

THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF LITERARY AND CULTURAL THEORY

LITERARY THEORY FROM 1900 TO 1966

VOLUME I



General Editor
Michael Ryan

Volume Editor
Gregory Castle

The Encyclopedia of Literary and Cultural Theory

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Edited by Gregory Castle



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John Wiley & Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, United Kingdom

Editorial Offices

350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA

9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK

The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

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To Camille,
who continues to teach me the theory of love.

And to Kristen,
who has opened new doors to its application.

Introduction to the Encyclopedia of Literary and Cultural Theory

MICHAEL RYAN

“It is the theory that decides what can be observed.”

Albert Einstein

The word “theory” derives from the Greek word for vision. A theory proposes ways of seeing or envisioning the world that adds to our knowledge of it. In the physical sciences, a theory is a proposed explanation of the world that has to be confirmed through research and investigation. Theories about literature and culture are not that different. They explain the cultural world and they guide research in certain directions. Without a theory regarding the law of gravity that accounts for how it works, you would not know why you are able to leap only so far into the air. You observe the effects of gravity, such as the bending of light from distant stars, but gravity itself is nowhere visible for you to see; in order to account for its action in the world, you have to theorize about it. The study of literature and culture has a similar need for theories to explain cultural objects and events. Literature is about life, and in human life, forces similar to gravity are at work, making some bodies fall and others rise, making some beams of human light straight and true while bending and warping others. Those events would be inexplicable without a theory to account for them.

In this encyclopedia, you will encounter a rich variety of theoretical terms and ideas. Some will appear to you to be unimpeachably true, while others will only seem debatably so. That is in part because the study of human culture is in flux, moving slowly away from idealist philosophy and religion and toward science and history, and in part because cultural reality is complex in much the same way that physical reality is, bearing within it both the chemistry of emotion and the physics of social power, the biology of evolutionary imperatives and the architecture of human institutions. More than one method or theory is required to account for that complexity. Literary and cultural theory therefore draws on a range of disciplines, from history and economics to political science and sociology. Increasingly, as well, it draws on the physical sciences.

The encyclopedia spans the period from the late nineteenth century to the present. Some fields touched on here, such as cognitive studies and evolutionary studies, are so new that with time they will appear to be underrepresented. The concepts and ideas these fields rely on have not yet attained wide currency. Other schools of thought, such as neo-idealism, humanism, and aestheticism, have ceased to have the same resonance in contemporary discussions that they enjoyed in the past, yet we feel

they remain relevant nevertheless. In constructing the encyclopedia, we decided to make two divisions, one between literary theory and cultural theory and one between two eras of literary theory. Size requirements demanded that we locate some moment in the history of literary theory that would justify the separation between two volumes. We chose 1966–7, even though it places more historical time in one volume than in the other, because new kinds of thinking began to emerge in a rush during that year that would lead to a discarding of many old ideas and the fabrication of many new ones. Of particular note was the peaking of structuralism and the start of post-structuralism, but one might also point to the beginnings of feminism, ethnic studies, and global or postcolonial studies, as well as the emergence of a new Marxism and the general broadening of literary studies away from the previously popular text-centered approach of the new critics. We felt a separate volume on cultural theory was justified by the emergence of cultural studies over the past half-century. An entirely new field (adjacent yet connected to the study of literature), cultural studies comprises many of the themes, issues, and concerns that can be found in literary studies, from gender and politics to history and economics. Yet it also represents a remarkable broadening of concerns to include visual studies, popular music, advertising and magazines, subcultures, and the media.

From its inception in classical Greece, the study of literature has been concerned with meaning, form, and effect. Descriptions of meaning have ranged from “social reality” to “universal ideas that transcend specific historical social realities.” Oddly, even as literary study becomes more scientific and scholars turn increasingly to such schools of thought as evolutionary studies, the same range appears. Some think literature, even in an evolutionary sense, is about a basic

human nature that is universal and the same in everyone, while others note that epigenetic local adaptation across a variety of historically and socially specific niches means that human cultural forms and expressions are highly variable. Literature is also always a technical or formal exercise, an execution of formats and procedures such as perspective, narrative, and metaphor that constitute a kind of toolkit of familiar devices for constructing a literary work, much as one might use a normal box of tools to build a house. If the satiric mode hammers home a point, metaphor provides a ladder to higher-order meanings not normally attainable with ordinary literal images. Finally, literature is always directed to someone, an audience that takes it in and understands it in certain ways. Literature and culture are always interactive, an engagement across the reading or viewing experience that has to do with how we perceive and think as well as how we feel or how we experience reality around us. Those three concerns of literary study have remained constant, and they continue to demarcate the major fields of endeavor in literary and cultural theory.

But as the study of literature and of culture has advanced and expanded over the past two centuries; it has also become a much deeper and wider discipline. It has moved from intrinsic considerations such as the meaning of symbols or the function of formal techniques to the ideological ramifications in particular historical settings of literary and cultural works. Theory has also moved from fairly simple to much more complex concerns, from such issues as what rhetorical figures best represent supposedly transcendental ideas to the consequences of the systematic character of language for how we conceptualize culture. Much controversy has attended these changes. And you will find a record of it in the pages that follow.

We begin in the nineteenth century, although literary and cultural study reaches back to the Greeks and especially to Aristotle, who first studied literary form and the effects of literary works. The “aesthetic” tradition in philosophy initiated the consideration of literature as a vehicle of meaning, even an embodiment of universal ideas that somehow transcended material reality. Such “idealism” was common before the twentieth century, although it would soon be discredited by science and by more critical kinds of philosophy. The nineteenth century continues the tradition of considering literature in terms of form, meaning, and effect. Literature was largely seen as consisting of symbols that provide access to ideas that are of a universal character and exist outside ordinary reality. But it was also seen by aesthetes such as Walter Pater as having a positive effect on audiences by heightening their experience of life and bringing passion to mundane existences.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, a group of young scholars known as formalists, who were interested in language, challenged the idea that literature was largely symbolic. According to the symbolists, literature directly represented the world, and in its symbols it allowed an ideal, nonphysical realm of spiritual essences to express itself in physical form. Thinking about human culture was at the time still hostage to idealist assumptions about the world, which held to a distinction between spirit and matter. Formalists challenged the assumptions of symbolism and shifted the study of literature and culture toward the actual techniques and procedures that distinguish literary from other kinds of writing. The formalists studied what made literature radically innovative – the fact that it often disturbs our assumptions about the world – and what made it something worthy of scientific analysis.

In their turn, formalists were opposed by Marxists and sociologists of literature who felt attention to the formal elements of a literary work overlooked its place in a social and historical context. Literature, however it may be put together or constructed, is about life, and life is about the vexed struggle over how social resources will be divided between economic classes. The formalists were also opposed by neo-humanists, who felt literature was about enduring concerns in human life and should be studied as a whole (both meaning and form). Neo-idealists added another voice in favor of considering literature as the embodiment of universal spiritual meaning.

After World War II, American culture especially became more conservative. In the US, an attempt was made to merge the neo-idealist and the formalist strains into one. The dominant current in the study of literature became religious and idealist while also being exactly formalist. The so-called “new critics” considered literature to be iconic in a religious sense, and the “verbal icons” in which spiritual ideas were delivered to humanity by seer poets had to be given the attention divine ideas deserved; their complexity had to be elucidated carefully so that the higher truths would not be lost through misinterpretation by the unenlightened. A poem embodied spirit in paradoxical figures and images, and the business of literary study was to elucidate the unity of universal meaning and concrete formal elements. The new criticism was elitist, politically conservative, and phallocratic. It avoided scruffy concerns such as the subordinate place of women in American culture or ignored the fact that an emblematic new critical seer-writer such as William Faulkner was a racist. That absence of social connection and concern proved costly, as the new criticism faded with the advance of changes regarding race

and gender in American culture and society after the 1960s.

Literary and cultural scholars in England took a more historically informed and politically sensitive approach to the relationship of literature to society after World War II. Writers such as Raymond Williams, cultural historians such as E. P. Thompson, neo-humanists such as F. R. Leavis, and cultural analysts such as Richard Hoggart studied literature in its real-world settings and attended both to its social effects and to its ethical and moral meanings. They contended that literature was about life, not universal spiritual truths that avoided the specifics of life. They added nuance to pre-war Marxism by attending more to the operations of culture considered as a realm independent of simple economic determination. And they created the modern field of cultural studies, whose importance is signified by the fact that it merits a separate volume of its own in this encyclopedia.

The 1960s are important for literary and cultural theory in both the US and Great Britain because the social and cultural changes that were initiated then reverberated through the Anglo-American academy, transforming everything from what works of literature were considered important and worth teaching to how literature and culture would be understood, discussed, and taught. American political leaders had behaved with reckless arrogance in the world during the period after World War II. They used military force to suppress pro-socialist democratic movements that were inimical to the financial interests of the wealthy businessmen who largely ran the country. That self-serving policy blew up in their faces in the 1960s when a tenacious Vietnamese population proved intractable in its resistance to the US's efforts to impose its will on them. That war spawned a student movement that was fueled by the aspirations for social justice around the world that arose

often in colonial or neocolonial contexts in places such as South America and Africa. Opposition to imperialism was easy to link to opposition to the capitalist economic system that often benefited most obviously from colonialism. At the same time, the aspirations for equality and fair treatment on the part of African Americans, women, and sexual minorities ignited movements that sought substantial change in business-as-usual in the advanced industrialized countries such as the US and the UK. Literature classes were places where students were offered the chance to reflect on their society, their values, and their cultural history. And literature became a focal point for the struggle between the old way of doing things and the new. In the US especially, the literary culture wars were part of a larger struggle between liberals and conservatives, between those who sought to bring about equality, justice, and fairness and those who clung to excuses for inequality and unfairness such as the ideology of "freedom" or elitist assumptions about "great" literature. At stake often were simple issues such as which books should be taught and how the study of literature should be conducted. Works by African Americans and women, for example, would as a result of these debates be taught more in literature courses than before. The so-called "canon," or list of "books worth teaching" changed, and one now finds Frederick Douglass and Kate Chopin taught beside Herman Melville and Ralph Waldo Emerson, something a new critic interested in "great" (implicitly white and male) works would never have countenanced.

The way literature and culture were studied also changed during this time. The 1960s were a mini-Renaissance in Paris especially. A number of influential thinkers, especially Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, wrote books that would transform how we think about literature and culture. Both were

influenced by Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist whose *Course in General Linguistics* (originally given as lectures and collected and first published in 1916) changed a generation of French thinkers from phenomenologists, philosophers who considered human subjective awareness or consciousness to be the central concern of their work, to structuralists and then poststructuralists. The structuralists were concerned with the language systems that govern and facilitate knowledge, while poststructuralists were concerned with complexity, the way relations between terms are as important as the terms themselves both in knowledge and in reality. Derrida and Foucault exercised enormous influence in the American academy especially. A school of criticism called “deconstruction” arose in response to Derrida’s work, and Foucault was instrumental in inspiring a new field of historical research that focused less on events and people and more on discourses.

Both formalism and structuralism helped literary scholars to deepen their understanding of literary form, especially narrative. Using structuralist ideas, it became possible to describe the discrete elements of narrative more accurately. Other scholars linked the study of narrative to such issues as ethics. A new field devoted to “narratology” came into being.

Another consequence of the break with the past that occurred in the 1960s was the emergence of feminism and studies defined by the concerns of sexual minorities such as gays, lesbians, and transvestites. These new strands of thinking brought into focus hitherto ignored issues and concerns and expanded the canon to include works that had never been taught before.

We have also attempted to take note of the new directions that literary and cultural study are taking. Especially important in this regard are the new scientific approaches to literature, such as cognitive studies and

evolutionary studies. The former makes the traditional focus on effects more scientific, while the latter gives new meaning to meaning by moving away from ideas or social contexts and toward physical nature itself as a source of meaning for literature. The approach is not always reductionist, however, since it notices how culture and genetic evolution interact in the development of modern human civilization. The idea of “epigenesis” is especially fruitful because it explains how human culture can trigger genetic responses. Much good work promises to emerge along these lines of inquiry. Rather than dismiss social construction as a factor in shaping human nature, evolutionary scholars can now note how external or socially constructive features of the environment, such as the development of trade or of human institutions, can generate internal genetic modifications over time. In one argument, the Greek Enlightenment of the sixth century BCE was one such event that combined the influence of trade and migration with the clear emergence of a genetic adaptation in favor of greater cognitive abilities than had previously existed.

We have included an entire volume on cultural theory because cultural studies is a new field that partly emerged out of literary study. Many literary scholars have expanded their repertoire of interests and expertise to include such things as the media and film. The word “culture” has always had multiple meanings. In one sense of the word, culture is inseparable from human life. Everything, from how we dress to what we eat, from how we speak to what we think, is culture. Culture in this sense comprises the unstated rules by which we live, rules that regulate our everyday practices and activities without our thinking about them or noticing them. Culture as a way of life tends to produce a commonality of thought and behavior, as well as conformity with reigning standards, norms, and rules. It is what

allows us to live together in communities by giving us shared signs and signals whose meaning we know and recognize. We recognize fellow members of our culture by dress, speech, behavior, and look. In this sense of the word, "culture" means embedded norms all obey usually without thinking about it. Within this larger sense of culture, there can be regions and zones, institutional settings with subcultures of their own. High schools can have quite specific cultures, ranging from the San Fernando Valley to East High in Newark, New Jersey, from a "valley girl" cultural style to a "ghetto" style. Investment banks can have a culture of "cowboy capitalism," in which men compete to make the most risky bets that make the most income.

A more familiar meaning of the word "culture" is the things we humans make when we translate ideas into objects. In the first sense of the word, culture comprised behaviors and institutions, such things as the norms by which we live, the practices in which we engage (everything from dress to bathing), and the institutions we inhabit and use, such as courts, marketplaces, and workplaces; the second meaning of culture comprises cultural artifacts, such things as the shape we give the built environment (the architecture of buildings, for example), the forms of entertainment we create (such as Hollywood or Bollywood movies), and the music we listen to (be it techno or rap). That list is far from exhaustive of human creativity or of the multiple ways humans create and develop institutions, activities, and things that are fabricated, artificial, and artistic and that count as culture in this second sense of the word.

One might say that culture in the second sense of artistic objects is only possible if culture in the first sense as a way of life gives permission. One cannot make good television shows if there is no television distribution system, for example, and that

presupposes a high level of prosperity of the kind found in such places as London and Hong Kong but not in the African or South Asian countryside. Similarly, to write novels, one usually has to be well educated, to know language well at least, and to be trained in how to write. Culture understood as a norm-guided behavior or as an institution is the house in which culture understood as an artifact occurs. What this means is that most cultural products or artifacts embody and express the norms of the culture in which they are made.

The culture in which one lives determines the culture that is created within it, but influence works in the other direction as well. One could even go so far as to say that the second meaning of culture as human creativity is our way of modifying the first meaning of culture as civilized normativity. Creative culture is often accused of being uncivil because it breaks existing norms and points the way toward the creation of new ones. When the bohemian movement started in Western Europe in the late nineteenth century, it was an attempt on the part of creative people to upset the reigning norms of the culture, which were perceived as being too restrictive, too allied with conservatism, commerce, and a narrow scientific view of knowledge. Women had been instructed throughout the nineteenth century to be prim and proper and to dress accordingly – tight corsets, body-covering dresses, and the like. The bohemians in the 1880s upset all that. They wore loose clothing that revealed their bodies. Women artists danced in free style instead of in the prescribed rote forms associated with "high" culture. Emotional expressiveness replaced formal rigor and reverie replaced objective scientific clarity. Drugs, of course, were part of the new bohemian scene, as was potent alcohol that altered the normal state of things. Commercial "bourgeois" culture's hold on human possibilities was

shaken, and a new culture eventually was born. We still live with its legacy today when we dress informally or reveal our bodies without shame or embarrassment or dance in non-prescribed ways to music that no one in the nineteenth century would recognize as “legitimate” music. The bohemians were first perceived to be rule-breakers by the keepers of normative culture, but, with time, the changes they introduced into cultural life altered for the better the cultural house they and we live in.

To use a contemporary analogy, culture is the software of our lives. It is the program we live by, the rules that determine how we think and act. But it is also the malleable, rewritable script that we ourselves rework and recreate as we live and produce creative works and say and do creative things in our lives.

Cultural studies came into being in England in the 1950s and 1960s. Initially, it was concerned with working-class youth cultures, but, with time, it has expanded to become a wide diverse field that includes the study of visual culture, subcultures, the media, dress and fashion, space and geography, audiences and celebrities, body culture, the culture of material things, and music.

Literature – understood as the traditional genres of poetry, theater, and fiction – endures and is central to culture understood in this new larger sense. It is appropriate, therefore, that both literary and cultural theory should be explained in the same

place. Many ideas from contemporary cultural analysis such as “hybridity” had their first use in literary studies. It is helpful to consider both literary and cultural forms of expression as different modes of representation. While each has its specific contours, each also shares certain practices and forms such as narrative that allow for a common analysis and theorizing.

The Encyclopedia of Literary and Cultural Theory is a comprehensive resource for the reader who wants to explore the rich tradition of theoretical approaches to culture and its artifacts. Though literary theory dominates the approaches explored in volumes I and II, the broader issues of culture mentioned above will be found throughout, for the techniques and strategies described in the entries on theoretical approaches to literary can be used in analysis of other cultural artifacts. Conversely, the approaches in volume III, while focused largely on things like popular media, music, fashion, and new modes of representation, can be usefully applied to literary texts. In view of twenty-first-century trends toward digital media, in which literature and other art forms (both visual and audial) commingle in innovative forms of cultural expression, it is increasingly difficult to distinguish literature in the conventional sense from these new modes of expression. The *Encyclopedia* celebrates and documents this difficulty, while remaining attentive to the traditions that gave rise to innovations across the cultural spectrum.

Notes on Contributors to Volume I

Grey Anderson is a graduate student in the Department of History at Yale.

Paul B. Armstrong is a professor of English at Brown University. His most recent book is *Play and the Politics of Reading: The Social Uses of Modernist Form* (2005). He has also written books about Henry James, literary impressionism, and the theory of interpretation, and he has edited Norton Critical Editions of E. M. Forster's *Howards End* and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

Patrick Bixby is an assistant professor of British literature at Arizona State University and author of *Samuel Beckett and the Postcolonial Novel* (2009). He has served as assistant to the editors of *The Letters of Samuel Beckett* (2009), and is currently writing a book on Nietzsche and Irish modernism.

Joseph Bristow is a professor of English at the University of California, Los Angeles. His books include *Oscar Wilde: Contextual Conditions* (2003), *Oscar Wilde and Modern Culture: The Making of a Legend* (2009), and *Sexuality* (New Critical Idiom) (2nd edn. 2010). He is the editor of the variorum edition of Oscar Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray* (2005).

Shelly Brivic is a professor of English at Temple University. He has written widely on Joyce and psychoanalysis, including *Joyce between Freud and Jung* (1980) and *The Veil of Signs: Joyce, Lacan, and Perception* (1991). He has also written *Tears of Rage: The Racial Interface of Modern American Fiction* (2008). He is currently writing on Joyce, Lacan, and Žižek.

Joseph Carroll is Curators' Professor of English at the University of Missouri-St Louis. He is the author of *The Cultural Theory of Matthew Arnold* (1982), *Wallace Stevens' Supreme Fiction: A New Romanticism* (1987), *Evolution and Literary Theory* (1995), and *Literary Darwinism: Evolution, Human Nature, and Literature* (2004). He has produced an edition of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. He is a coeditor (with Brian Boyd and Jonathan Gottschall) of *Evolution, Literature, and Film: A Reader* (2010), and he coedits an annual journal, *The Evolutionary Review: Art, Science, Culture*. A collection of his recent essays, *Reading Human Nature: Literary Darwinism in Theory and Practice*, is in press.

Gregory Castle is a professor of British and Irish literature at Arizona State University. He has published *Modernism and the Celtic Revival* (2001), *Reading the Modernist Bildungsroman* (2006), and the *Blackwell Guide to Literary Theory* (2007). He also edited *Postcolonial Discourses* (2000). He has published numerous essays on Joyce, Yeats, Wilde, and other Irish writers, and is currently working on *Inventing Souls: The Pedagogies of Irish Revivalism*, a study of misrecognition and aesthetic education in Irish revivalism.

James Walter Caufield is an extension lecturer at the University of California, Los Angeles, from where he received his PhD in 2008. His published work includes essays on Matthew Arnold, Thomas Hardy, Joseph Conrad, and James Joyce.

David Cerniglia is a PhD student in literary and cultural studies at Carnegie Mellon University. He works on nineteenth-century British literature and culture, the history of the book, and the relationship between political economy and the novel.

Ranita Chatterjee is an associate professor and graduate director of English at California State University, Northridge. She has published on the exchange between Luce Irigaray and Sarah Kofman, as well as many articles on 1790s British Jacobin writers.

Alexander Chirila graduated from New York University with a BA and from the State University at Albany with a PhD in writing and criticism. His work focuses on symbolic and mythic literary analysis and archetypal criticism.

John Claborn is a PhD candidate at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, with a focus on modern American literature, critical theory, and film studies. He is currently working on a dissertation on early twentieth-century African American environmental writing.

Gerard Cohen-Vrignaud is a doctoral candidate in comparative literature at the University of Chicago and a lecturer in the French language and in English and French literature in the undergraduate college, specializing in Romantic literature, historicism, and exoticism in French, English, and Arabic.

Paul Dahlgren is a PhD candidate at the University of California, Irvine who works in the history and theory of rhetoric as well as American literature to 1900. He has published in the *Journal of Cultural and Religious Theory*. His dissertation explores the interrelationship between rhetoric, literature, and theology during the nineteenth century.

Stephanie DeGooyer is a PhD candidate in the English Department at Cornell University. Her dissertation examines the fictional structure of human rights claims in the eighteenth-century fiction of Samuel Richardson, Mary Shelley, and Laurence Sterne.

Matthew Dubord is a doctoral student in English literature at the University of California, Los Angeles. His dissertation analyzes the relationships between professionalism, intimacy, social systems, and narrative form in the sequence novels of Anthony Trollope, Margaret Oliphant, and Philip Meadows Taylor. He has an article under review for publication on the systematic production of individual choice in Henry James's *The Tragic Muse*.

Dotty Dye is a doctoral student specializing in twentieth- and twenty-first-century comparative literatures in the English Department at Arizona State University. Her focus is comparative literatures in the twentieth century. In 2006 she earned an MA in French literature for her work on André Gide's *L'Immoraliste* and Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *L'Aventure ambiguë*. Her research interests include identity studies, travel narrative, and postcolonial literature.

Lahcen E. Ezzaher is a professor of English at the University of Colorado, where he teaches courses on the history of rhetoric, stylistics, the essay, world literature, colonial discourse, and postcolonial criticism. His has published an Arabic-English translation in *Rhetorica* on Alfarabi's commentary on Aristotle's *Rhetoric*.

Peter Fenves is Joan and Serepta Harrison Professor of Literature, Northwestern University. He is the author of *A Peculiar Fate: Kant and the Problem of World-History* (1991), *"Chatter": Language and History in Kierkegaard* (1993), *Arresting Language: From Leibniz to Benjamin* (2001), *Late*

Kant: Toward Another Law of the Earth (2003), and *The Messianic Reduction: Walter Benjamin and the Shape of Time* (forthcoming).

Brigitte Flickinger is a lecturer in Russian cultural history and philosophy at Heidelberg University (Germany). Her current research is on cinema-going and urban experience in London, Berlin, and St Petersburg 1900–1930. Her publications include a book on Valéry Bryusov, essays on Russian cultural history, Soviet literature and film, as well as translations of books on philosophy, psychology, and history.

Anthony Fothergill is a senior lecturer at the University of Exeter, where he teaches English literature and cultural theory. He has also taught at the University of Heidelberg and at Kenyon College, Ohio. He has written widely on modernism and modernity. His most recent book is *Secret Sharers: Joseph Conrad's Cultural Reception in Germany* (2006). He has published a book-length study on Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1989; 2000) and has edited works by Conrad and Oscar Wilde.

Dustin Friedman is a doctoral candidate in the English Department at the University of California, Los Angeles. His dissertation examines the relations among aesthetic philosophy, negativity, and homoeroticism in late nineteenth-century British literature. He has presented studies of Mary Wollstonecraft, Walter Pater, and Oscar Wilde at various conferences, and his writings have appeared in *Studies in Romanticism* and *Textual Practice*.

Paul H. Fry is William Lampson Professor of English at Yale University. His primary areas of specialization are British Romanticism, the history of literary criticism, contemporary literary theory, and literature in relation to the visual arts. *The Poet's Calling in the English Ode* (1980)

received the Melville Cane Award of the Poetry Society in America. He has also published *The Reach of Criticism: Method and Perception in Literary Theory* (1984), *William Empson: Prophet Against Sacrifice* (1990), *A Defense of Poetry: Essays on the Occasion of Writing* (1996), *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (ed.; 1999), and *Wordsworth and the Poetry of What We Are* (2008).

Peter Gilgen is an associate professor of German studies and a member of the Graduate Field of Comparative Literature at Cornell University.

Geoffrey Green is a professor of English at San Francisco State University. He is the author of *Literary Criticism and the Structures of History: Erich Auerbach and Leo Spitzer* (1982), *Freud and Nabokov* (1988), and *Voices in a Mask* (2008). He is the editor of *Novel vs. Fiction: The Contemporary Reformation* (1981) and *The Vineland Papers: Critical Takes on Pynchon's Novel* (1994). He is the executive editor of the journal on contemporary fiction, *Critique*.

Chouki El Hamel teaches African history at Arizona State University. His research focuses on Islamic culture and the evolution of Islamic institutions in Africa. He has published widely on issues of slavery and intellectual life in Islamic Africa. He is the author of *The Internal African Diaspora: "Race/Color" and Gender in Moroccan Slavery* (forthcoming).

David Hawkes is a professor of English at Arizona State University. He is the author of *Idols of the Marketplace* (2001), *Ideology* (2nd edn. 2003), *The Faust Myth* (2007), and *John Milton: A Hero Of Our Time* (2009) and has edited John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (2004) and John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (2005). *The Culture of Usury in Early Modern England* is forthcoming. His work has appeared in such journals as the *The Nation*, the *Times Literary Supplement*, the *Journal of the History of Ideas*,

Studies in English Literature, English Literary History, the Huntington Library Quarterly, Milton Studies, Shakespeare Quarterly, Clio, and In These Times.

Joanne A. Hsu is a doctoral candidate at the University of Michigan. From 2007 to 2008, she was an exchange lecturer at the Johannes Gutenberg University of Mainz in Germany. Her research deals with architecture in a transnational context as well as with theories of textuality. She received a BA from Brown University.

David Jenemann is an associate professor of English and film and television studies at the University of Vermont. He is the author of *Adorno in America* (2007) as well as a number of essays on critical theory and mass culture. He is currently writing a book on the cultural history of ambivalence.

Jason B. Jones is an associate professor of English at Central Connecticut State University. His main interests are Victorian literature, psychoanalysis, and humanities computing. He is the author of *Lost Causes: Historical Consciousness in Victorian Literature* (2006).

Tim Kaposy is an assistant professor in the Cultural Studies Program at George Mason University. He is a coeditor (with Imre Szeman) of *Cultural Theory: An Anthology* (2010).

Joshua Kates, associate professor at Indiana University, is the author of two books that situate the work of Jacques Derrida in relation to phenomenology and contiguous fields: *Essential History: Jacques Derrida and the Development of Deconstruction* (2005) and *Fielding Derrida: Philosophy, Literary Criticism, History, and the Work of Deconstruction* (2008).

R. Brandon Kershner is Alumni Professor of English at the University of Florida. He is the author of *Dylan Thomas: The Poet and His Critics* (1977), *Joyce, Bakhtin, and*

Popular Literature (1989), and *The Twentieth-Century Novel: An Introduction* (1997). He is also the editor of the Bedford Books edition of Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (2006) and of *Joyce and Popular Culture* (1996). He has published some 40 articles and book chapters on various aspects of modern literature and culture, and a similar number of reviews and poems. *Joyce, Bakhtin, and Popular Literature* won the 1990 award from the American Conference for Irish Studies as the best work of literary criticism in the field. Kershner was recently re-elected to the Board of Trustees of the International Joyce Foundation. He has just completed a book-length study entitled *The Culture of "Ulysses."*

Koonyong Kim is a James B. Duke Fellow and PhD candidate at Duke University. He has published on critical theory and post-modern global culture. He is also the Korean translator of Fredric Jameson's work.

Donald A. Landes currently holds a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Postdoctoral Fellowship in the Philosophy Department at McGill University, Montreal, Canada. He received his PhD in philosophy from Stony Brook University in 2010. His research engages with numerous figures in continental philosophy, including Merleau-Ponty, Bergson, Husserl, and Nancy, and focuses on issues in phenomenology of perception, language, and ethics.

Michael Levenson is the William B. Christian Professor of English at the University of Virginia. His many books include *A Genealogy of Modernism: A Study of English Literary Doctrine, 1908–1922* (1984), *The Fate of Individuality: Character and Form in the Modern English Novel* (1991) and *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism* (ed.) (1998). He has written many articles on figures including James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, and Joseph Conrad. His *Modernism* is forthcoming from Yale University Press.

Sharon Luk is a doctoral candidate in American studies and ethnicity at the University of Southern California. She has also worked professionally in community and youth development and holds an MA in education from the University of California, Los Angeles.

Michael Lundell is a PhD student in English literature at the University of California, San Diego, with an MFA in creative writing from San Diego State University. He is interested in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American, English, and Arabic literature, *The Thousand and One Nights*, psychoanalytic literary theory, and film.

Daniel M. Markowicz is a PhD student in literary and cultural studies at Carnegie Mellon University. He works on Marxist theory, the relationship between realism, naturalism, and financialization in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America, and twentieth-century insurrectionary narratives.

Tom McCall is an associate professor of literature and humanities at the University of Houston, Clear Lake. Author of numerous essays (including on Greek tragedy, Hölderlin, deconstruction, Spinoza, Freud, and Walter Benjamin), he is currently at work on *Ekplexis Ancient and Modern: On "Being Struck,"* which resurrects an ancient counterconcept to mimesis.

John McGowan is Ruel W. Tyson, Jr. Distinguished Professor of Humanities at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. He is the author of five books, including *Postmodernism and its Critics* (1991) and *American Liberalism: An Interpretation for Our Time* (2007). He is also an editor of the *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (2001).

Mia L. McIver is a doctoral candidate at the University of California, Irvine. Her re-

search focuses on theories of sovereignty in twentieth-century British, Irish, and German narrative literature.

Brian Meredith is a PhD candidate at the University of Florida. His interests include Samuel Beckett and eighteenth-century literature. He has published in *Politics and Culture*. His career in literature was first encouraged by a new critic, Michael W. Raymond, in whose memory he would like to dedicate this entry.

Gerald Moore is a lecturer in French at Wadham College, Oxford, having previously taught at Université Paris-12 (Val de Marne). His book on poststructuralist politics, *Politics of the Gift* is forthcoming (2011). He has also published on Michel Houellebecq and has translated works by Henri Lefebvre, Michel Foucault, and Georges-Didi Huberman, among others.

Yasser Munif is a sociology PhD candidate at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. He is currently conducting research on Afro-French youth and poor Parisian suburbs.

Tara Needham is a doctoral candidate in the Department of English at the University at Albany, SUNY, where she researches and teaches in the areas of global modernisms, transnational cultural studies, and critical theory. Her essay "Faux factory: Barthes walks in a Starbucks" appears in Mary Valentis (ed.), *TechKnowledgies: New Imaginaries in the Humanities, Arts, & Technosciences* (2007).

Matthew H. Pangborn received his PhD in English from the University at Albany, SUNY. He has written on American literature, transatlanticism, and film, and his interests include creative writing, literary theory, and philosophy. Currently, he is at work on a book project tentatively entitled "Specular Subjects: The Philosophy of

Vision in the Transatlantic Novel, 1719–1850.”

Cóilín Parsons is a lecturer in the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of Cape Town, South Africa. He received his PhD in English and comparative literature from Columbia University.

Paul Perron is a professor emeritus at the University of Toronto, a Member of the Royal Society of Canada, and former President of the American Semiotic Society. He holds a PhD in French literature from the University of Bordeaux. Associate editor of *Semiotica*, he is the author and co-author of numerous articles and books in literature and semiotics and his latest monograph is a co-translation and critical edition (with Jean-Patrick Debeche) of Vladimir Propp's *On the Comic and Laughter* (2009).

Michael Peters is a PhD candidate at the University at Albany, SUNY. His dissertation is a study of “sound environment programming” in the post-1945 field of the literary arts. He has published on Charles Olson (Cambridge Scholars) and poetics (*Word for/Word*) as well as providing entries for Kostelanetz's *Dictionary of the Avant-Gardes* (2001) and a recent transcription of a 1971 Sun Ra lecture (*Hambone*). He has served as editor of the *Little Magazine* and *Xtant*. He is also the author of the sound-image poem, *Vaast Bin* (2007). His assorted language, art, and sound works have appeared in numerous journals (both print and online) and on recording labels like Atavistic and Luna Bisonte, in addition to galleries, installations, various anthologies, and special collection libraries like the Sackner Archive.

Petre Petrov is an assistant professor in the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, Princeton University. His research

focuses on Soviet modernism, Russian literary and cultural theory, socialist realism, and Stalinist culture.

Matthew Potolsky is an associate professor of English at the University of Utah, where he teaches literary theory and Victorian literature. He is the author of *Mimesis* (2006), as well as articles on the literature and culture of the late nineteenth century. He is a coeditor (with Liz Constable and Dennis Denisoff) of *Perennial Decay: On the Aesthetics and Politics of Decadence* (1999).

Jean-Michel Rabaté is a professor of English and comparative literature at the University of Pennsylvania. He has written extensively on Joyce, Lacan, modernism, and literary theory. His books include *The Ghosts of Modernity* (1996), *Joyce and the Politics of Egoism* (2001), and *Jacques Lacan and Literature* (2001). He edited numerous collections of essays, including *The Cambridge Companion to Jacques Lacan* (2002) and *Advances in James Joyce Studies* (2004). More recent work includes *1913: The Cradle of Modernism* (2007) and *Given 1° Art 2° Crime: Modernity, Murder and Mass Culture* (2007).

Royal W. Rhodes is Donald L. Rogan Professor of Religious Studies at Kenyon College. His publications in religion and literature include *The Lion and the Cross: Early Christianity in Victorian Novels* (1995).

David Richter did his doctoral work at the University of Chicago, where his dissertation was directed by Sheldon Sacks and Wayne C. Booth. He is the author of *Fable's End* (1975) and *The Progress of Romance* and the editor of *The Critical Tradition* and *Falling into Theory* (1996), along with dozens of academic articles. He is currently a professor of English at Queens College and the City University of New York Graduate Center, where he teaches eighteenth-