**Philosophy and Literature: A Short History**

While sharing a common origin in myth, Western philosophy and literature have developed as two distinct yet interconnected media of reflection on the human condition. Since Greek antiquity, the relationship between philosophy and literature has been seen as both competitive and complementary. The very earliest philosophers were also poets, such as Xenophanes, Empedocles, and Parmenides. The sophists also tended to combine philosophy with literature. Plato, however, famously distrusted poetic imagination and banned poets from his Republic. At the same time, in composing his dialogues Plato drew on literary techniques. His follower Aristotle did not regard fiction as morally suspect. On the contrary, he thought of it as a useful aid to moral education of the citizens. However, in the *Poetics* he carefully sets apart imaginative literature—epic, tragedy, comedy and lyric poetry—from philosophy. Once the Romans appropriated the Greek ideal of *paideia,* they assigned equal educational significance to philosophy, rhetoric, and poetry. Thus many Roman philosophers, including Marcus Aurelius, Seneca, and Boethius, were also innovative literary authors who transformed such genres as the dialogue, the tragedy, and the Menippean satire.[[1]](#endnote-2)

The rediscovery of the classical tradition by the Renaissance brought forth the new ideal of individuality, which found embodiment in the humanists’ philosophical treatises

as well as such new genres as the essay, the philosophical fragment, and the novel. Since Montaigne and Rabelais, a synergy between moral philosophy and literature has defined the European culture of the modern age, producing such constellations of thinkers as the seventeenth-century French moralists, the eighteenth-century *philosophes,* the Scottish Enlightenment, and the European Sensibility movement. However, the decisive move that brought language and literature to the forefront of philosophy occurred in the second half of the eighteenth century, when traditional theological conceptions of language as representation gave way to a new understanding of language as the means of human self-expression. A crucial role in this intellectual revolution belongs to the German pre-Romantic Johann-Gottfried Herder. By insisting on the human origin of language and on its expressive dimension, Herder paved the way for the emergence of the new conceptions of creative genius and the imagination. In contrast to earlier philosophers who drew on literary genres and techniques without reflecting on the distinctiveness of literary language, early German Romantics made imaginative literature (*Poesie*) crucial to their theoretical inquiry. Literature came to be valued not only for its capacity to convey ideas, emotions, and knowledge of the world, but also for its autonomy and authenticity.

The German Romantic understanding of literature as a “progressive universal poetry,” which reunites separate genres of literature and puts literature into contact with philosophy and rhetoric, had an impact on both philosophy and literary studies. So too did a new appreciation of the richness of the varieties of forms of literature across history and cultures. Thus literary criticism became transformed from a semi-dilettante appreciation of verbal art into a rigorous discipline which required both philological erudition and analytical skills. The notion of literary theory developed by Friedrich Schlegel and his fellow German Romantics undermined the received idea of “theory” as the creation of systematic coherence by endowing theory itself with a literary form. Literature and philosophy were united in their infinite pursuit of truth. Most importantly, the very idea of truth as correspondence was supplanted by a new vision of truth as a product of continual poetic self-transcendence.

The German Romantics’ valorization of *Poesie* derived from the realization of the modern need for a special sphere of value which was not dominated by the exchange principle. The burgeoning of philosophical aesthetics in subsequent decades was also indicative of a stubborn resistance on the part of the intellectual elite to the commercialization of culture in the age of the industrial revolution. In the philosophical systems of the German idealists art, including literary art, played a crucial role as the realm of intrinsic value indispensable for the spiritual and moral education (*Bildung*) of modern subjects. Some thinkers—most notably, Schelling—understood art in quasi-religious terms as the medium of revelation, and the artist as a visionary capable of grasping the Absolute. Hegel, on the other hand, saw art, or the sensuous embodiment of ideas, as germane to the *Bildung* of humanity and yet ultimately inferior to the conceptual activity of philosophy.

German Romanticism and Idealism played an important role in the development of the novel. Friedrich Schlegel’s view of the novel as a synthetic genre that incorporates other genres, as well as its own critique, transformed the way authors and critics understood the relationship between poetry and prose. While neoclassical aesthetics regarded narrative prose as a lower form of writing devoid of poetic inspiration, in the wake of German Romanticism narrative prose came to be perceived as the vehicle of philosophical self-consciousness. Thus the prose novel emerged as the medium of “progressive universal poetry” that embraced all literary genres developed by humanity throughout its history. This Romantic approach to the novel was popularized by August Wilhelm Schlegel in his *Lectures on Fine Arts and Literature,* a bestseller that was read and discussed throughout Europe, from Berlin and Vienna to London and Petersburg. Notwithstanding Hegel’s derogatory remarks on the modern novel in his *Lectures on Fine Art*, novelization became the main trend in nineteenth- century European literary history.[[2]](#endnote-3)

Although Hegel’s thesis about the death of art and the concomitant triumph of philosophical reason was disproved by the vibrancy of nineteenth-century literature, music and visual art, Hegelianism undoubtedly contributed to the emergence of socially and politically engaged realism and naturalism. Some proponents of the latter movements repudiated Romanticism and Idealism and sought a rapprochement between literature and positivistic science. At the same time, it would be wrong to see the ascendency of narrative prose literature in the 1840s-70s as a symptom of the falling out between literature and philosophy. On the contrary, the crisis of Idealism in academic philosophy coincided with the blooming of idealistic literary art. As recent studies have demonstrated, a number of novelists, including Honoré de Balzac, Georges Sand, Victor Hugo, and George Eliot believed that idealist aesthetics with its belief in the unity of truth, beauty, and goodness was compatible with realism. The growing prestige of the novel encouraged a number of authors to expand this genre’s intellectual scope. Seeking to transform the novel into a medium of sociopolitical and moral reflection, authors like Thomas Carlyle, Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Henry James drew on the well-established genres of philosophical prose, such as the essay, the moral tale, the Utopia, the Menippean satire, and the confession. Meanwhile, such philosophers as Søren Kierkegaard, Arthur Schopenhauer, Henry Thoreau, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, deployed literary genres. While some of these thinkers chose the literary medium strategically, in order to reach out to a broader non-academic audience, others did so because they believed that truth without beauty remains arid and soulless.

Modernism, which began to emerge in the 1850s-70s in the works of Charles Baudelaire, Théophile Gautier, August Strindberg, Walt Whitman and other European and American authors, introduced a new aesthetic consciousness. While neo-classicism and Romanticism regarded nature as the source of all beauty, the modernists insisted on the superiority of art as artifice. As Baudelaire argued in his programmatic review essay “The Painter of Modern Life” (1863), “everything beautiful and noble is a result of reason and calculation.”[[3]](#endnote-4) However, the beautiful and the noble were no longer thought of as static ideals. Each age had its own vision of beauty concomitant with its own conception of “modernity.” Baudelaire famously defined “modernity” as “the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is eternal and immutable.”[[4]](#endnote-5) The poet perceived his own age as the age of socioeconomic and cultural crisis, whose transitory beauty was embodied in such figures as the dandy, the fashionable society woman, and the prostitute. While the dandy and the lady represented the last glimmer of aristocratic culture, the prostitute’s fancy dress and cosmetics signalled a break with the aristocratic ethos and its ideal of noble simplicity. And yet, her fashionable attire was still “a symptom of the taste for the ideal which floats on the surface of all the crude, terrestrial and loathsome bric-à-brac.”[[5]](#endnote-6) When accused of being a “decadent,” Baudelaire took the moniker as a badge of honour, a sign of his nonconformity with the flat-footed ideology of scientific progress.

The emergence of symbolism and aestheticism in literature and the arts coincided with Arthur Schopenhauer’s rise to fame and the appearance of other philosophical systems which assigned art a redemptive function. Sharply critical of the Enlightenment with its idealized conception of humanity, philosophical pessimism and “decadent” artistic movements hastened the revival of the Romantic vision of art as the ultimate manifestation of spirit. This vision was forcefully reasserted by Richard Wagner, whose *Gesamtkunstwerk* was supposed to serve as a modern example of objective art, and by the young Friedrich Nietzsche, who described ancient Greek tragedy as a fusion of two conflicting drives, the Dionysian (which corresponded roughly to Schopenhauer’s Will) and the Apollonian (which corresponded to Schopenhauer’s Representation). Nietzsche saw artistic decadence as a symptom of what he called the “nihilism of weakness” (as opposed to the tough-minded “nihilism of strength” that underlay his post-idealistic vision of *Bildung* as self-overcoming and the will-to-power). According to Nietzsche, other symptoms of modern decadence that culminated in nihilism included the reduction of religion to morality and the reduction of the philosophical quest for wisdom to arid logical reasoning. Overcoming nihilism became Nietzsche’s central philosophical project. Following the Romantics, he believed that the quest for knowledge was inextricably tied to self-knowledge and creative self-expression. As he claimed in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), every great philosophy was “the personal confession of its author and a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir.”[[6]](#endnote-7) In the same work, however, Nietzsche compared truth to a woman and philosophers to her clumsy lovers, suggesting that he shared the Socratic (and Romantic) view of philosophizing as the “erotics of knowledge,” but was somewhat sceptical about the modern cold-headed philosophers’ ability to experience genuine desire. And yet, as evidenced by the *Gay Science* (1887), Nietzsche persisted in his attempts to transform a quest for wisdom into a “joyous science” reminiscent of the spiritually and erotically charged poetry of Provencal troubadours. In fact, all of Nietzsche’s mature works of the 1880s can be read as experimental writing that collapses the boundary between poetry and philosophy. Finally, in his autobiography, *Ecce Homo* (published in 1908)*,* Nietzsche proudly declared that his books were good not only because of his intellectual daring and acumen, but also because they were artistic compositions which introduced new rhythmical cadences to the philosophical discourse.[[7]](#endnote-8)

In recent decades Nietzsche’s ideas have been compared to those of Marcel Proust, Robert Musil, Mikhail Bakhtin and a score of other modernist authors and thinkers. From the intellectual historical point of view, Nietzsche’s critique of nihilism was especially influential on twentieth-century existentialists, whereas his metaethical approach to morality and perspectival epistemology have resonated and continue to resonate with philosophers and literary theorists who identify with postmodernism. However, the Nietzschean insight that influenced all of these schools of thought concerned metaphysics. In rejecting the metaphysics of the two worlds, the sensuous and the supersensuous, Nietzsche completed the historicist turn in philosophy. After Nietzsche philosophers could no longer turn away from the vicissitudes of life while searching for eternal values, but conceived of Being in this-worldly, historicist terms.

While Nietzsche’s critique of idealism undermined the authority of the subject-centred Reason, phenomenology and existentialism have done away with the transcendental subject. Philosophy no longer conceived of itself as a theory of knowledge, but recovered its ontological vocation, becoming a “universal phenomenological ontology.”

Taking a cue from Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger made the overcoming of nihilism his central philosophical project. He believed that his philosophy amounted to a new postmetaphysical humanism, which centred not on the ideal human being, but on the concrete human condition, or Dasein. What distinguishes Dasein from other entities in the world is the fact that its own being presents an issue for it. This conception of the human condition rests on a special conception of language, one that regards language not as a mere vehicle of communication, but as the condition of possibility of our presence in the world. By “world” Heidegger understood not a totality of facts, but the context of meanings, a realm of intelligibility that allows things to present themselves to us. In Heidegger’s later works poetry comes to the fore and is assigned an ontological function as the original language which “discloses” being.

For many European intellectuals between the two world wars existentialism answered the urge to destroy the double frontier that separated philosophy from life and from literature. As Georges Bataille confessed in “Existentialism,” Heidegger’s essay “What is Metaphysics?” had a tremendous impact on him and his generation, because Heidegger’s philosophy seemed to open directly onto life.[[8]](#endnote-9) Such a philosophy, suggested Bataille, ceased to differentiate itself from literature.[[9]](#endnote-10) Most French existentialists welcomed this development. They valorised literature as the vehicle of the imagination and spontaneous self-expression which facilitate the discovery of authentic selfhood. A number of existentialist thinkers, including Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus, and Paul-Yves Nizan, often articulated the same problems in their philosophical and literary writings. For example, Sartre first described such existential feelings as nausea and angst in his novel *Nausea* (1938) and only then analysed these phenomena in his philosophical treatise *Being and Nothingness* (1943). On the other hand, Camus simultaneously deployed three different genres–the essay, the novel, and the play–to to meditate on the philosophical problems. Thus, for example, the problems of alienation and the absurdity of human existence are articulated in the cycle that consists of the essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), the novel *The Stranger* (1942)*,* and the play *Caligula* (1944).[[10]](#endnote-11)

To bring philosophy from the ivory tower back to the agora and make it relevant for society was the task of Critical Theory pioneered by the Frankfurt School in the 1930s. This school of social and cultural criticism emerged at the crossroads of sociology, Marxist political economy, Marxist aesthetics, and literary criticism. Formally, the emergence of this school dates back to 1923, when a law professor from Vienna, Carl Grünberg, with the help of Felix Weil, who provided the funding, created the Institute for Social Research (*Institut für Sozialforschung*) at the Goethe University in Frankfurt. Max Horkheimer became the director of the Institute in 1930. He recruited Theodor W. Adorno, Erich Fromm, Herbert Marcuse, and several other up-and-coming intellectuals. However, the two thinkers whose ideas shaped the methodology of the Frankfurt School were literary scholars and philosophers Georg Lukács and Walter Benjamin, neither of whom was officially a member of the Institute.

Lukács had participated in the First Marxist Workweek organized by Weil in 1922. However, as a member of the Hungarian Communist Party he was barred from joining the Institute for Social Research. Meanwhile his work, *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), which introduced the concept of “reification,” had a momentous significance for the development of Western Marxism. Taking a cue from the final section of the first chapter of Marx’s *Capital,* “The Mystery of the Fetishistic Character of Commodities,” Lukács identified the essence of the commodity structure of capitalism as its tendency to make the social relations between people appear as relations between things, possessed of an autonomous power and objectivity. In the same work Lukács also developed the theory of class consciousness and argued that the emergence of the Communist Party testifies to the proletariat’s newly achieved self-consciousness as the subject-object of history. In the 1930-50s Lukács (who lived in exile in the USSR from 1930 until 1944) became one of the leading exponents of Marxist aesthetics and literary theory. Thus, in his 1938 essay “Realism in the Balance,” written as part of his public debate with Ernst Bloch about German expressionism, Lukács accused expressionists of subjectivism and betrayal of art’s true goal, which consists in the faithful reflection of the real.[[11]](#endnote-12) While Bloch had pointed out the expressionists’ interest in the popular arts, Lukács insisted that realism was the only aesthetic form accessible to the people and therefore only such authors as Gorky, Thomas Mann, or Romain Rolland could be deemed progressive. In *The Historical Novel* (1955) Lukács went on to argue that Walter Scott, whose Waverly novels portray the disintegration of archaic social forms in the face of capitalist transformation, should be regarded as a progressive author, despite being a political conservative. In *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (1955) Lukács reiterated that the only artistic method capable of fostering true historical consciousness was critical realism, whose classic exponents were Honoré de Balzac, Alesandro Manzoni, Lev Tolstoy, and Thomas Mann.

According to Agnes Heller, throughout most of his career Lukács shared Benjamin’s and Adorno’s view that modern philosophy must become a philosophy of art*,* because only in this way it can have recourse to the *defetishizing* of objectification.[[12]](#endnote-13) Although Heller doubts that philosophy of art is qualified for such a task, pointing out that at the end of his life Lukács turned to traditional ethics, her observation holds true for Benjamin and Adorno, both of whom believed that contemporary academic philosophy had relinquished its critical role and turned into a handmaiden to science and industry.[[13]](#endnote-14) Diagnosing the crisis of philosophical thought and finding new venues for critical consciousness were their main intellectual motivations. Thus already in his first published writings Benjamin attacked Kant’s transcendental idealism and sought to substitute the narrow Kantian concept of “experience” (*Erfahrung*), as well as the transitory “lived experience” (*Erlebnis*) of contemporary *Lebensphilosophie*, with a “higher,” metaphysical experience.[[14]](#endnote-15) Benjamin’s philosophy of language and translation theory shed additional light on his disagreement with the Kantian epistemology. Influenced by the Kabbalistic mysticism, into which he was initiated by Gershom Scholem, and by the writings of Johann Georg Hamann, Benjamin developed a theological view of language. Thus he regards the ordinary human language used as the medium of knowledge and communication as a “profane” language. However, he believes that this language still partakes of the originary Word. Taking a cue from Hamann, he believes that poetry, the only medium where language can escape the control of instrumental reason, allows us to glimpse the pure “Language as Such.” The task of the literary translator, according to Benjamin, is to lay bare this higher language.

If “The Task of the Translator” (1923) reveals Benjamin’s distinctive vision as a translator, his doctoral dissertation on *The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism* (1919) brings out Benjamin’s self-consciousness as a critic. The critic is an “extended author” who must complete the work’s self-reflection. Following Friedrich Schlegel, whose 116th Athenaeum fragment defines reflection underlying a Romantic work of art as “progressive” and “universal,” Benjamin argues that critical reflection is not an empty and endless regress, but rather a full infinitude of interconnected ideas. In this context, reflection should be understood as an ontological, rather than a psychological principle.[[15]](#endnote-16) In Benjamin’s radical reading and transformation of Schlegel and Novalis, aesthetic form emerges as both a product of reflection and a germ of further reflection. Thus critical activity can be said to “absolutize” the work of art.[[16]](#endnote-17) That Benjamin regarded criticism as the ultimate organon of Truth can be gleaned from the juxtaposition of commentary and critique in the opening of his essay “Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*.” While commentary concerns itself with the “material content” of a literary work (that is, with the elements of literary form and technique), critique “mortifies” the work, that is, destroys its beautiful appearance in order to release its “truth content.”

“Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*” was composed in 1919-22, when Benjamin was still a Romantic Platonist. However, after reading Lukács’ *History and Class Consciousness* in the mid-1920s, Benjamin “converted” to dialectical materialism. This philosophical transformation is reflected in the methodological breakthroughs that Benjamin introduced in his failed Habilitation thesis, *The Origins of German Trauerspiel* (1925). In the “Epistemo-Critical Prologue” Benjamin laments the experiential impoverishment of traditional philosophy and proposes an alternative approach: thinking in constellations. In the rest of his thesis Benjamin juxtaposes the Baroque *Trauerspiel*, whose plot refers to actual historical events, to classical tragedy, whose “truth content” is enshrined in myth. According to Benjamin, the preponderance of allegory in the seventeenth-century dramas reflects the socio-political and religious fragmentation of the Thirty Years’ War epoch. Benjamin’s trip to the Soviet Union in 1927 reinforced his interest in modern or “allegoric” art (as opposed to classical art whose meaning could be expressed symbolically). In contrast to Lukács, an inveterate aesthetic conservative, Benjamin became a champion of the avant-garde, surrealism, and modern technological art media, such as photography and cinema. As the famous 1935 essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” suggests, Benjamin welcomed the emergence of cinema, because he saw it as a genuinely popular medium, which gave rise to a new collective and participatory form of aesthetic experience. As evidenced by the materials assembled for the unfinished Arcades Project, Benjamin’s assault on the “bourgeois” subjectivity was not confined to the sphere of art. Inspired by Louis Aragon’s surrealist book *Le paysan de Paris,* Benjamin planned to compose a work consisting of uncommented “material elements,” including citations from other authors’ works and empirical observations. His goal was “to conjoin a heightened sensible vividness (*Anschaulichkeit*) to the realization of the Marxist method” by carrying over the principle of montage into history. The exposé to the Arcades project suggests that the idea of connecting images through montage was linked for Benjamin to the “dialectical images” of the kind he found in the poetry of the modern allegorist Charles Baudelaire, where “the image of the woman and the image of death intermingle in a third: that of Paris.”[[17]](#endnote-18)

Theodor Adorno, who corresponded with Benjamin’s throughout his mentor’s Parisian exile and knew more than anyone else about Benjamin’s unfinished *magnum opus*, was taken aback when in 1948 he finally received the materials that Benjamin had entrusted to George Bataille before his flight from the Vichy France (which ended in his suicide in September of 1940).[[18]](#endnote-19) Benjamin’s “extraordinary inattention to the theoretically formulated ideas as opposed to the enormous store of excerpts” went against the grain of Adorno’s Hegelian conviction that the movement of the concept is coincident with the thought process of the reflecting subject. As can be gleaned from his correspondence with Benjamin, Adorno was alarmed by Benjamin’s continued commitment to *Lebensphilosophie* and his interest in Jung’s theory of archetypes, both of which Adorno deemed reactionary. Responding to Benjamin’s first outline of the Arcades project, titled “Paris—the Capital of the Nineteenth Century,”he cautioned his older colleague against psychologizing “dialectical images” and transforming them from “objective constellations in which ‘the social’ situation represents itself” into “dream images” produced by the collective unconscious.[[19]](#endnote-20)

The paratactic approach that Adorno adopted in *Negative Dialectics* and *Minima Moralia* was undoubtedly inspired by Benjamin’s “constellational” thinking. *Negative Dialectics* was conceived as a riposte to Hegel whose conflation of the “rational” and “the real,” and hence legitimation of the present status quo, had disturbed all his left-wing readers since the nineteenth century. According to some scholars, Adorno’s methodology approximates negative theology, where the state of Redemption—the object of Benjamin’s crypto-theological philosophy of history—can only be deduced *ex negativo*, as the antithesis of the current state.[[20]](#endnote-21) *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which Adorno and Horkheimer co-authored in the 1940s in California, also reveals their ongoing engagement with Benjamin’s ideas. Contrary to some interpretations, they do not provide a negative “Nietzschean” metanarrative of Western civilization, which would contrast sharply with Benjamin’s enthusiastic response to modernity in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” Rather, Adorno and Benjamin construct a double perspective on Western modernity, summarized in the seemingly paradoxical statement: “Myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology.” While the first part of this thesis calls into question the secularization thesis, the second part draws attention to ideological (in the pejorative sense) and destructive tendencies within secularized modern culture.

Exposing ideology in the pejorative sense of the term, as false consciousness, remains one of the main long-term legacies of the Frankfurt School. To appreciate the significance of their “radical critique” for aesthetics and literary studies one should look not only at the above-mentioned major works by Benjamin and Adorno, but also at Adorno’s essays collected in *Notes to Literature,* as well as at the works of Herbert Marcuse. This member of the Frankfurt school began his career by publishing his dissertation *The German Künstlerroman* in 1922. After studying philosophy with Heidegger in Freiburg, he emerged as a highly original Marxist anthropologist. In his best known works, *Eros and Civilization* (1955) and *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), Marcuse drew on Freudian psychoanalysis to expose what he saw as one of the most insidious traits of the Western civilization: the rationalization of socio-political, sexual and racial domination. Anticipating recent feminist thinkers like Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous, Marcuse argues that Western philosophy has traditionally treated human beings as abstract rational subjects, whose bodies and passions had to be subjugated by *Logos*. Taking a cue from Freud’s conception of the libido, Marcuse tried to restore *Eros* to its proper place as a major motivating force in human life on par with *Logos*. In contrast to postmodern feminist philosophy, Marcuse’s attempt to vindicate the non-rational aspects of the self does not lead to the repudiation of subjectivity. Thus in *The Aesthetic Dimension* (1978), the erstwhile student of Heidegger revives Schiller’s conception of the play-drive and tries to re-establish art as the privileged medium of personality formation.

Simultaneously with the development of Critical Theory, American and Western European universities witnessed a remarkable transformation and burgeoning of literary criticism. There emerged a new field of literary theory (which in contemporary academic parlance is sometimes also referred to as “critical theory,” even though it only partially overlaps with the ideological critique launched by the Frankfurt School). The new model of literary criticism that looked for a theoretical dimension of literary texts came to replace traditional philological commentary and aesthetically-grounded evaluative criticism. The origins of literary theory and its role vis-à-vis both traditional literary studies and philosophy remain debatable. Institutionally, it became crucial to the curricula of North American Comparative Literature departments, which Paul Alpers and Richard Rorty have described as “ports of entry’ for a tradition of European philosophical thought that had been neglected in America.”[[21]](#endnote-22) However, in France, Germany Italy and other European countries where the analytic approach did not dominate philosophy departments it was often impossible to draw the line of demarcation between literary theory and philosophy. But whether it was housed in philosophy or in the multilingual Comparative Literature departments, literary theory soon became one of the most variegated and adventurous branches within the humanities.

While most contemporary scholars trace the origins of modern literary theory back to American New Criticism and Russian Formalism, René Wellek links the emergence of theory to the revival of poetics by the Russian philologist Alexander Veselovsky (1838-1906). Wellek (a Czech-born philologist and intellectual historian who created the first program in Comparative Literature at Yale University in 1946) praises Veselovsky for trying “undauntedly to construe a historical poetics, a universal evolutionary history of poetry, in which the history of poetic devices, themes, forms, and genres would be traced through all literatures, oral and written.” [[22]](#endnote-23) Trained in Moscow as a scholar of Byzantine and Italian literature, Veselovsky continued his studies with Wilhelm von Humboldt’s follower Heymann Steinthal in Berlin and Prague. Trained as a philosopher and philologist, Steinthal investigated the intersections of logic, grammar, and “folk psychology” (*Völkerpsychologie)* Veselovsky’s historical poetics emerged as an attempt to combine an inquiry into collective or national psychology enshrined inmyth, folklore and literaturewith Herder’s dream of composing a comprehensive history of world literature (*Weltliteratur*).

Russian Formalists positioned themselves as the opponents of historical poetics, which they deemed too psychological. In truth, however, the Formalists were reacting against the psychological approach in literary criticism that emerged in the wake of Dilthey’s *Poetry and Experience*, as well as against aesthetic criticism of Russian symbolists like Dmitrii Merezhkovsky and Viacheslav Ivanov. As Wellek points out, the Formalists’ quasi-scientific methodology was prepared by Veselovsky’s rigorous analyses of poetics and by the breakthroughs in contemporary linguistics.[[23]](#endnote-24) In the 1900s and 1910s Ferdinand de Saussure’s proto-structuralist approach eclipsed the Humboldtian linguistics, which had dominated Russian universities since the 1840s. The clarity and simplicity of the method based on binary oppositions appealed to the literary scholars whose coming of age coincided with the Russian Revolution. Eager to free themselves from the authority of their old professors who held history and philology chairs in pre-revolutionary Russia, the Formalists looked up to avant-garde poets and artists whose bold experiments with words, shapes, colors and whole genres betokened an anthropological revolution. The new humanity that was to emerge in the crucible of the Revolution would have a new perspective on reality. Thus the idea of “estrangement” (or “defamiliarization”) as the *sine qua non* of aesthetic perception formulated by Victor Shklovsky in his 1917 essay “Art, as Tech” became one of the key ideas of the Formalist movement. Indebted to Husserl’s phenomenological method, the theoreticians of literary estrangement believed that what distinguishes verbal art from ordinary language is neither special words nor special metrical patterns, but rather the striking impression that words used in an unfamiliar way can have on our imagination. The effect of “estrangement” as described by the Formalists is not unlike the sudden shock that Benjamin’s *flâneur* experiences on the streets of Paris or in the galleries of the luxury shopping malls, the arcades. Both conceptions convey a modernist fascination with novelty and freshness of experience. It is noteworthy that in the late 1920s both Benjamin and the Formalists (except for Roman Jakobson) joined the camp of Marxist historical materialism and made forays into the sociological study of literature and culture.

Unlike Shklovsky, Yuri Tynianov and other members of the Formalist circle who remained in the Soviet Union, Roman Jakobson chose the precarious yet ultimately liberating fate of an exile. He first moved to Prague, where he became a cofounder of the famous Linguistic Circle, but eventually to the United States. A rigorous linguist, Jakobson believed that all human activities are organically connected with language. Even if language is not directly involved in the act of creation, it still remains a model for such an act. He shared this creed with other Formalists and with his Prague colleagues, who were later dubbed “structuralists.” What distinguished these thinkers from the Romantic theoreticians of literary art was their conviction that the autonomous value of literature was due not to the artistic genius, but rather to the workings of language itself. The methodology of structural analysis became one of the most fruitful twentieth-century approaches to literary studies. The analysis of Baudelaire’s poem *Les chats* by Jakobson and Claude Lévi-Strauss, published in 1962, is often seen as a structuralist classic, which painstakingly analyzes the text as a system of phonological, semantic, and syntactic oppositions and equivalences. However, the heyday of structuralism did not last long. The methodology exemplified by Jakobson’s and Lévi-Strauss’ work attracted criticism from Jacques Derrida and a number of American critics who came to be known as the school of Deconstruction. They realized that the binary oppositions favored by the structuralists represent a mode of thinking typical of ideologies. While structuralist critics always tried to fit a text into a system of oppositions whose logic they could expose, deconstructive critics tried to uncover the *aporias* of the text, i.e., the impasses of meaning where the binary logic no longer works and where the text begins to contradict itself or fails to make sense.

Post-structuralism was the last major theoretical movement of the twentieth century. Although the origins of post-structuralism are still debatable, no one doubts that two Bulgarian émigré scholars in Paris, Tzvetan Todorov and Julia Kristeva, made crucial contributions to this movement by translating, commenting and elaborating on the works of the Russian thinker Mikhail Bakhtin. A contemporary and one of the first critics of Russian Formalism, Bakhtin developed a language-centered philosophy of culture, in which literature figured as a product of collective consciousness. Unlike the formalists and structuralists who focused on discrete texts as synchronic structures, he investigated literary discourse both synchronically and diachronically, looking at speech genres as products of different ages and as reflecting different conceptions of time and space (“chronotopes”). The idea of Bakhtin’s that resonated with the French poststructuralists was the polyphonic or dialogic propensity of language. According to Bakhtin, no word can have a discrete meaning controlled by the author of a given text. Because language is intersubjective and subject to perpetual evolution, individual language users are always interpreters, rather than sovereign masters of their language. True literary masters recognize the Protean nature of their medium and allow language to display its “intertextuality” (a term coined by Kristeva). As Roland Barthes demonstrated in *S/Z*, a literary work should not be treated as a stable object or delimited structure. In fact, the most intriguing works are not those that can be easily interpreted by critics, but rather those that are *writeable* (*scriptable*). That is to say, the most interesting works are those that have no determinate meaning. Such works provoke an active response from readers, encouraging them to play with the work’s elements and appropriate them for his or her own discourse. Because all literary works are woven out of the materials borrowed from other works, a strict division of labor between the producers of literature, the critics, and the consumers is abolished. Echoing the Frankfurt School, Barthes and other *Tel Quel* critics rebelled against the commodification of literature and defended the Romantic view of literary art as the medium of endless creative self-expression and self-understanding.

Another French thinker whose ideas ushered in post-structuralism was Jacques Lacan. Trained as a psychiatrist and Freudian psychoanalyst, Lacan was also deeply interested in philosophy and the arts. In his youth he was involved with the Surrealist movement and attended Alexander Kojève’s lectures on Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*. In the late 1940s and early 50s Lacan encountered Saussurean linguistics and the works of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Roman Jakobson. This encounter led to Lacan’s major psychoanalytic discovery summarized in the pithy phrase: “the unconscious is structured like a language.” This insight allowed Lacan to develop a dialectical theory of the psychic life, which he depicted graphically as a “Borromean knot” (a figure represented on the Borromeo family coat of arms) consisting of three interlinked rings that represent three psychic registers: the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. The Imaginary register is activated during the so-called “mirror stage,” when the child, confronted with her own reflection in the mirror, perceives herself as different from the rest of the world and begins to form the ego. For Lacan, who wished to challenge ego-psychology, the child’s budding self-awareness is a “misrecognition” insofar as it substitutes the flux of impressions and mental images with a holistic self-image. The introduction to the Symbolic order, which means not only language, but the entire cultural-semiotic reality (analogous to Hegel’s “objective Spirit”) marks the beginning of socialization. In the Symbolic stage we learn to control our libido and experience constant frustrations caused by the ever unsatisfied and, in Lacan’s view, ultimately unquenchable desire. Only the death-drive, activated through some kind of trauma or transgression, allows a human subject to experience the ecstatic *jouissance* through which we can glimpse the Real. Lacan’s theory did not only have a significant impact on philosophy, literary and film theory, but also stimulated the interface among these disciplines. Thus Lacan influenced Feminist thinkers like Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Laura Mulvey, the Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, and the Ljubljana school of psychoanalysis and contemporary philosophy, which includes figures like Slavoj Žižek, Alenka Zupančič, and Mladen Dolar.

In general, the advent of post-structuralism brought closer together the arts, humanities, social and even natural sciences. New poststructuralist epistemologies and ontologies allowed a number of postmodernist thinkers to challenge the grand narratives of modern socio-political organization and cultural hierarchies. Confronted with the postmodern crises of canons and values, philosophers throughout the world were impelled to rethink the traditional role of philosophy as a search and representation of the Truth and to look for new methodologies and a new disciplinary identity. Thus one of the most daring philosophical innovators in the Anglophone world, Richard Rorty in *Philosophy as a Mirror of Nature* (1979) crossed the divide between the “analytic” and the “continental” traditions to argue for a new hermeneutic philosophy. Instead of purveying the absolute truth, philosophy, according to Rorty, should aim at edifying humanity. In his next major book, *Irony, Contingency, Solidarity* (1989), Rorty argued that the only authentic position that such a post-metaphysical philosophical thinker can entertain is that of radical irony. According to Rorty, an ironist is someone who entertains doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered. Importantly, in this book Rorty gives literature the pride of place, because he believes that the novelists who present us with psychologically gripping accounts of human actions can often be more effective than textbooks on ethics and politics. For example, no textbook can make us understand selfishness and cruelty as well as do Dickens in *The Bleak House* and Nabokov in *Lolita*. For Rorty, philosophy and literature are different idioms that allow people to express themselves and communicate across all kinds of social, political, and gender barriers, attaining if not complete mutual understanding, then at least mutual empathy and a sense of solidarity.[[24]](#endnote-25)

Rorty is often described as a neo-pragmatist. Looking back at the origins of American pragmatism, we discover that its founders were also keenly interested in literature. For example, William James and John Dewey were life-long admirers of Leo Tolstoy and drew on his novels and non-fictional works in their philosophical works. In point of fact, many philosophical schools in the Anglophone world have been open to dialogue with literature. Drawing on literary texts to illustrate and think through ethical problems is perhaps the oldest and most widespread practice, which can be traced back to Shaftesbury and eighteenth-century moral sense philosophers. Thus, for example, in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) Adam Smith draws on Shakespeare to throw into relief the role of sympathy in moral judgment, whereas David Hume puts his ethical and sociopolitical ideas to test in his elegantly written *History of England* (1754-1761). The tradition of analyzing literary works alongside philosophical ones has never died out, for, as Iris Murdoch pointed out, “ethics and aesthetics are not one, but art is the great clue to morals.”[[25]](#endnote-26) A successful novelist and philosopher, Murdoch believed that novels are valuable to philosophers not because of the ideas they articulate, but because they bring home to us the “density of our own lives.”[[26]](#endnote-27) In literary works there is always “something moral which goes down further than the ideas, the structures of good literary works are to do with erotic mysteries and deep dark struggles between good and evil.”[[27]](#endnote-28) According to Murdoch, novels can actually make us wary of moral theory with its overly rational view of human behavior. Because philosophical writing involves a “disciplined removal of the personal voice,”[[28]](#endnote-29) philosophical theory inevitably deals with abstract universals, whereas the novels are “perfect particulars” that leave space for interpretation.[[29]](#endnote-30)

For Bernard Williams and Martha Nussbaum literary works are indispensable for moral philosophy that does justice to moral agents as concrete individuals shaped by their lived experience. In a series of works beginning with *Problems of the Self* (1973), *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973-1980* (1981*), and Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985)*,* Williams challenged contemporary moral philosophy whose understanding of responsibility remains strongly influenced by Kantianism. The target of his critique was the Kantian notion of moral obligation, which trumps all other kinds of motivations. Kant’s focus on the supposedly autonomous will undetermined by individuals’ dispositions, interests and social roles made him blind to the reality of our ethical life as members of specific communities. In *Shame and Necessity* (1993) Williams offered close readings of the works of Homer, Sophocles and Euripides, whose answers to the question of how to live a good life are often more satisfactory than those of Plato and other philosophers. According to Williams, Homer and the tragedians were often more insightful about moral life than Greek philosophers because they were more attuned to the contingencies of human fate and moral motivations. Taking a cue from Williams’ analysis of the ethics of Greek tragedy and the idea of “moral luck” that Williams developed in dialogue with Thomas Nagel, Martha Nussbaum’s *The Fragility of Goodness* (1986) provides a broad-ranging examination of the role of luck in Greek philosophy and tragedy. Given that in their pursuit of happiness human beings are vulnerable to factors that lie outside of their control, in passing moral judgments we should evaluate the person’s whole character, rather than her expressed intentions. To be able to understand a particular human being we should be attentive to the emotional dimension of life. As Nussbaum masterfully demonstrates in her more recent books, such as *Love’s Knowledge* (1992) and *The Upheavals of Thought* (2001), literature and other arts can help students of philosophy to deepen their understanding of moral psychology and sharpen their hermeneutic skills.

Analytic philosophy also did not neglect literary art and aesthetics. As is well know, Ludwig Wittgenstein was keenly interested in art and literature, and was on intimate terms with one of the most important contemporary critics, F.R. Leavis. We find remarks on literature, poetry, architecture, the visual arts, and music scattered throughout his writings on the philosophies of language, mind, and philosophical method, as well as in his personal notebooks. Some of these are assembled in Culture and Value.[[30]](#endnote-31) In contemporary analytic philosophy, however, philosophy of literature constitutes a buoyant subfield, which is beginning to interface with literary theory and criticism. Philosophers Peter Lamarque, Stein Haugam Olsen, and Mary Mothersill, and literary theorists Terry Eagleton and Peter Swirski (to name only a few key figures) have been debating such issues as the nature of fiction vis-à-vis literature and various ways in which literary works and/or fictions relate to the real world; the status of literature among other cultural practices; the mechanism of imagination and fifferent roles it plays in thought processes and narrative; the veridictory function of literature, and its aesthetic value.[[31]](#endnote-32) Another important philosopher who has dared to disregard the disciplinary boundaries between philosophy and literary studies is Stanly Cavell. In *Must We Mean What We Say?*(1958)he linked essays on Shakespeare’s *King Lear* and Samuel Beckett’s *Endgame* to reflections on Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* and J.L. Austin’s ordinary language philosophy. Cavell is particularly well known for his interpretation of Shakespeare as a poet who grappled with Renaissance skepticism and with the problem of knowing other minds.

In recent decades scholars have been increasingly concerned about the decay of literary humanities. According to some scholars, the current crisis in the humanities is partly due to the lack of cooperation between different humanistic disciplines. It has been argued that philosophers and literary scholars ought to expand their dialogue. The vital need for such a dialogue has become particularly obvious since the once buoyant field literary theory had declined in the 1990s.[[32]](#endnote-33) In response to this need, a number of interdisciplinary centers and working groups devoted to the study of philosophy and literature have emerged in Europe and North America. Our Center is part of this network and aspires to increase its visibility in the world. Our principal goal is to promote innovative research in such well established areas as hermeneutics, translation theory, aesthetics, and philosophy of culture, as well as in such comparatively new areas as neo-existentialism, the theory of fiction, literature and ethics, gender studies, and digital humanities.

The rich history of Bonn University makes it a perfect institutional setting for an interdisciplinary Research Center dedicated to the study of Philosophy and Literature. Along with the University of Berlin (now the Humboldt University) Bonn was one of the first German Universities in which Wilhelm von Humboldt’s vision of a research University was realized. The most prolific and influential Romantic literary critic, A.W. Schlegel, became Germany’s first Professor of Indo-European philology at Bonn in 1818. He also made important contributions to the study of literature in general and to the study of Romance literatures in particular. Another influential Bonn philologist who is regarded as the founder of the discipline of Romance philology was Friedrich Christian Diez. He was appointed in 1821 as a lecturer in Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese and in 1823 was promoted to associate professor. Romance philology maintained its tradition of excellence here throughout the twentieth century. For example, it was here that Ernst Robert Curtius spent the most productive years of his career from 1929 until 1951. Classical philology has been another highly reputed discipline at Bonn University since the nineteenth century. A.W. Schlegel was an important early contributor to this field as well. It was here that the young Friedrich Nietzsche began his studies under Friedrich Ritschl in 1864. The discipline of philosophy at Bonn also has an illustrious history and a number of famous alumni, including not only Nietzsche, but also Bruno Bauer, Karl Marx, and Jürgen Habermas.

1. Mikahil Bakhtin interprets Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy* as a Menippean satire in

   “Epic and the Novel.” See Mikhail Bakhtin. *The Dialogic Imagination,* edited by Michael Holquist. Translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981). 27. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. G.W.F. Hegel. *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art.* Translated by T.M. Knox. (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1975). 1: 593. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. Charles Baudelaire, “The Painter of Modern Life.” In *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays by Charles Baudelaire.* Translated by Jonathan Mayne. (London and New York: Phaidon Press, 1970). 32. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. Ibid., 13. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. Ibid., 32. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. “Allmählich hat sich mir herausgestellt, was jede grosse Philosophie bisher war: nämlich das Selbstbekenntnis ihres Urhebers und eine Art ungewollter und unvermerkter mémoires; insgleichen, dass die moralischen (oder unmoralischen) Absichten in jeder Philosophie den eigentlichen Lebenskeim ausmachten, aus dem jedesmal die ganze Pflanze gewachsen ist.” Friedrich Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse.* In *Jenseits von Gut und Böse. Zur Genealogie der Moral.* Herausg. von Giorgio Colli und Mazzino Montinari. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1999). 9-244, 19-20. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo: On How to Become What You Are.* In *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings.* Edited by Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005). 69-152, 104. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. Georges Bataille, “L’existentialisme.” In *Oeuvres completes.* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988). 11: 83. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
9. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
10. One should bear in mind, however, that Camus did not wish to be seen as one of the French existentialists (mainly for political reasons, since Sartre did not share his anti-Stalinist outlook). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
11. Georg Lukács, “Realism in the Balance.” In *Aesthetics and Politics,* translated and edited by Ronald Taylor, with an Afterword by Fredric Jameson. (London: Verso, 1977). 28-59. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
12. Agnes Heller, “Lukács and the Holy Family,” *Telos* 1984. 145-154, 153. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
13. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
14. See Walter Benjamin, “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy.” In *Selected Writings,* edited by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996. 1: 100-110. For an illuminating account of Benjamin’s conception of experience see Martin Jay, *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme.* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: The University of California Press, 2005). 312-361. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
15. See Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life.* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014). 110. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
16. Ibid., 111. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
17. Walter Benjamin, “Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century.” (Exposé of 1935). In *The Arcades Project*. Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999). 1-14, 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
18. See Richard Wolin, “Between Proust and the *Zohar*.” In *The Frankfurt School Revisited and Other Essays*. (New York: Routledge, 2006). 21-44, 22-23. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
19. Theodor Adorno, “Letters to Walter Benjamin.” In *Aesthetics and Politics*. 110-133, 116. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
20. See Richard Wolin, “The Adorno Centennial.” In *The Frankfurt School Revisited and Other Essays*. 45-59, 51. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
21. Richard Rorty, “Philosophy without Principles.” In *Against Theory: Literary Studies and the New Pragmatism,* edited by W.J.T. Mitchell. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982). 132-138, 137. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
22. René Wellek, “Poetics, Interpretation, and Criticism.” In *The Attack on Literature and Other Essays.* (Sussex, UK: The Harvester Press, 1982). 33-47. 35-37. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
23. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
24. It is also noteworthy that Rorty was one of the defenders of literary theory against its neo-pragmatist critics Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels. He called it “a species of philosophy, an attempt to weave together some texts traditionally labelled ‘philosophical’ with other texts not so labeled. See Richard Rorty, “Philosophy without Principles,” 136. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
25. Iris Murdoch, “The Darkness of Practical Reason.” In *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature.* (New York: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1998). 193-202. 202. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
26. Iris Murdoch, “Against Dryness.” In *Existentialists and Mystics.* 287-295, 294. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
27. Iris Murdoch, “Literature and Philosophy: A Conversation with Bryan Magee.” In *Existentialists and Mystics.* 3-30, 21. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
28. Ibid., 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
29. “The literary writer deliberately leaves a space for his reader to play in. The philosopher must not leave any space.” Ibid., 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
30. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, edited by G.H. von Wright (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998). [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
31. See Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, *Truth, Fiction, and Literature* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1994), Mary Mothersill, *Beauty Restored* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1984), Terry Eagleton, *The Event of Literature* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012), Peter Swirski, *Literature, Analytically Speaking: Explorations in the Theory of Interpretation, Analytic Aesthetics, and Evolution* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
32. See, for example, Peter Swirski 4-10. See also Christopher New, *Philosophy of Literature: An Introduction* (London, NY: Routledge, 2001). [↑](#endnote-ref-33)