967/1997: 10).

suppression of *other* meanings, the repression of *extraordinary* signs. These assorted "betrayals of repressed human possibilities" (Derrida 2008: 105) work together as an active forgetting, a forced amnesia about *alternative* intelligibilities. While *no* meaning is sustained except by reference to another meaning, *some* meaning—namely, clearly given meaning—sustains itself through the *erasure* of competing interpretations. Such an erasure, such a removal of the traces of production from the product, is the very work of reification, of sedimentation, the underlying goal of which would be obviating the very possibility that "things as they are" might be imagined otherwise.[18]

Theoretical writing, then, must always attempt to negate reification, must always work against the erasure of imaginative alterity. Through its restless de-sedimentations, theoretical writing attempts to help bring *alternative* intelligibilities into circulation, to help bring *other* ways of making sense, other ways of "making the present," into play. At its productively baffling best, theoretical writing "never stops coming back" to challenge, resist, or disturb all the sedimentary operations that are required to reproduce "ordinary understanding," to stabilize "given meaning," to reify all human reality, and to *normalize* a world thus insulated from discomfort, protected from interrogation, shielded from interpretation, contestation, and change. This "normalization" is what theory fights. This fight is what theory does. And what theory does is why theory lives.

Coming to Terms

Critical Keywords encountered in the Introduction:

reification, essentialism, defamiliarization, humanism, metaphysics, semiotics, discourse, the subject, the political, materialism/materiality, sedimentation/de-sedimentation, phenomenology, deconstruction

[18] I've repeated the phrase "things as they are" a number of times now without giving proper attribution, so here, at last, are two—In *Very Little . . . Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*, Simon Critchley writes that for Adorno, "the task of thinking is to keep open the slightest difference between things as they are and things as they might otherwise be" (1997: 22). Meanwhile, in the poem "The Man with the Blue Guitar," Wallace Stevens writes that "things as they are are changed on the blue guitar" (1937/1982: 165). I take "the blue guitar" to mean for Stevens the poetic imagination itself. But I also imagine that in some venues, performing the task of thinking, keeping open the possibility of change, theoretical writing can play a pretty mean blue guitar.

Part 1

Antiphysis: Five Lessons in Textual Anthropogenesis

Lesson One

"The world must be made to mean"

—or, in(tro)ducing the subject of human reality

I. Work with words

So what in the world does it mean to say that "the world must be made to mean"? How does this sentence help us begin the hard work of "coming to terms with materialist language" (Jameson 2004: 403), of getting a handle on materialist semiotics? And why is this morsel of semiotic material an appropriate starting point for "in(tro)ducing the subject of human reality"—for *introducing* the idea that this "subject" must always be *induced*, as other processes, like labor or vomiting, must occasionally be induced? Like all properly "materialist" questions, these cannot be simply, briefly, or tidily answered, but we can learn a great deal about the most basic assumptions of theoretical writing by "coming to terms" with their terms.

The sentence was written by the **Birmingham School** cultural theorist Stuart Hall.[1] To say that Hall's sentence concisely expresses the most basic assumption of "materialist semiotics" is to locate it within the tradition of Marxist or "historical materialist" cultural studies. The initial clause of the sentence—*the world must be made*—is pretty much the foundational *premise* of historical materialism, while the final infinitive—*to mean*—is our semiotic *kicker*. Taken together, premise and kicker basically boil down to *labor* with *language*, or *work* with *words*, or, if you'll forgive me, *Marx* with *marks*.

What marks Marx as an "historical materialist" is his conviction that humans must always make or produce their "world," their "history." In other words, Marx concurs with what Edward Said calls Giambattista Vico's "great observation that [people] make their own history, that what they can know is

[1] What Hall actually writes, in "The Rediscovery of Ideology," is "The world has to be made to mean" (1998: 1050), but for a number of reasons, including the hard time I have resisting alliteration, I've changed "has to" to "must." **Birmingham School** is short for the Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies, founded in 1964 at Birmingham University, UK. Hall was director of the Center from 1968 to 1979 (Childers and Hentzi 1995: 28–9).

what they have made" (1978: 4–5). For Marx and other historical materialists, that is, "the world" is nothing but "the history of the world," and that history is only ever "anthropogenetic," only ever humanly fashioned, fabricated, or caused—humans only are responsible for it.[2] In *The German Ideology*, Marx sets his materialist analysis of anthropogenesis against philosophically idealist or mistily theological accounts of "the origin of the world." He writes that human beings

> can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion or anything else you like. They themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to *produce* their means of subsistence . . . By producing their means of subsistence [people] are indirectly producing their actual material life. (1932b/1978: 150)

For Marx, then, specifically *human* history begins, antinaturally enough, when the earliest humans first distinguish themselves from immediately *natural* or merely *animal* life by actively *producing* the real material conditions of their existence, their human reality, their *world*. For Marx, only humans "think, act and fashion [this] reality" (1844/1978: 54); only humans *produce*, actively and materially *create*, this world—which is why some Marxists, such as Antonio Negri in *Time for Revolution*, speak of historical materialism as "creative materialism" (2005: 166).

Here of course the word "world" doesn't mean the physical planet (crust, mantle, magma, molten core, etc.), which Marx doesn't for a minute think that humans "created" (though he doesn't believe that some almighty, otherworldly deity cooked it up either); rather, by "world" an atheist historical materialist like Marx means the untranscendable horizon of human social existence in its historical totality, from the most rudimentary tribal forms in the dark backward and abysm of time to the most developed and digitally

[2] Commenting on the link between Vico and Marx, Fredric Jameson notes that Marxism "stakes out what may be called a Viconian position, in the spirit of the *verum factum* of the *Scienza Nuova* [1725]; we can only understand what we have made, and therefore we are only in a position to claim knowledge of history [which is our work] but not of Nature itself, which is the work of God" (2009: 7); thus "Vico's *verum factum* in effect sunders history from nature as an object of possible human knowledge" (2009: 217n21). But where Marx's materialism surpasses Vico's is less in the act of sundering history from nature as an object of human understanding and more in understanding human history itself as our permanent sundering of ourselves from nature, understanding history as the ongoing and productively human or "anthropogenetic" process of "antiphysis." Marx further surpasses Vico in rejecting the idea that nature is "the work of God" and positing instead that "God" is the creative or imaginative work of "man"—for the militantly atheist Marx, that is, "the criticism of religion is the premise of all criticism," and "the basis of irreligious criticism is this: *man makes religion*, religion does not make man" (1844/1978: 53–4).

fast-forwarded cyber-societies. Specifically *human* history or "the world" *begins* for Marx not when some deity says "let there be light" but when "the first humans" begin *working* on the raw materiality of their immediately natural environment in order to *transform* it into something starting to resemble specifically human or social existence—thereby becoming, anthropogenetically speaking, "the first humans." In other words, probably because "living like animals" wasn't working out all that well for them anyway, the proto-people who are our most distant ancestors gave up trying to live a "merely natural" life—they stopped seeking shelter in the nearest natural formation (the proverbial cave or some other hole in the ground) and starting building huts and hovels out of the available sticks and mud; they stopped being merely hunters and gatherers, as some animals merely hunt and gather, stopped grubbing on whatever happened to be growing or grunting nearby, and started raising flora for harvest and fauna for slaughter. As these quite basic examples might suggest, the materialist gist here is that human reality or human history even at its most "primitive" level never "just naturally" (much less supernaturally) happens, never just grows on trees, or falls from the sky; a certain amount of *work* or productive activity is required in order to get human history up and running—to begin wrangling a realm of specifically human *freedom* from the merely natural realm of *necessity*.

"Antiphysis," then, isn't a bad name for this anthropogenetic activity, this totally human and—potentially, at least—totally humanizing *work* on and "against nature."[3] For in an historical materialist account, there is no beneficently divine creator watching over us, and nature is completely indifferent to our survival, much less to our "cause" (freedom, autonomy, dignity, etc.). Nature, that is, doesn't really give a damn whether or not we're protected from its elements, doesn't care if or, most importantly, *how* we live or die. If I live like a king or die like a dog, it's all the same to nature. And the fact that nature is completely indifferent to Operation Human Freedom, the fact that raw and immediate physical nature *must* be transformed, worked on, worked *against*, if this project of antiphysis is ever to get off the ground,

[3] I write here that human history as our ongoing work on and against nature is only *potentially* "totally humanizing" because, so far, history hasn't exactly worked out this way for everybody—in other words, we haven't yet reached what Jameson calls "the human age itself," the *utopian* age of our totally mutual recognition of ourselves in a "fully human and humanly produced world" (2010: 107). The "world," to be sure, is still only ever "humanly produced," but for many, the work itself is anything but "fully" humanizing. For many producers, that is, labor is still "alienated" in the four-fold sense Marx describes in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*. We will discuss Marx's theory of alienated labor more fully in Lesson Seven. For now, let's just say that from a Marxist perspective, "the human age itself" can't and won't come about until the age of global capitalism is superseded.

constitutes the basic or primordial reason why "the world" must always "be made"—and always only by us. Because we, the people, first distinguish ourselves *as* people by anthropogenetically differentiating ourselves *from* animals in the practical act of *producing* our means and conditions of existence, human reality must always be distinguished from natural reality, from merely animal life.

II. Post-oceanic feelings

Or, as psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan might put it—in terms no less laboriously "materialist" than those of Marx—human reality must be distinguished from nature because each and every *subject* of this reality must be set apart from **the real**, must separate or free itself from the real's oppressively immediate *hic et nunc* or "here and now." Lacan describes "human reality" as a "montage" of **the imaginary** (the register of images) and **the symbolic** (the register of language). He distinguishes this imaginary and symbolic montage from another register, which he calls the real. In Lacan's account, the real both *precedes* and *exceeds* human or "socio-symbolic reality," precedes and exceeds any individual subject *of* this reality, any particular human being. The real *precedes* reality insofar as it relates to "the very young child's experience of itself," which, Lacan says, "develops on the basis of a situation that is experienced as undifferentiated" (1966c/2006: 91); Lacan characterizes this "precedent" real as a perceptual state or experiential stew in which "things . . . at first run together in the *hic et nunc* of the all" (1966d/2006: 229). Because the inarticulate infant mired in this undifferentiated real literally can't "tell the difference" between its "experience of itself" and everything else, it in effect experiences itself as "everything." Thus the real as "the *hic et nunc* of the all" relates to what Freud in *Civilization and Its Discontents* calls the infant's "oceanic" feeling, "a feeling of an indissoluble bond, of being one with the external world as a whole" (1930/1989: 723)—a "feeling" that we all of course must one day *lose*. For, eventually and inevitably, each and every "very young child" must be pulled out of the "oceanic" real and *installed* in properly human reality, *framed* in the imaginary/symbolic montage, must become an individual human subject, an "I," a *parlêtre* or "speaking being," as Lacan puts it, "an animal at the mercy of language" (1966f/2006: 525). Thereafter, the real is what *exceeds* human reality and "resists symbolization absolutely" (Lacan 1991: 66).

We'll be returning to Lacan, to "infantile" experience, and to the real's resistance to language's tender mercies, later in these lessons. Here, let's say

that for Lacan, human reality must be distinguished from the real because, in the real, there is nothing to distinguish the human from the merely natural/animal "here and now."[4] While for Marx, *labor* pries humans loose from nature, for Lacan, *language* separates reality from the real. Taking Marx and Lacan together, materialist semiotics asserts the "labor of language" as the specifically and exclusively human mode of antiphysis that *produces* human reality as such. The world must be made, to be sure, but it must also be made to mean. Human reality is only ever the product of human work with words.

But how do these laboriously linguistic matters relate to the idea that "the *subject* of human reality"—the individual human being—must be "induced"? Here, we begin to approach a materialist assumption that many self-respecting human beings find unpalatable—the assumption that, like "the world," each and every one of us must also be "made to mean." To paraphrase Lacan—humans make meaning, but only because meaning makes us human.[5] Antinaturally enough, this quip means that none of us is ever actually *born human*; rather, universally and transhistorically, we must all be *turned into* human beings through the antinatural labor of language. What does this mean? How does this work? How could this possibly be?

Well, consider all the abilities or activities by which we tend to "distinguish" ourselves from animals. Make a list of everything we can do that a non-human animal, a monkey or a lobster, cannot.

[4] Let's also say a little more about Lacan's triptych—the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real. It's true that Lacan distinguishes human reality, as imaginary/symbolic montage, from the real. It's also true that Lacan gives us a sort of developmental narrative in which the infant starts off in the undifferentiated real, leaves that mess behind, and enters "the imaginary order" via the so-called mirror stage (which we'll be discussing quite thoroughly in a later lesson), and then supersedes the imaginary by entering "the symbolic order" of language. But Lacan doesn't want to suggest that any distinction drawn between the real and reality is absolute; nor does he want us to put all our psychoanalytically interpretive eggs in the developmentally narrative basket; rather, Lacan stresses the structural permanence of real, imaginary, and symbolic interconnections within human reality as such. In fact, he famously represents the real, the imaginary, and the symbolic with the diagram of the so-called Borromean knot, "a group of three rings that are linked together in such a way that if any one of them is severed, all three become separated" (Evans 1996: 18) and the whole "subject of human reality" falls apart. So, while it's accurate to say, as I have above, that "the real" in Lacan's sense *precedes* and *exceeds* human reality, it's probably *more* accurate to say that the real precedes, exceeds, and yet never ceases to *invade* human reality. This sense of invasion can produce a feeling of "extimacy" for the subject of human reality. As explained in the Preface, the word extimacy "neatly expresses the way in which psychoanalysis problematizes the opposition between the inside and the outside, between container and contained" (Evans 1996: 58); the word opens us up to the unsettling suspicion "that the innermost, intimate core of a person's psychical being is, at root, an alien, foreign 'thing'" (Johnston 2009: 86).

[5] Or, to quote him directly: "Man thus speaks, but it is because the symbol has made him man" (Lacan 1966d/2006: 229).

Lesson Two

"Meaning is the polite word for pleasure"

—or, how the beast in the nursery learns to read

I. Bungle in the jungle

In our first lesson, concerning how "the world must be made to mean," we encountered the rather rude proposal that none of us is born altogether human, that each of us comes into this world as an inadequate little animal that—not *who*, mind you, but, more precisely, *that*—must be *turned* into a small human child. We also encountered the unflattering suggestion that our entire species universally and transhistorically experiences a "*specific prematurity at birth*" (Lacan 1966b/2006: 78). This prematurity is called upon to account for our woefully insufficient animality, for what Lacan calls the "organic inadequacy of [our] natural reality" at the experiential get-go, "a certain dehiscence at the very heart of [our] organism, a primordial Discord betrayed by the signs of malaise and motor uncoordination of [our] neonatal months" (1966b/2006: 77, 78).

But what accounts for our prematurity, for our allegedly over-early launch out into this world that must be made to mean? How does it happen that we as a species don't take as much time in uterine space as we apparently "should" and so seem "biologically determined" to endure a period of abject immobility and helpless dependency considerably longer than that of any other animal neonate? A conjectural explanation for our endemic "organic inadequacy" at birth is that premature birthing developed as a strategy of evolutionary adaptation—when our primate ancestors first assumed an upright gait, this postural shift precipitated a skeletal pelvic contraction in proto-human females such that heads of fully formed fetuses were suddenly too big to be born. But whatever its speculative prehistorical cause, the ongoing effect of our prematurity—and thus, our dehiscent historicity—is that, *unlike* other animals, born simply as small versions of what they already organically are, we are *not* born human but have to be *made* that way. In other words, while any non-human animal that survives its neonativity will spontaneously grow to become an adult of its species, the

principle," then, Freud designates a process of mental functioning that demands and depends upon unpleasure's immediate reduction. The basic goal of the pleasure principle is to retreat from unpleasurable tension and return to a psychic equilibrium or quiescence, an ideally tensionless homeostasis. Whenever it loses homeostasis, whenever it experiences unpleasurable tension in any form—hunger, diaper-rash, fear of the dark or of strangers or of being all alone—the helpless infant wants to get its "pleasure" back, wants the tension to go away, wants its homeostasis restored, *immediately*. But in reality there will always be some discrepancy between the infant's immediate demand and two interrelated and mediating factors (factors which mediate in that they "come between" infantile demand and its fulfillment). One significant factor is the time it actually takes for homeostasis to be satisfactorily restored (if ever it is); the other significant factor is the form in which the satisfaction actually materializes (if ever it does, and the object eventually obtained may very well differ in form from the object irritably anticipated or psychically reached after). Reality, then, constitutively involves the "factoring in" of significantly temporal delay and significantly formal alteration (so much so that, as we'll see, temporal delay and formal alteration become the twin bases of significance itself). The discrepancy between immediate, formally self-identical gratification and satisfaction temporally delayed and/or formally altered is pretty much the difference between pleasure and reality. And every "little animal" must deal with this difference in order to factor itself into human reality, to become a small human child, a good or *polite* little girl or boy.

Now, the infantile psyche—ragingly impolite (and arguably ungendered) at this juncture—is completely under the "inhuman" dominance of the pleasure principle. Whatever it wants, whenever it wants it, its infantile majesty wants exactly what it wants and it wants that now. It knows no reason to endure *waiting* for pleasure's homeostatic restoration; it knows no reason to accept any substitute gratification whatsoever. Too bad for this completely unreasonable infant that it's also utterly powerless, helpless, and dependent, a miniscule tyrant incapable of actually *doing* anything to remedy its "wanting" situation. Under the pleasure principle's dominance, then, the infant having a bad time attempts to reduce anguished temporality in the most immediate way possible—by mentally summoning (i.e., fantasizing, hallucinating reaching after) the missing object (e.g., the mother's breast). But since this instant fantasy image fails to satisfy, provides merely representational pleasure, but never the real thing, the infant who wants someday to be more and other than an infant must eventually give itself over to the mediations of the reality principle. The infant, that is, must actively

certain others be pleased with it than it is for "it" to have whatever pleasure it wants whenever it wants it.[3]

The "beast in the nursery" begins to learn to read when it starts allowing the metaphorical incept of desired signs to become more important than the material intake of needed sustenance, when it starts perceiving substitutive "signs of life" and reality's "promise of happiness" as being somehow better than immediate life itself—"even better than the real thing." When the real thing in question is the breast, what the infant must learn to read is not that real pound of flesh, much less its milky issue, but rather the telling expression that "overflows," so to speak, from the breast-giver's face. When the needy infant demanding the breast accepts in its stead a disappointingly diminished substitute—the cold dry plastic pacifier instead of the warm and softly seeping thing—it accepts this diminution only because a surplus of meaning provides symbolic compensation, makes good the loss of real enjoyment *qua* enjoyment in the real. The mother's completely approving facial expression, her milky look of love, along with any unconditionally soothing sounds she might manage to make—all work to compensate the infant, make up for the difference in pleasure-yield between breast and pacifier. These significant sights and sounds partially "paper over" the discrepancy between the enjoyment anticipated and the enjoyment obtained.

But if the infant does feel fairly compensated, it does so only because it senses what it damned well better get used to sensing—to wit—that it is "better" to "take in" these rewarding sights and sounds of approval than it is to obtain immediate gratification. At the end of the day, reality's primary lesson is still Freud's famous motto *Wo Es war, soll Ich werden*—"where id was, there ego must be" (1933/2001: 80), or, more literally, where an "it" was, an "I" must come into being. Reality's lesson, in other words, is that it will have been much more significant for me, *das Ich*, to obtain recognition (for having sucked it up and been polite) than it would have been for it, *das Es,* to have gotten exactly what it wanted, exactly when it wanted it (back in the prehistorical miasma of the real, the merely natural/animal *hic et nunc*). If the infant doesn't learn this "history lesson," if it doesn't on a very basic level grasp "the virtual character of the symbolic order [as] the very condition of human historicity" (Žižek 1999/2002: 241), if it doesn't figure out the terms of this existential bargain—if it clings to its pure pleasure principle in the real and doesn't allow itself to be worked over by virtual reality, if it simply continues to cry like a baby until it gets what it wants, refuses any substitutive

[3] I allude here to the distinctions Lacan makes among *need, demand,* and *desire*, which roughly and respectively correspond to his three "registers" of psychic life—the *real*, the *imaginary*, and the *symbolic*. We will return to the "knotted" relations among these two trios in our fourth lesson.

pacification and never learns to give a big happy damn what any significantly "Big Other" thinks of it—then this beast isn't going to get very far in the *polis*. It probably won't make it out of the nursery.

III. Happier endings

Adulterated reality, then, must supersede pure pleasure if "*das Ich*" is ever to displace "*das Es*," if anything resembling anthropogenesis is ever to occur. But reality can't simply eradicate pleasure altogether; rather, reality modifies, redirects, *transforms* pleasure. Reality can't "just say no" to any and all enjoyment. Reality "says no" to *immediate* and *self-identical* gratification, to be sure, but because no animal responds well to unmitigated negativity, the reality principle must always hold out the future promise of greater, more important, more significant gratification.

The paradoxical crux of the matter, however, is that, throughout their negotiated conflict, the pleasure and reality principles still share the same overriding goal—the reduction of unpleasurable tension, the restoration of homeostasis. And since the goal does remain the same, pleasure still pretty much rules the roost, despite reality's encroachments on its terrain. What must *fundamentally* change in the transition from *pure* pleasure to *accomplished* reality is the question of what actually constitutes the *source* or *cause* of the unpleasurable tension that demands to be reduced. Back in the day of the *pure* pleasure principle, what caused unpleasurable tension was whatever forced us "to wait for it"; in our quest to have our homeostasis restored a.s.a.p., we psychically withdrew like the heads of frightened turtles from whatever threatened to make us wait—that is to say, whatever threatened to *make* us *mean*. In the *accomplished* reality principle, however, unpleasure involves whatever disturbs the *reassuring stability of meaning*, whatever threatens the formally established coherence of *das Ich*. The stray memory of *non-meaning* (the "purposeless" animal enjoyment of inarticulate babble); the emergence of *bad meanings* (impolite or "perverse" gratifications that "I" might feel sick even thinking about); the appearance of *strange meanings* (unfamiliar articulations that disturb my normal understanding, anxiogenic "foreign elements" that "terrorize" my psychic equilibrium) —all these "bad" things become the unpleasurable tensions that "I" have to deal with—that is, *repress*—if *meaningful* homeostasis (the "homeland security" of my own private Idaho) is to be maintained. In the pleasure principle, it is the very thought of *repression*, the thought of my having to renounce a satisfaction, of my not getting what I want, that precipitates unpleasure; in the reality principle, however, it is the thought of *the return of the repressed*, of getting

more than I bargained for, that does the trick. As Freud writes in the essay called "Repression," a specific satisfaction might be "pleasurable in itself" (i.e., in the pure pleasure principle), but "irreconcilable with other claims and intentions" (e.g., those of the reality principle). Thus the same thought can "cause pleasure in one place and unpleasure in another" (1915/1989: 569). Psychoanalysis, which studies psychic conflict, which explores the ways the same thought can generate antithetical feelings, has thus been called "the science of ambivalence."[4]

But speaking of ambivalence, and of tricks, the one that my "I" is about to play on yours really isn't very nice. For I can imagine that your "I" could without too much difficulty imagine itself *as an infant* sucking with great satisfaction at its mother's breast. Your "I" might even be able to imagine *that* infant being seriously displeased to have this breast suddenly pulled away. You *as an adult* "I" can probably imagine fairly easily that you *as an infant* "it" would want to banish immediately the very thought of the nipple's disappearance. OK, so far so good. *Now* let's see if you can imagine yourself *at your present age* sucking away at the wet and erect nipple of your own mother's breast (not just *any* old nipple, mind you, but specifically, unimaginably, unspeakably, *your own mother's*). I imagine, I would even heavily bet, that your "I" can bring *that* image to mind only with *extreme* difficulty, if at all, that the very idea provokes feelings of queasy disgust, unbearable shame, painful embarrassment, horrible incestuous weirdness, homophobic revulsion (particularly if you're a good girl), considerable anger at yours truly for even trying to stick the hideous thought into your head, etc.—in other words, *massive psychical unpleasure*. You *must* want to get this sick thought out of your head as quickly as possible. But while you're busy trying to restore your disrupted homeostasis, let's at least note what's illustrative here—to wit, back when you were a little "it," completely under the dominance of the pleasure principle, it was the thought of the object's *disappearance* that you wanted immediately to get rid of; now that you're a great big "I," long under the sway of the reality principle, it's the unwelcome thought of the object's *return* that you want to beat back, exclude, expel, repress, *tout de suite,* for "the essence of repression lies simply in turning something away, and keeping it at a distance, from consciousness" (Freud 1915/1989: 569–70).

In Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, the term **unconscious** marks the "extimate" space of "otherness within" each of us, the traumatic thing or "unbearable truth" (Žižek 2006: 3) within each subject's psyche from

[4] I have to apologize for the fact that I can neither remember nor discover who coined this phrase—I'm beginning to think that I dreamt it.

which normally constituted consciousness tries—pathetically and bathetically enough—to keep its distance.[5] So, when I write that anthropogenesis depends upon repression, that anthropogenesis begins to kick in when impolitely animal *being* is "sacrificed" to properly human *meaning*, I don't mean to suggest that the sacrificial beast vanishes into thin air, flies, or slithers, or waddles off to die. For "to be sacrificed" doesn't necessarily mean "to be killed"; sacrificing an object can involve making it "sacred" by setting it apart, excluding it from the mundane, the everyday, the familiar, the easily accessed, the readily known. The strangely animal "it" of the pure pleasure principle is not terminated, but repressed, distanced from normal everyday consciousness, from the standard operating procedures of "common sense." Upon repression, it—*the* it, *das Es*—is relegated to the unconscious, where it doesn't expire but rather remains a lively but covert participant in the psychic life of the I, *das Ich*, sometimes coming back to bite my polite or "politicized" ego in the ass.

As this rather rude turn of phrase might suggest, *its* most vital activities are *fundamentally incompatible* with normal, conscious, proper meaning and manners, homeostatic good housekeeping, all the rules and regulations of fine upstanding citizenship, freedom, dignity, self-respect, impeccably clear writing, and so on. The fundamental psychoanalytic thesis about anthropogenesis is that none of us ever neatly exchanges *l'être pour la lettre,* pleasure for reality, wild being for civilized meaning, our pitiful portions of real happiness for the Big Other's tenuous portions of security. There is always for each of us an "unbearable truth," an ego-traumatizing *remnant* or *leftover*, unconscious but still unceasingly productive, the impolite if not unspeakable "stuff" that our darkest dreams of light are made of.

Freud, of course, called dreams the "royal road" to the unconscious. But for any theoretical writing that is informed by psychoanalysis, *all* the lost highways on the map of human reality lead to and from that strange location as well. For the gist of psychoanalysis is that the unconscious plays *its* part not only in the production of baffling dreams, neurotic symptoms, and embarrassing slips of the tongue; it determines and undermines the very production of meaning itself, all the work with words that *makes* the world that *must* be made to mean. Unconscious desire haunts *all* the forms

[5] In *How to Read Lacan*, Žižek writes, "The unconscious is not the preserve of wild drives that have to be tamed by the ego, but the site where a traumatic truth speaks out. Therein lies Lacan's version of Freud's motto *Wo es war, soll ich werden* (Where it was, I am to become): not 'The ego should conquer the id,' the site of unconscious drives, but 'I should dare to approach the site of my truth.' What awaits me 'there' is not a deep Truth that I have to identify with, but an unbearable truth that I have to learn to live with" (2006: 2–3).

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