EDITORIAL REMARKS: RECOGNIZING CRITIQUE

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This issue marks the fortieth anniversary of *College Literature*, and also sees the publication of the first essay handled entirely by the new editorial team under our revised Editorial Policy. While an exciting landmark in the life of the journal, this anniversary also offers a broader opportunity for reflection on the project of ‘critique’ signaled in the journal’s subtitle (as “a journal of critical literary studies”). Like a number of other journals in the discipline founded at North American universities in the early 1970s, the lifespan of *College Literature* approximates to the period of disciplinary reconstruction and paradigm change that has come to redefine literary studies in the Anglo-American academy, a period associated with the influx of what was once called ‘critical theory’ but is now more often termed simply ‘theory.’ However, what differentiates *College Literature* from other journals is our concern to understand and rethink (that is, to re-cognize) our current position in relationship to the upheavals of this period, rather than either simply taking them for granted or running ever onwards (or backwards) in search of novelty and ‘innovation.’

It is not possible in this short space to summarize the myriad changes involved in the disciplinary shifts of the last forty years, but it is possible to identify a broad realignment in the way in which ‘critique’ is articulated and understood across a number of positions, ‘schools,’ tendencies, and approaches, a realignment that is rooted in some of the central assumptions of contemporary ‘theory.’ One of the most exorbitant (in the legal sense) moves made by theory has been its rejection of any external criteria for critique, a rejection whose sweeping nature seems to unify all those positions against which it has erected itself. Traditionally, the story goes, critical judgments have always required an external set of criteria to calibrate and orientate judgment, whether in the guise
of a formal principle (proportion, non-contradiction, complexity, or the beautiful), a set of moral claims (the good, individualized freedom, or humanistic compassion), or a historical narrative (the triumph of the West, the achievement of liberal democracy, or the struggle for socialism). Such external criteria are said necessarily to imply an illegitimate and predatory universalism that results in the violent liquidation of difference, a conceptual violence that has widely come to be seen as consanguineous with the political and social violence of modernity.

This critique of ‘traditional’ modes of critique has been so successful because it offers not just a rejection of such modes, but also an alternative to them. Instead of calling on external criteria to address the text, theory reconceives the operation of critique as purely internal to the text understood as the bearer of its social determination: as ‘deconstruction’ (Derrida), the unraveling of the text’s own semantic tracery; or as ‘resistance’ (Foucault), the necessary doubleness of social systems when conceived as closed circuits, or *topoi* of pure immanence. This approach proved especially conducive to the political and social movements that came to the fore in this period, which in various ways premised political critique on the covert exclusions enabled by the language of universalism. Indeed, theory’s staying power has in part lain in its ability to offer itself not just as another critique of one form of universalism, but as a critical mode that rejects the externality seen as underlying the universalism of all earlier modes of critique, however radical they may have claimed to be. For in relocating critique within the perennially mobile transactions of meaning-making, theory takes on a politically self-reflexive dimension signaled by the widespread critique of ‘essentialism.’ Where social movements had looked to the particularities excluded by any statement of universalism (whether as ‘femininity,’ ‘blackness,’ ‘queerness,’ or the numerous yet inadvertently composite ‘non-Western’), theory has fastened onto the particularity underlying such critiques of universalism and identified in them a homologous appeal to externality in the guise of ‘essence.’

The point of these brief (and necessarily reductive) remarks is not to diminish the critical work done by recent theory, nor to devalue the very significant critiques developed by different social movements over this period. But after forty years or so, the very success and ubiquity of these critical operations within the Anglo-American academy itself calls for critical reflection. For over and against the intellectual success of contemporary theory within academic discourse in the humanities, we must also recognize the overwhelming success of the neoliberal program in reshaping the landscape within which intellectual activity takes place. This success constitutes a significant issue for contemporary theory given neoliberalism’s echoing of the critique of universalism in order to attack public provision, the rule of law, and universal access, and its ability to respond to and even mobilize the language of ‘anti-essentialism.’ And as the neoliberal project comes increasingly to reorganize and set the terms for intellectual activity—as public institutions and research agendas are privatized or made subject to the demands of the market—turning away from the risks of involving ‘externality’
in the articulation of critique, in favor of the surety of purely ‘internal’ modes of
decreation and resistance, may prove debilitating and counterproductive.¹

The retrospective occasion of an anniversary is perhaps especially appropri-
ate for raising these issues. One kind of response to the dual successes I have
described—of theory within the academy, and of neoliberalism in configuring the
site of academic critique—is the perennial search for new critical paradigms and
schemas, which promise escape from immersion and complicity within the histo-
ries of critical discourse that have given rise to these questions. Such a search for
new beginnings might seek to escape these issues by basing itself, for example, on
the cognitive patterns of empirical consciousness, or the certainty of evolution-
ary models of behavior; or indeed on the rejection tout court of the last decades of
theory, through a return to a theoretically unencumbered ‘pure scholarship.’ This
journal has called instead for a different response, which involves the continuing
critique of both ‘traditional’ modes of criticism and of the ‘new critical orthodoxy-
ies’ that developed as radical critiques of those very critical traditions. In doing so
we might recall the counsel offered by the British philosopher Gillian Rose over
da decade ago, that “to investigate the possibility of an ethics that does not remain
naïve and ignorant of its historical and political presuppositions and hence of its
likely outcomes,” critical thinking requires:

a comprehensive account of substance and subject, of modernity and subjectiv-
ity; an account, that is, of the modern fate of ethical life: of the institutional and
individual inversions of meaning in the modern state and society, where increase
in subjective freedom is accompanied by decrease in objective freedom, where
the discourses of individual rights [may routinely] distract from the actualities of
power and domination. (Rose 1996, 70–71)

NOTES

1 This response to the critique of essentialism can be seen in the “neo-racism” discussed
by Étienne Balibar (Balibar and Wallerstein 1991, 17–28). The refunctioning of ‘anti-
essentialism’ by the Right can be seen most prominently in the contemporary discourse
of Western Islamophobia; for a discussion of some of the problems which this discourse
raises for contemporary theory, see MacPhee 2011, 100–106.

2 My use of the term ‘risk’ in this context draws on the work of Gillian Rose; see for
example Rose 1996, 38.

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