

## “The World is too much with us:” The Character of Literary Studies Today

Zekiye ANTAKYALIOĞLU

Gaziantep University, Türkiye

**Abstract:** Literary studies in the new millennium are described as “post-theoretical,” which implies a paradigm shift from the deconstructive linchpin of capital-t Theory, to a more socially, politically and environmentally engaged, future-oriented, and reparative drive in our discipline. There is a change of attention from the relativist epistemology of poststructuralism to realist ontology in the new fields of study such as posthumanism and new materialism. Post-theory holds two concurrent attitudes toward Theory: acknowledgement and critique. On the one hand, it is indebted to the legacy of Theory and forms discursive practices in relation to it; on the other hand, it is critical of Theory’s anti-essentialism or lack of ethos, and reassesses its foundational axioms with contemporary ontological anxieties and motives. Ours is a chaotic century with manifold problems such as terrorism, war, economic crisis, COVID-19 pandemic, climate changes, oil and water crises, Anthropocene, consumerism, migration, digitalisation, and the question of democracy, etc. This sense of emergency, and its representations in literature, eventually, calls for “character” (essential, mental and moral vision, ethos) and genuine critique (evaluation) from the academics in humanities. This paper aims to offer an outline of the network of practices in literary studies as well as their ethical and aesthetic allegiances with this demand for “character” in mind.

### Keywords:

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### “Dünya çok fazla bizle”: Günümüz Edebî Çalışmalarının Karakteri

**Öz:** Yeni milenyumda edebi çalışmalar, kilit ögesi yapısökümcülük olan ve büyük K ile yazılan Kuram’dan bir paradigma kaymasıyla ayrılarak merkezine toplumu, çevreyi ve siyaseti alan, yüzünü iyileştirici/onarıcı bir itki ile geleceğe çeviren “kuram-sonrası” döneme girdi. Günümüz edebi çalışmalarında, özellikle posthümanizm ve yeni materyalizm gibi öne çıkan akımlar, postyapısalcılığın göreceliğe dayalı epistemolojisinden daha gerçekçi bir ontolojiye yönelmekte. “Kuram-sonrası” veya “Post-teori” denilen bu dönem, ‘Kuram’a aynı anda iki farklı tavırla yaklaşıyor: minnet ve eleştiri. Bir yandan kuramdan kalan entelektüel mirasa ve pratiklere çok şey borçlu olduğunu kabullenirken, diğer yandan Kuram’ın özcülük karşıtlığını veya ethos eksikliğini eleştirerek temel aksiyonlarını çağdaş ontolojik kaygılar ve motiflerle yeniden değerlendiriyor. Çağımız, terörizm, savaş, ekonomik kriz, göç, Covid 19 pandemisi, iklim değişikliği, petrol ve su krizleri, Antroposen, tüketimcilik, dijitalleşme ve demokrasi sorunu gibi birçok sorunla boğuşmakta olan kaotik bir çağ. Çağın sorunlarının getirdiği aciliyet duygusu ve bu duygunun edebiyattaki temsilleri, nihayetinde, beşeri bilimlerdeki akademisyenlerden “karakter” (temel, zihinsel ve ahlaki vizyon,

### Anahtar Sözcükler:

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ethos) ve gerçek eleştiri (değerlendirme) gibi beklentileri öne çıkarıyor. Bu makale “karakter” talebini odağına alarak günümüz edebi çalışmalarının ve bu çalışmalarda öne çıkan etik, estetik yönelimlerin ana hatlarını ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır. Kabul Tarihi: 16 Ocak 2023

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## Introduction

Character, in the positive sense, expresses the presence of virtues such as honesty, reliability, fortitude, empathy, courage, and integrity. So the question of character is, always, also an ethical question. Today, English Studies is dedicated to the recovery of its “character” and “ethos” more than anything else and has become auto-critical in ways it has never been before. This paper seeks to assess the ethical, intellectual, and emotional re-orientations that distinguish English studies today from what it was during the heydays of Theory. It intends to draw a sketch of English studies and track the changes in the mindset and ethical impulses of the academics in the discipline in order to describe our post-theoretical moment.

Why “character” instead of “characteristics”? What is “character”? “Character” is generally defined as the complex mental and ethical traits marking and often individualising a person or a group. Character can be described as the totality of a person’s behavioural and emotional characteristics. When we attribute a person “a strong character,” we generally mean that this person’s set of behaviours, intellectual and emotional capabilities are admirable, or their personality is strong. With “a judge of character,” we refer to someone whose opinions about another’s character are usually right or usually wrong. One can be “a fair judge of character” as well as a “shrewd or impudent” kind. Between the 1920s and the 1960s, literary studies was merely based on historical/archival research and literary critique. Character (of the critic as well as the artist) used to be central to criticism which was primarily a matter of forming judgements about the relative aesthetic merits of literary works—judgements that would then be taken to have some bearing on the rest of life.

For Joseph North, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, literary criticism was understood as two things: “[T]here were academics who claimed to be scholarly and scientifically objective with a professional knowledge of literature,” this group had to master a specific body or canon of books before proceeding to another; “and there were aesthetes who were committed to aesthetic and impressionistic subjectivities and a taste for aesthetic value,” this group had to master the style and rhetorical strategies of the texts

(21). Aesthetes or belletrists defended appreciation over investigation and value over facts.

This was the background when T. S. Eliot (1888–1965) came up with his famous critique of William Wordsworth (1770–1850) in “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” Central to his argument was “personality” in or as poetic expression:

There is a great deal, in the writing of poetry, which must be conscious and deliberate. In fact, the bad poet is usually unconscious where he ought to be conscious and conscious where he ought to be unconscious. Both errors tend to make him “personal.” Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things. (43)

While judging another’s character, we cannot evade the risk of giving away something from our own. It is a risky business; so risky that it may cause a great poet to dismiss another, by practising exactly the opposite of what he preached. Apart from its daring overtone, what is noteworthy here is that Eliot, who proposed “impersonal voice” as constitutive of ideal poetry, and gave the best examples of it as a poet, did not favour it as a critic. Definitely, he did not conceive criticism as an escape from personality and emotions, or as a disengaged activity. For the last 60 years or so, although we have placed Eliot’s non-fictional writings among the finest examples of critical essays in literary history, we have grown to assume a more impersonal style of criticism which is closer in voice to what Eliot expected from poets. Under the impact of Theory, we even developed a tendency to perceive the critical essay form as unscholarly, subjective and naïve. But, with the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a hundred years after Virginia Woolf (1882–1941), we found ourselves once again in the same spot echoing her when we say: “in and about” the 2010s the character of literary studies changed, “the change was not sudden and definite, . . . but a change there was, nevertheless” (4). Today, we no longer perceive our profession as an escape from emotion and personality but a return to them, in order to be conscious where we ought to be really conscious and directly responsive to the changes in life and literature.

“The World is too much with us”—used in the title of this paper—is from Wordsworth’s 1807 sonnet. In this sonnet, Wordsworth, by doing exactly what Eliot objected, uses poetry as a means to call for critical capacity, comprehension, vision, emotion and strong character to express his personal dissatisfaction with the ways we relate to the world and life. An urge we share with Wordsworth today.

Until the 1970s, the critics such as Eliot were perceived as the arbiters of public taste, and they were assumed to set the standards in society. Matthew Arnold, F. R. Leavis, I. A. Richards, and Eliot all had a concept of an “organic, harmonious community with high values” in mind. University’s highest task was to produce knowledge, and art was responsible to maintain an educated public. For North, toward the midst of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the 1970s, literary practices of the belletrists were rejected as necessarily

elitist, as well as the idea of the aesthetic was rejected as idealist, humanist and universalising after the emergence of the social theory, namely the linguistic turn (67). “Theory,” as a heterogeneous assemblage of French-inspired theoretical writings, became the dominant way of reading literary texts in order to understand and theorise the social. From the 1980s to the 2010s, the terms “criticism” and “theory” were absorbed into a single project of historicist/contextualist analysis. Eventually, “Theory became the Newspeak of literary criticism” (Hartman 240) with two major modes of discourse: Postmodernism as its cultural and aesthetic program and poststructuralism as its philosophical, textual and theoretical method.

In the 1980s, Terry Eagleton, as a student of Raymond Williams, recommended the restructuring of departments of literature around the central goal of “education in the various theories and methods of cultural analysis” (North 82). Gradually French Theory became the hegemonic paradigm that set the rules of interpretation and analysis with a reference to a “hermeneutics of suspicion” that was based on the methods of Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and Friedrich Nietzsche.

Postmodern hermeneutics of suspicion referred to a specific form of disengaged contemplation, a symptomatic style of reading that aimed to find out whatever was repressed in the unconscious of texts. Postmodernist, poststructuralist, new historicist, post-Marxist, post-colonialist, and post-feminist schools of thought have been fundamental sources of literary and cultural production, shaped our ways of thinking, and created the deconstructive tradition by radically changing the ways we perceived the concepts such as text, language, sign, gender, race, ethnicity, identity, and society. As Jeffrey T. Nealon remarks, our perspectives were mostly framed by “an insight into the narrow workings of linguistic and textual analysis and not by an insight that helped us to understand the larger fabric of the social, scientific and cultural world” (*Fates of the Performative* xiii). Most of the active academics today were born into this all-encompassing paradigm of Theory and became professionals abiding by the deconstructive, anti-essentialist *modus operandi* of poststructuralism. But in the new millennium, as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri observe, “the deconstructive phase of critical thought, which from Heidegger and Adorno to Derrida provided a powerful exit from modernity, has lost its effectiveness” (217).

Parallely, for Nealon, with the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, “the obsession with showing how binary oppositions in a text cancelled themselves out, is OVER!” (*Post-Postmodernism* 118), and he amusingly warns the younger academics as follows: “The interpretive questions (that painstaking tracing of the chiasmic reversals of presence and absence of meaning in a text) are, at this point, research dead ends in literary study. If you don’t believe it, try deconstructing the hell out of an Emily Dickenson poem and send the results to *PMLA* – and see what happens!” (*Post-Postmodernism* 143). The first decade of the new century has been a period of indeterminacy, the mantras of theory have worn thin over time and theory as the critical parameter of postmodernism found itself in crisis because

of the backlash against everything postmodern. This backlash was prompted by the changes and problems on a global scale and resulted in a resurgence of scholarly interest in theories that are more embedded in the social realities and conditions of life. The new century with its zillion problems—such as terrorism, war, economic crisis, COVID-19 pandemic, climate changes, environmental crises, Anthropocene, consumerism, migration, the question of democracy, and the revival of autocratic, fascist regimes around the world required a serious turn to a more ethically-driven, sociologically informed, politically alert and realistic engagement with the conditions of life. Nealon sees this as a shift from the hermeneutics of suspicion to a “hermeneutics of situation which aims at offering tools for thinking differently about the present, rather than primarily either exposing or undermining the supposed ‘truth’ of this or that cultural position” (*Post-Postmodernism* 88).

A very long period of engagement with theory created in the academy an ontological anxiety which can be diagnosed by the following symptoms and sentiments:

- ❖ The abundance of theory and capitalist forces of publication created out of academics types of touristic readers who jump from one text to another purposelessly;
- ❖ Perceiving historical knowledge as a function of narrative caused a gradual weakening of historical consciousness;
- ❖ Postmodernist “waning of affect” (Jameson 31) narcotised the academy;
- ❖ Ferociously emptied forms of criticism served to promote popular culture, de-aestheticised literature and transformed it into a media commodity (Hartman 240);
- ❖ Theory caused us to spend more time in the B, H and J sections of the library than our own, the good old P section (Nealon, *Post-Postmodernism* 127);
- ❖ What Eliot coined as “dissociation of sensibility” (“Metaphysical Poets” 62 ), i.e. separation of thinking from feeling, became widespread;
- ❖ Theory without criticism created a pedagogical gap in the classes;
- ❖ Due to “interpretosis” (Deleuze and Guattari 118) or the neurosis of interpretation, we failed to form an ethical and healthy relationship with our reality.

As a result, a demand for “personality and emotions” or “more genuine criticism” and “less disinterested interpretation” turned the scholars to new directions with a feeling that theory has been too much with us!

Today we all agree that the moment of postmodernism has passed. Perhaps, along with it many subdisciplines such as poststructuralism, post-feminism, post-Marxism, and post-colonial studies started to give way to other quests while post-theory,

posthumanism, or post-truth come to the forefront. This common sense directs us toward more inventive, innovative ways of dealing with the “how” (performativity) instead of the “what” (symptomatic reading) regarding the meaning-making processes in the new conditions of life. But, quite ironically, in finding a new term to address what follows postmodernism, we are not that innovative because “Post” is still too much with us!

The facile term “post-postmodernism” demonstrates that the moment of postmodernism might have passed but our infatuation with the prefix “post” has not. Nealon is right in seeing the double prefix “post-post,” as “ugly and infelicitous, difficult both to read and say, as well as nonsensically redundant” (*Post-Postmodernism* ix). Moreover, just as postmodernism was associated with Theory, with capital T, so post-postmodernism today is treated as one of the synonyms for post-theory.

### **Theory and Post-Theory**

Only a quick look at some of the titles of the acclaimed publications since the 2000s may help us to trace the anxieties and re-orientations in literary studies: *Post-Theory: New Directions in Criticism* (Eds. Graeme Macdonald et al., 1999), *Mapping the Ethical Turn: A Reader in Ethics, Culture and Literary Theory* (Eds. Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack, 2001), *After Theory* (Terry Eagleton, 2004), *Post-Theory, Culture, Criticism* (Eds. Ivan Callus and Stefan Herbrechter, 2004), *The Future of Theory* (Jean-Michel Rabaté, 2008), *Theory After ‘Theory’* (Eds. Derek Attridge and Jane Elliott, 2011), *Post-Postmodernism: or, The Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism* (Jeffrey T. Nealon, 2012), *The Limits of Critique* (Rita Felski, 2015), *The Value of the Novel* (Peter Boxall, 2015), *Literature Against Criticism* (Martin Paul Eve, 2016).

These publications, their focal points or titles may vary but in all of them, the terms “value, ethics and politics” come to the forefront or occupy larger entries in their indexes. Some of these titles imply either a concern about Theory’s end or its transformation into something else while some others indicate a revived interest in concepts such as value, function, critique, appreciation or a return to the long-neglected school of aesthetics.

For example, Peter Boxall, in *The Value of the Novel* (2015), presents the journey of literary value in the history of our discipline and suggests a re-evaluation of the novel, not as something we read, but as something that reads us, that shows us our weaknesses and strengths. In other words, he re-considers the novel as an intellectually, morally and psychologically valuable source that helps us to gain awareness of ourselves and form an understanding of character in a world that is out of joint. He maintains, “Under the contemporary conditions, in which we are all summoned into new forms of community . . . it is the novel we need, more than ever, to help us to understand such communities and to live with them . . . and to frame the utopian potential of the world to come” (144).

Apparently, a disinterested or apathetic mode of Theory, (i.e. theory without personality and emotions) is no longer viable for the analysis of the pressing historical considerations. In their introduction to *Theory after ‘Theory’*, Jane Elliott and Derek

Attridge, remark that “whether the news is met with celebration or lamentation, there seems to be little disagreement that the era of theory’s dominance has passed – whatever ‘theory’ might mean or have meant” (1). According to them, the questions either about Theory’s demise, or loss of hegemony “created conversations akin to an ongoing wake, in which participants debate the merits of the deceased and consider the possibilities for a resurrection desired by some and feared by others” (1). For them, “theory continued to diversify, drawing on the work of a range of new figures and examining a host of new archives and arenas, but its new incarnations offered at most a kind of afterlife of the once vital object that was ‘Theory’, a diluted form lacking in both intellectual substance and institutional prominence” (1). In short, Elliot and Attridge believe that “theory continues to thrive, and increasingly adopts positions that challenge some of the fundamental intellectual stances that once defined Theory . . . and theories today are not only subsequent to but also distinct from the body of work known as Theory” (2).

This transformation of Theory is enunciated by the term “post-theory.” In their introduction to *Post-Theory, Culture and Criticism*, Ivan Callus and Stefan Herbrechter suggested two ways of pronouncing post-theory: either as *post-theory* or as *post-theory* (9). For Callus and Herbrechter, ‘*post-theory*’ implies the critical assessments of theory, now posthumously, and how to continue practising theory after high theory, whereas ‘*Post-theory*’ refers to the critical upgrades in the theoretical endeavours and the pragmatic renewal of theoretical practices. The former involves nostalgia, devotion and acknowledgement, whereas the latter celebrates a break, a distancing, and invites a search for alternatives (9).

Another question perhaps is about whether we should pronounce “post-theory” in the singular, or as “post-theories” in the plural. Because, unlike Theory which is now perceived as a singularity, a canonized plane of consistency, a constellation formed by the stars of Theory, post-theories as its offsprings are disarrayed, liquid, multiplying and not likely to form a canon or a constellation anytime soon. Perhaps it is due to their interstellar orientation. In any case, post-theories succeed Theory but cannot liberate themselves from it. They either defer or reterritorialize it to negotiate its aporias that are perceived today in the form of *différance*. The dash between post and theory illustrates this dual sense of continuity and discontinuity.

Claire Colebrook considers “the current terrain of theory as a reaction formation. In response to a world in which ‘the political’ is increasingly divorced from meaningful practice (whatever that would be) theory has insisted in ever more shrill tone on the grounding of *theoria* in meaningful, practical, productive and human organic life.” (67)

For Peter Osborne, “The intellectual present is posited as ‘the after’ of some purportedly concluded period, open to a yet-to-be-determined future: the logic of the ‘post’ in its more positive, forward-looking guise as *the logic of the new*” (26). Osborne evaluates “post-theory” as theory’s becoming anti-theoretical insofar as “theory had previously been associated within philosophy, with metaphysics more generally” (21).

Ernesto Laclau summarizes these various perspectives by asserting that “although we have entered a post-theoretical universe, we are definitely not in an a-theoretical one” (1). If we use, following Laclau, “universe” as a metaphor to illustrate the galaxy of our theoretical system: We may take philosophies as stars forming their gravitational fields, where the planets circulate and remain in the orbit like the ones in our solar system. Grand Theory stands for the planets spinning around stars of philosophy; they take shape according to their relation to stars. And then, the planets of Theory form their own orbits, moons and satellites. The satellites of Theory can be taken as post-theories, which in turn sprout other thematic sub-fields that appear like asteroids or meteorites trafficking around diverse planetary systems, travelling from here to there, crossing various planets and satellites, sometimes fusing with them, sometimes simply disappearing without a trace.

Or perhaps Theory has not passed, only the legendary figures, “the heavenly bodies” who produced it are dead, and the current crisis is due to not knowing who will be next on the throne after Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, or Jacques Lacan.

Vincent B. Leitch [the renowned editor of *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (2001)] disagrees with those who believe that theory no longer holds the same significance or gravitational force it once did. In *Literary Criticism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Theory Renaissance* (2014), he insists that Theory is still alive, strong and intact, and the moment of postmodernism has not passed. Leitch considers ours as an age of “Theory Renaissance,” as a period of vigorous theoretical and intellectual activity, and sees the newly sprouting sub-branches of literary studies and its varieties as a bliss that indicate the dynamism and vitality of our field. He offers a map of current theories that contain ninety-four subdisciplines and fields circling around twelve major topics (reminiscent of planets and satellites) which change spheres and fuse into original combinations. They are disarranged, disintegrated, fragmented and therefore, for Leitch, still postmodern in form. Theory of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and its mainly fifteen schools of thought remain still important today as sources not only for practical literary criticism but also for teaching theory. Leitch thinks that Theory is far from dead, rather, as an indispensable strength, it continues to prompt and underwrite productive research, generating publications across an expanded spectrum of topics and fields. He uses the term “renaissance” not to accentuate re-birth but to refer to the abundance of intellectual activity (vi–vii). Nealon’s quick search supports Leitch’s view and shows that we are still in the orbit of Theory in our post-theoretical endeavours, and circling around the big names associated with theory: “In 2010, the Arts and Humanities Citation Index turns up 1498 hits for Michel Foucault, 1310 for Jacques Derrida, 699 for Gilles Deleuze and 455 for Jacques Lacan” (*Post-Postmodernism* 114).

Whether or not as a theory renaissance, our sense of being both “after Theory” and “in the theory of the post” requires an assessment of what is new in post-theories. If we



take post-theories, with reference to Deleuze and Félix Guattari, as new “lines of flight,” we might notice that they share similar allergies and anxieties in their critique of Theory. While adopting post-deconstructive strategies in method, they remain quite deconstructive of theory for its lack of *ethos*.

Post-theoretical studies all agree that the analysis of material life escaped Theory. And Jean-Michel Rabaté affirms this: “The problem with Theory,” he says, “seems to be that it is always accused of having missed something. Theory is missing out on ‘life,’ real life that is, as in the expression ‘Get a life!’ about ‘real’ sexuality, ‘real’ politics, and so on. Prophetically Rimbaud had written, ‘True life is elsewhere’” (3).

A comparative list may be helpful at this point to locate this “elsewhere” of post-theories. The following list is an excerpt from the appendix of *Post-Theories in Literary and Cultural Studies* (2022):

<b>Theory</b>	<b>Post-Theory</b>
Critique of philosophy	Critique of theory
Stars	Satellites
French	Global
Eminent	Subsidiary
Productive	Re-productive
Radical	Reactive
Philosophical	Political
Schizophrenic	Hysteric
Apathy	Empathy
Cold War	War against/as terrorism
Astute	Audacious
Genesis	Legacy
Cultural	Natural/Environmental
Amoral	Moral
Textuality	Actuality
Anti-humanist	Posthumanist
Linguistics	Ethics
Nietzschean	Spinozist
Sceptical	Responsible
École	Hub
Seminar	Workshop
Individual	Network (Antakyahoğlu 262)

If Theory was a critique of Western philosophy and was produced by scholars most of whom are acknowledged today as eminent and revolutionary figures, post-theories are critiques of theory, and the producers of post-theories play a subsidiary, reactive role since they are not—at least yet—stars but academics who are lesser in degree and capacity than philosophers and remain indebted to their legacies. Thereby, post-theories

imply a falling-off-from theory, by being re-productive, prompt and impatient in revising Theory for pragmatic and mostly political reasons. If theory was schizophrenic in the sense of being extremely apathetic, post-theories are hysteric in the sense of being empathic and overemotional. Theory was a cold war endeavour but post-theories take shape during the time of war as or against terrorism.

High theory's target of analysis was culture, its critical keys were linguistics and textuality, in post-theories we see a responsible and ethical return to actuality, nature and environment. Theory's domes were *écoles* (as in *École Normale Supérieure*), also each star of theory individually formed his own *école*, gave famous and groundbreaking seminars to their devoted disciples. Post-theories are collaborative endeavours conducted in various hubs, developed in workshops by academics that form various digital networks.

From the listed aspects of post-theories, we can deduce three major lines of flight, three prominent currents that emerged as vibrant fields in literary studies today: Moral value-oriented studies, Aesthetic value-oriented studies and Eco-political value-oriented studies. These three currents are all value-oriented for different reasons, and each value orientation generates new sprouts, new sub-fields that vary in their thematic interests, target concepts or methods.

### **1. Moral value-oriented studies**

Moral value-oriented studies hold diverse perspectives in re-assessing literature's cognitive and psychological functions by turning to certain scholars or philosophers whose views were neglected during the heydays of Theory.

The works of Emmanuel Levinas, Martha Nussbaum, Richard Rorty, Jürgen Habermas, and Lionel Trilling are revisited by some groups of academics to form a contemporary understanding of the social, affective, and moral functions of literature. Some others remain in the orbit of Derrida—not the deconstructive Derrida—but the Levinasian Derrida who wrote intensively on hospitality, empathy, friendship, death, mourning, sincerity, solidarity and sympathy. Or, return to Foucault—not the Foucault of power-knowledge problematic—but the Foucault of the aesthetics of existence, ethics of pleasure. Some focus on Deleuze's essays on the critical and clinical function of art, or his works with Guattari on literature and philosophy as significant sources to bridge the gap between social life and literature, or life and theory. Some revisit Lacan and Freud with posthumanist definitions of subjectivity, identity and alterity. They aim to revive ways of attending literary works as moral embodiments of social values, no longer following Roland Barthes, but offering new ethical inquiries that tend to favour recuperation of authorial agency in the production of texts as socially constructed narratives. They benefit also from contemporary scholars or sociologists such as Giorgio Agamben, Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, Zygmunt Bauman, Bruno Latour, Pierre Bourdieu, Jacques Rancière and Jean-Luc Nancy to enhance their ethical and aesthetic inquiries.

Scholars such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Amanda Anderson, Marjorie Garber, Ivan Callus, Peter Boxall, Rita Felski, Toril Moi, John Frow, believing that literary studies has lost the art of discussing characters and concepts in illuminating ways, offer new perspectives on attending literary works for psychological relief, aesthetic satisfaction, cognitive development, identification. They suggest new ways of reading against the grain, treating literary works as potential sources of insight, imagination and ethical improvement. Sharon Marcus proposes that we should be “just readers” using the term “just” in its double sense to be both “mere readers” as opposed to overconfident theorizers and also “ethical readers” seeking to do better justice to the works we encounter instead of examining them just as a self-referential web of signs. With Stephen Best, she offers “surface reading” as a new method which “is an invitation to attentive reading, enjoying what the text invokes without any political or theoretical agenda that determines in advance how we interpret texts” (Best and Marcus 11–13). Similarly, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick offers a model of “reparative reading” instead of “paranoid reading” to highlight the healing functions of art for humanity (123). The New Sincerity (Adam Kelly) and metamodernism (Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker) are other undercurrents that aim to set aside postmodern irony in an age that demands sincere engagements with social and psychological conditions. And Boxall, in *The Prosthetic Imagination: A History of the Novel as Artificial Life* (2020), reimagines the novel from the axis of “prosthetic imagination” instead of the traditional mimetic axis to interpret the new relations our bodies enter in the artificial and digital environments.

Under the rubric of Moral value-oriented studies, we can place the sub-fields such as trauma studies (Cathy Caruth, Roger Luckhurst), gender studies, performativity studies (following Judith Butler, Karen Barad, Jeffrey T. Nealon and Bruno Latour to re-assess the socio-psychological functions of art), hybridity studies, migration studies, testimonial studies, vulnerability/precariat studies, poverty studies, violence studies, affect studies, hauntology, and ecocriticism. This field of study is post-theoretical in method but pre-postmodernist in its attitude toward work, author, authenticity, content, psychology, nature, morality, dignity etc. Its aim is to revive criticism’s ethos, its reason of being, with truly human concerns.

## **2. Aesthetic value-oriented studies**

Aesthetic value-oriented studies implies a return to formalism and is particularly concerned about the negligence of literary criticism that Theory caused for the last sixty years. It holds an intention to compensate the suspicion of the category of aesthetics during the 1970s and the 1990s, amounting at times to hostility, by a more positive re-engagement with aesthetic questions under the banners such as “new formalism,” “new aesthetics,” “neomodernism” to reappraise the strategies and scopes of formalist critique in the present. Scholars like Geoffrey Hartman, Catherine Belsey, Christopher Castiglia, Nikolas Kompridis, Amanda Anderson, Marjorie Perloff, Marjorie Levinson, Rita Felski, and Elizabeth Anker express a plenitude of ideological, cultural interpretations and a

hunger for genuine, attentive, evaluative criticism in literary studies and call for the rehabilitation of the concept of art as technique. Felski and Anker, in *Critique and Post-critique* (2017) invite literary scholars to recuperate the deliberately ignored strategies of former critics such as I. A. Richards, F. R. Leavis, Northrop Frye and Wayne C. Booth as well as the philosophers such as Richard Rorty. They call for a return to compositional, insightful and meditative writing, perhaps, the sincere essay form of Arnold, Samuel Taylor Coleridge or Eliot. For Anker and Felski, “the growing scepticism about the value of the critique calls for another regime of interpretation: one that is willing to recognize the potential of literature and art to create new imaginaries rather than just to denounce mystifying illusions,” and they invite us to an “attentiveness that does not reduce texts to instrumental means to an end” (14). This metacritical value re-orientation attempts to figure out what exactly we are doing when we engage in “critique” and what else we might do instead. They put the emphasis on form and express a plea for returning to scholarly standards in literary critique which resist the established modes of political analysis.

### 3. Eco-political value-oriented studies

Eco-political value-oriented studies is ideological, revolutionary, operational and activist in spirit, unlike the first two value orientations that focus on the ethical and aesthetic merits of literary works. In order to combine theory with practice they adhere to a performative methodology that focuses on the function of things rather than their meaning. The scholars in this branch particularly focus on the pervasive character of exploitation, perversions of commodification, and the destructive aspects of advanced capitalism. They are critical of the current biopolitical global order and stand against neo-liberal, anthropocentric politics that caused the Anthropocene. They aim to achieve a Spinozist ethics of happiness and open the possibility of a new politics that is beyond the constituted traditions. We can take “posthumanism” as its banner which, as a concept (or ideology) chooses to treat classical humanism and humanist *ethos* pejoratively, but also remains sceptical of the anti-humanist core of poststructuralism for its indifference to *ethos* and *polity*. It aims to replace “human” with an upgraded, de-centred version of “posthuman” as the better alternative for the formation of an “eco-philosophy of multiple belongings” (Braidotti 49). This new materialist or matter-realist school of thought calls for a return to matter, to nature as *zoe*, as life common to all beings. It draws extensively on Deleuze and Guattari’s concepts of rhizome, immanence, relationality and functionality in defining human and non-human life and offers a *zoe*-egalitarian ethico-politics as an alternative political model. This new orientation in literary and social studies also interacts with the anti-correlationist, post-Kantian, Object Oriented Ontology initiated by Graham Harman and Quentin Meillassoux et al.; apart from this, it contains areas of study that range from Latour’s socio-ontological “actor-network theory,” to the multidisciplinary variations of posthumanism as developed by Karen Barad, Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti, Elizabeth Grosz, Jane Bennett, Vicki Kirby, and Cary Wolfe. As a post-theoretical endeavour, it aims to create a new ethics of sustainability that requires an urgent shift from the humanist ideology to the posthumanist alternatives to ensure a

better futurity. For this, it calls for action and decision without which there would be no ethics or politics.

Moral, aesthetic, and eco-political value-oriented studies as post-theoretical endeavours “sustain sincere concerns for fundamental issues and vigorously pursue wholly practical questions relating to political change, living conditions, institutional practices” (Attridge and Elliott 14). They all want to meaningfully diagnose and cure the illnesses of the day.

The moral and aesthetic value-oriented studies are likely to merge into one current and will inevitably undergo a reorientation in line with posthumanist parameters. Posthumanism, on the other hand, should, at some point, reassess its reason of being if it really aims at changing the world. In their introduction to *Posthuman Glossary*, Rosi Braidotti and Maria Hlavajova propose that “new notions and terms are needed to address the constituencies and configurations of the present and to map future directions” (1). The glossary includes 160 entries of neologisms that are attributed to posthumanism. No doubt, today the glossary will have to be re-edited because the production of neologisms is epidemic in the academy. However, considering the posthumanist urge for a much more direct involvement in urgent social and ecological matters of concerns, it requires a more solution-oriented attitude and simpler language to build real channels of communication. One wonders what Vladimir Putin, Joe Biden or Xi Jinping will understand from the terms “chthulucene,” “intra-agential combust identity,” “necropolitics,” “altergorithm” if they ever decide to listen to posthumanist activists, especially when what they need to hear is solutions rather than new words, words and words...

### **Contemporaneity: The World is too much with us**

All three new currents point out that the character of our studies today is gaining strength, which is good. But this strength can easily turn into a weakness if their aims are not internalized with truly scholarly interests. Today our decisive pivot is the critique of the present. But the present is too much with us! And, dwelling on the present, for the sake of relationality, creates the risk of being absorbed by it. It might deprive us of maintaining a secure distance from the rapidity of life, and create the fallacy of perceiving everything as political. Today, everything can easily turn into a matter of politics: emotion becomes politics of affect, art becomes politics of aesthetics, form politics of style, self politics of identity, life biopolitics or zoe-politics. Engendering newer, coherent and determinant values for a better future, requires a less populist and more visionary, reflectional, meditative, self-reflective standpoint which is resistant to temporariness in today's critical endeavours. Otherwise, a direct relation with contingent realities in the present might create a lack of persistency. The leading figures of Theory in the previous century did not produce concepts for immediate gratification or intellectual recognition, let alone the concern for being cited. Unlike them, we live in a digitalised world experiencing every possible effect of immediacy, time-space compression and need to beware of it.

Jean-Michel Rabaté in *The Future of Theory* shares Camille Paglia's following critique of the academy in the 1990s as still a relevant warning:

A scholar's real audience is not yet born. A scholar must build for the future, not the present. The profession is addicted to the present, to contemporary figures, contemporary terminology, contemporary concerns. Authentic theory would mean mastery of the complete history of philosophy and aesthetics. What is absurdly called theory today is just a mask for fashion and greed. (222)

For the sake of compensating Theory's negligence of real, daily life, academic practices coincide too well with present sensibilities, current problems and adjust very quickly to the changing demands of the day, which is both good and bad. It creates the danger of degrading research to newspaper journalism especially when we think of the inflation of academic publications today. It has become way too easy to be published, cited, read, and gain popularity in diverse networks. At this point, Agamben's definition of "contemporary" should be remembered as a note of caution:

Those who are truly contemporary, who truly belong to their time, are those who neither perfectly coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands. They are thus in this sense irrelevant. But precisely because of this condition, precisely through this disconnection and this anachronism, they are more capable than others of perceiving and grasping their own time. (40)

For Agamben, "The ones who can call themselves contemporary are only those who do not allow themselves to be blinded by the lights of the century, and so manage to get a glimpse of the shadows in those lights, of their intimate obscurity" (45).

Theories offer an abundance of ways to interpret and publish academic writing without a genuine scholarly interest, which in turn creates a commodification of literature and theory. Therefore, what Leitch sees as "a theory renaissance" might as well be perceived as a chaos of eclectic theories which build a heap of disorganized, disarrayed studies. For Martin McQuillan et al., "The obsession with research dictated by the system much of which is pointlessly conducted for the gain of a research rating and/or promotion accelerates this process of banalization" (xi). The university may be too much with us!

Therefore, it is also possible to see some of the post-theoretical fields as "the by-products that emerged after a long process of Theory's commodification and reification" (Osborne 22). Theory can be a great camouflage to hide mediocrity and enable academics to publish numerous articles or books without having to make any single clear statement. Thereby, for Leitch, genuine criticism is getting rarefied because "we are drowning in published scholarship and its main consequences, namely, fast reading, quick writing and superficial coverage" (25).

To maintain a strong character, literary studies must remember its reason of being as a discipline. We should know our function well and make other disciplines see ours as we do. Only then, perhaps, we can make peace with diversification and not look at it as

chaos. The flexibility of our discipline, our openness to multidisciplinary research can be a strength insofar as we create the awareness that humanities or post-humanities matter. Nealon is right in reminding us that “science without humanities is without the imaginative, creative and critical thought. Humanities teach to think, to transcend, to approach and to imagine” (*Post-Postmodernism* 190).

### Conclusion

With these pros and cons in mind, we may say that literary studies today is Janus-faced: one side inspires optimism, idealism, and a sincere commitment to meaningful scholarly efforts for a better future; while the other parasitically feeds on the trophies of neoliberal capitalism. One side opts for setting ethical standards, the other, in a lamentably degenerate fashion, benefits from the lack of professional idealism, commodifies scholarship in pursuit of promotion or popularity in the corporatized education and speeds up the publication system. One side fights against capitalism in every possible way, the other surrenders to its Faustian bargains.

Literary studies today, perhaps like any other discipline, has a split character: If the dark side wins, if we can't develop intellectually rigorous and institutionally coherent ways of putting our studies to practical use, if we remain out of tune, the efforts for ethical, aesthetic, eco-political turns will be nothing but futile and ostentatious displays of academic discourse.

This brings us to Wordsworth's sonnet “The World is too much with us.” The sonnet could be read as a lament for humanity's failure to enjoy and appreciate nature, or as a critique of capitalism. Contrary to what Eliot expects from poets, he offers, in the form of a poem, a splendid, lyrical expression and depiction of character—whether human or posthuman—as the key to a better future.

The world is too much with us; late and soon,  
Getting and spending we lay waste our powers;  
Little we see in Nature that is ours;  
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon! (lines 1–4)

Wordsworth wrote this sonnet two hundred years ago, but as a true contemporary, in Agamben's sense of the term, as a comprehensive soul beyond his time, he predicts our current concerns and elegantly intimates how not to be forlorn. Today we can read it as a potential source of insight, or as an expression that echoes the inner voice of literary studies which tries to recover its character and restore its ties with life in the post-theoretical moment.

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