

HEGEL AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF LITERARY THEORY

Do the various forms of literary theory – deconstruction, Marxism, new historicism, feminism, postcolonialism, and cultural/digital studies – have anything in common? If so, what are the fundamental principles of theory? What is its ideological orientation? Can it still be of use to us in understanding basic intellectual and ethical dilemmas of our time? These questions continue to perplex both students and teachers of literary theory. Habib finds the answers in theory's largely unacknowledged roots in the thought of German philosopher Hegel. Hegel's insights continue to frame the very terms of theory to this day. Habib explains Hegel's complex ideas and how they have percolated through the intellectual history of the last century. This book will interest teachers and students of literature, literary theory and the history of ideas, illuminating how our modern world came into being, and how we can better understand the salient issues of our own time.

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This book is gratefully dedicated to:

*Angela Miller
Advait Ubhayakar
Jessica White
Jim McGauley
Alyson Howe*

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Preface

Is literary theory dead? Has it really given way to a resurgence of more conventional modes of reading texts? Do the various forms of theory – including deconstruction, Marxism, new historicism, feminism, postcolonialism, and cultural/digital studies – have anything in common? If so, what are the fundamental principles of theory? What are its ideological orientations? Can it still be of use to us in understanding basic intellectual and ethical dilemmas of our time? These questions continue to perplex both students and teachers of literary theory.

The proposed book aims to answer these questions with reference to theory's largely unacknowledged background in Hegel. Many of the often-cited accomplishments of theory were prefigured by Hegel. It was Hegel who first offered a comprehensive critique of the notions of identity and essence; it was Hegel who showed that both subjectivity and objectivity are constructions; that we achieve humanity only through mutual recognition; and it was Hegel who pioneered the insights that the linguistic sign is "arbitrary," and that "reason" is historical and social in its very nature.

Hegel's insights continue to frame the very terms of theory, including posthumanism in all its inflections, as well as media/digital studies. This pervasive impact of Hegel has generally gone unrecognized, though as Jean Michel Rabaté points out, "a grounding in the patient reading of Hegel ... is ... an essential step on the way to an understanding of Theory."¹ There are indeed several specialized studies that astutely analyze the influence of Hegel, whether direct or indirect, positive or negative, on specific fields and thinkers. For example, there are studies that relate Hegel to Marx, feminist philosophy, Deleuze, and language (which are

¹ Jean Michel Rabaté, *The Future of Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), pp. 21–3. This book contains an excellent concise overview of some of the ways in which Hegel's insights pervade theory, pp. 21–45.

referenced in this book). But most of these, though excellent, are very technical and are written for specialists. What is urgently needed, I believe, is an accessible overview of Hegel's relation to the foundations or fundamental principles and assumptions of literary theory as a whole. Hence the proposed book is the first comprehensive study of its kind.²

Understanding what modern literary theory owes to Hegel will help us – especially in what is now being dubbed a “post-theoretical” age – to situate the achievements and limitations of theory in a more accurate historical context. It will also help us to assess more comprehensively the connections of literary theory to the past, to the traditions of Western thought, and hence to see more clearly what future intellectual possibilities lie open to the various fields that comprise theory.

This book makes no pretense to contribute to Hegel scholarship. It does, however, strive to make Hegel speak accessible English, to make his basic modes of thought intelligible to a relatively wide readership, to show that his thinking underlies our world on many levels. Hegel helps us understand how our identities are often created for us; how we inhabit the terrifyingly ubiquitous economic and ideological edifice of capitalism; how we engage with the worlds of religion, art, and politics; how we negotiate the frameworks of gender; how we confront the persisting legacies of colonialism and regionalism; and the ways in which we contribute or are unable to contribute to the shaping of our world and of language. Another task of this book is to show – without burying it under a mass of jargon – how literary theory is profoundly relevant to all these issues. What Hegel has to say and what theory has to say are simply too important to be imprisoned within any kind of linguistic or technical obscurity. They concern most of the important dimensions of our world.

As such, this book is intended not only for teachers and students of literature and literary theory but also for more general readers interested in the history of ideas, in how our modern world came into being, and how we can better understand the salient issues of our own time. I aim to furnish a clear, detailed, accurate, and readable exposition of both the basic principles of literary theory and of Hegel's difficult ideas on many subjects – logic, the history of philosophy, language, gender, and the political state – for an audience which is presumed to be interested in, but

² I should also mention Andrew Cole's recent book, *The Birth of Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014). This work deals with Hegel's relation to theory and has caused much controversy, but does not overlap with the present work, which is somewhat broader in its scope. I have written two detailed reviews of this book, both published in well-known philosophical journals.

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unfamiliar with, those ideas. While there is a coherent argument running through the book, each chapter should be fairly self-sufficient, enabling students to explore subjects or themes of particular concern to them. I hope that this book is clearly enough written to serve as an introduction not only to Hegel but also to the various branches of literary theory, its basic principles, and its foundations.

In writing this book, I have consulted with some of the foremost scholars of Hegel and Marx, including Frederick Beiser, Jere Surber, Terrell Carver, Allen Wood, Thomas Kemple, John O'Neill, and Michael Baur. I have also sought help from the German historian Andrew Lees and the German language specialist Lori Lantz, as well as the sociologists Thomas Kemple and Keith Hall, and the African historian Teshale Tibebe. I received much insightful assistance from a number of eminent literary theorists, including Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson, and from Stuart Barnett who edited a splendid series of essays on Hegel and Derrida. Zhao Ng and Alicia Broggi of Oxford University gave me valuable feedback for the sections on Antigone. I also owe much to Chris Fitter, Joe Barbarese, the late Frank Kermode, and my dear departed friend, Michael Payne. Any errors or oversights are of course entirely my responsibility.

I should like to thank, finally, a group of my graduate and undergraduate students who gave me persistent and insightful feedback over a period of two years to ensure that what I said was clear and intelligible. I will always be grateful for their help, and I dedicate this book to them: Angela Miller, Jessica White, Jim McGauley, Advait Ubhayakar, and Alyson Howe.

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