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Introduction:

Towards a Conception of 'Literary Theory of Uncertainty'

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Uncertainty of meaning is a fundamental dimension and quality of literature and constitutive of what renders some literary works accessible, appealing and engaging across time and in different contexts. Uncertainty is a precondition for literature, indeed for any stabilisation of meaning. A greater or lesser degree of authorial and readerly awareness of this precondition and fundamental trait is possible, and thus, uncertainty can also form part of a narrative strategy and function as a literary device, used either to disrupt the seeming naturalness of a narrative or as a mimetic method to authentically render the uncertainty of reality and human perception. And uncertainty can be integrated into a critical reading strategy or interpretational attitude by which the fundamental uncertainty of narrative is acknowledged and the uncertainties and inherent tensions of a literary narrative are kept open and unresolved.

The notion of uncertainty of meaning has always existed and been relevant, if not in the form of explicitly recognised and theorised concepts, then implicitly present as the defining opposition of certain and decided meaning. In this sense all theory of literature, interpretation and meaning is also theory of uncertainty.

However, in the nineteenth century through the twentieth, the ideas of and thinking about uncertainty begin to consolidate into a more distinct branch in literary theory. This growing preoccupation in literature and literary theory with uncertainty of meaning and interpretation is linked to a general shift in how the world and human existence is perceived and to developments in the fields of physics, philosophy and psychology. As a new scientific view of the physical world emerges in the beginning of the twentieth century, notions of uncertainty become increasingly prevalent in all spheres of society, and scientific truth about the world and the human perception of it as well as the artistic representations and explorations of these undergo a noticeable change.

Uncertainty comes to function as a structuring principle and primary conveyor of meaning in literature in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The uncertainty of knowledge, epistemology and phenomenology are key issues in the impressionist and Modernist works of this period. Forms of uncertainty are used as subversive devices and strategies to challenge established literary conventions and to explore and develop novel philosophical and existential ideas, and the notion of uncertainty of meaning is established as a criterion of authenticity and truth in the literary representation of reality and human experience. This foregrounding of uncertainty in Modernist literature has had a radical and lasting effect on narrative, and uncertainty continues to hold a vital position through the postmodern period and into contemporary narrative where it still functions as a criterion for credibility in both fictional and nonfictional narrative.

Literary theory also becomes increasingly preoccupied with notions of uncertainty of meaning, representation and interpretation in the late-nineteenth century. A variety of sub-forms and related terms such as undecidability, indeterminacy, ambiguity, indistinction, obscurity, vagueness, opacity, indiscernibility appear at the heart of some of the most central discussions about the meaning and nature of literature. The literary theories of uncertainty in the nineteenth and twentieth century vary in their focus, emphases, terminology and explanations, and indeed they are often developed in explicit opposition to the conceptions of uncertainty that precede them. They are, however, aligned in their view of uncertainty of meaning as an inherent textual feature and a fundamental literary property. They share the perspective that the most interesting meanings in a literary text are linked to its uncertainty, indeed that uncertainty is constitutive of the very meaning of literature. They recognise that uncertainty is that from which meaning springs and on which reader-engagement hinges.[1]

There seems to be in literary theory and culture an implicit understanding of the significance and centrality of the notion of uncertainty, in literature fundamentally and in Modernist literature in particular. But there is curiously little conscious awareness or deliberate investigation of the notion of literary and interpretive uncertainty and few detailed and focused meta-studies on the theory of uncertainty. The present volume of critical essays attempts to make up for this. It represents an exploration of uncertainty both as a fundamental dimension of all literary theory as well as a continuation of the strand of 'theory of uncertainty' that runs through late nineteenth- and twentieth-century literary theory. The volume

draws attention to and expands this implicitly recognised, yet under-explored area of literary theory, as it looks at uncertainty of meaning and interpretation from a variety of perspectives, with a focus on the modern and postmodern period. It reinstates, investigates and further develops a number of concepts of uncertainty, unleashing some of the analytical force and potential of notions of uncertainty for the study of literature. And it emphasizes the link between literary appeal and uncertainty of meaning, thereby shedding light on the fundamental appeal and effect of interpretive challenge and recalcitrance.

Uncertainty, undecidability, indeterminacy, obscurity, etc. are contested terms, words with 'bad vibes' as Geoffrey Hartman has pointed out,[2] often associated with meaning-relativism, nihilism and the prejudices against deconstruction. This volume springs from the view that a conceptualisation of uncertainty need not, however, be vague, that the notion of uncertainty is not as elusive as is often presumed, and that it is both possible and desirable to explore a literary theory of uncertainty. The volume counteracts the existing conceptual vagueness with theorisations of uncertainty as a fundamental dimension of literature and offers analyses of the types and modes, uses and strategies and functions and effects of uncertainty in twentieth century and contemporary literature. In nine diverse essays by some of the most prominent, inquiring minds of the disciplines of literary, cultural and critical theory today, the volume thus draws the contours of the field of a literary theory of uncertainty.

Inevitably, several uncertainties are at play in the volume itself. The chapters are all to some degree determined by the very uncertainty that precedes language and discourse and which is also their object of study. There is a clear self-awareness in the volume of its inherent uncertainty as an attempt at textual fixation of meaning, and several chapters engage demonstratively with this feature. The volume arises from the zone of indistinction between theory and literature on which it also sheds light. As one contributor notes in the form of a rhetorical question, it is impossible to clearly separate theories of uncertainty in literature from theories of uncertainty that are literary. These are connected, and the volume deals in both, demonstrating exactly the literary nature of theory and the theoretical quality of literature.

The present chapter functions as an introduction, both to the volume itself and to theory of uncertainty as a literary-theoretical strand more generally. Its aim is to establish the theoretical-historical background for the volume by introducing some of the most significant points in the history of theory of uncertainty and relating these to the broader scientific and cultural context and to relevant theories and trends in other fields than the literary. My focus is mainly on the first half of the twentieth century which is characterised by a particularly strong inventive and productive theoretical energy, and which appears as a period of culmination for literary theory of uncertainty.

Nineteenth-Century Notions of Uncertainty

The authorial, critical and readerly awareness of the fundamental uncertainty of meaning in literature and its meaning-productive function and potential grows notably in the last half of the nineteenth century, but notions of productive forms of uncertainty are also present in literary theory and narrative before the more explicit theories take form in the early twentieth century. In 1817 Keats uses the term 'negative capability' to designate the special ability of great writers such as Shakespeare to accept uncertainties, doubt and mystery. In a letter to his brothers, Keats reflects on the insight he has had during a discussion with Charles Dilke that a prerequisite for literary greatness is an ability to accept uncertainty of meanings: 'several things dovetailed in my mind, & at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously – I mean *Negative Capability,* that is when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason'.[3] Uncertainty also clearly appears as an important aspect in early Modernist literature such as the works of Gustave Flaubert, Thomas Hardy, Henry James and Joseph Conrad. In *The Uses of Obscurity: The Fiction of Early Modernism,* Allon White shows how obscurity in the last decade of the nineteenth century began to function as a significant and positive aspect of English fiction. And Jonathan Culler, in his study *Flaubert: The Uses of Uncertainty*, sheds light on the undecidable point of view in *Madame Bovary* (1856), demonstrating how the novel obstructs the identification of a single narrator and how the narrative strategy of irony creates an uncertainty of meaning and undermines conventional reading strategies.

The authorial and readerly awareness of the undecidability between the domains of fiction and nonfiction, which is one of the most immediately obvious forms of uncertainty, is also fundamental and dates back much further than the twentieth century.[4] In the first edition of *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) Daniel Defoe credited the protagonist of the work as its author, which led many to read the novel in the referential mode as a true travelogue. This undecidability between autobiography and fiction in life-writing has been a particularly contentious form of uncertainty. Generic blurring of the boundaries between the autobiography and the novel is generally perceived as dating back to Rousseau's *Confessions* (1782–1789) and even Saint Augustine's *Confessions* (397-400), but he question of whether something has been made up or is true (in the sense of being in accordance with the real, external life of the author) has arguably been relevant to readers for as long as the form of the autobiography has existed.[5]

Literary experiments with the uncertainty between the autobiographical and the fictional mode begin to increase with literary impressionism around the turn of the century. In the late nineteenth century literature begins to reject the reading strategies of Romanticism, in particular the attempt to identify literary works with their author, and uncertainty is applied as a means to avoid identification in life-writing. Max Saunders's comprehensive study of the fusing of life-writing and fiction by modern and Modernist writers, *Self Impression*, which looks at the movement from literary impressionism in the late nineteenth century to Modernism in the early twentieth, thus shows how the conventional modes of autobiography, biography, fiction and criticism begin to blend and to disrupt each other, in works

by writers such as Conrad, Ford, Proust, Joyce, Woolf, Stein, Mann, Sartre and Nabokov.[6]

Another highly conspicuous form of literary uncertainty is related to the representation of speech and thought. In third person narration there are always two voices and, thus, potentially two perspectives at play, namely that of the narrator and that of the represented character, which may or may not be aligned. The narrative mode of free indirect discourse is particularly emblematic of this uncertainty.[7] This form of narration by which the speech or thought of a character is rendered in the idiom of the character but with the grammatical discourse of a third-person narrator which was later to become a standard style in fiction and an integral part of the narration in Modernist works by Woolf, Joyce, Mann, Kafka and many others, also becomes more prevalent in the nineteenth century and forms part of what has been termed the 'inward turn' of narrative. It was first used extensively by Jane Austen in *Emma* (1815) and in France by Flaubert in *Madame Bovary* (1856) where it famously formed part of the central argument in Flaubert's defence in the trial against him for obscenity; and it comes to play a central role towards the end of the century as an effective technique for rendering impressions. The inherent uncertainty of FID was also used strategically to trick the reader, for instance in the works of Henry James where the perspective of the narrator is made to coincide closely with that of the character in order to confuse the reader. Indeed, the narrative undecidability of *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) has fuelled a variety of differing and even contradictory interpretations.

The work of Joseph Conrad is another prominent example of early but evident uncertainty, as is demonstrated, for instance, by the obscurity and fragmentation of *The Heart of Darkness* (1902) and its assertion of the uncertain nature of subjective understanding. James and Conrad are representative of the broader preoccupation with the notion of the impression in which uncertainty plays a central part (and the two are often discussed as impressionist writers although both were ambivalent toward the term). This focus on subjective sensory experience and epistemological uncertainty of impressionism in the late nineteenth and at the turn of the century anticipates certain major scientific, philosophical and cultural changes. Impressionism can thus be seen as laying the ground for Modernism in which the deep engagement with the notion of the inherently uncertain and subjective impression is continued and elaborated.

There are also significant non-literary precursors to the specifically literary concepts of uncertainty developed in the twentieth century. At the end of the nineteenth century, a new position of uncertainty and the ethical vacuum resulting from a growing agnosticism put writers under pressure to look for alternative meanings. The dissolution of the religious meaning-system opened up a vast field of uncertainty to investigation, and writers engaged with this new field of uncertainty through formal and aesthetic experiments as well as ethical and existential explorations.

The notion of uncertainty of meaning forms an important part of the existential theory of Kierkegaard and the epistemology developed by Nietzsche, and both had a distinctive influence on the literary theories and works of uncertainty in

the twentieth century. In Kierkegaard's existential theory it plays a significant role in relation to the concepts of possibility, actuality and necessity and to his description of the human condition and of a viable existential position, which he characterises in terms of tension and unresolved movement between finitude and infinitude and between necessity and possibility. While Kierkegaard does not offer a theory of interpretation as such (at least not explicitly), he uses literature to demonstrate his theories and deploys strategies of uncertainty in his philosophical writings, including the use of pseudonyms and unreliable narration. His philosophical works are characterised by a multiplicity of perspectives that form part of a poetic practice aimed at reorienting the understanding of readers and at activating and inciting them to read in a participatory manner. With their narrative strategies of uncertainty and playful use of pseudonyms and the autobiographical mode, his philosophical works are evident early examples of a generic uncertainty which was to become prevalent with later, in particular poststructuralist critical positions, as they undermine the borders between criticism, fiction and autobiography.[8]

Uncertainty also features prominently in Nietzsche's theory and is entailed in his theory of perspectivism, the claim of the contingency of human knowledge and the notion of multiplicity of truth. According to Nietzsche, epistemology is necessarily determined and limited by our human perspective which we cannot escape, and there is no stable or objective point of reference by which a distinction between wrong and right perspectives can be determined. For Nietzsche, then, there is no 'real' reality which is simply contaminated and blocked by our perspective, but

only perspectives. As a consequence, he argues, we should acknowledge the impossibility of acquiring undistorted knowledge and instead consciously multiply our subjective perspectives on reality in order to attain a more multifaceted view of things. This philosophical position of perspectivism and theory of the uncertainty of epistemology are manifested through his famously contradictory and obscure writing, which also makes use of the autobiographical mode to demonstrate the subjectivity of perspective.

Similarly, the notion of the unconscious, which is one of the central conceptualisations of uncertainty in the twentieth century, is an idea that manifests itself throughout the nineteenth century, long before Freud.[9]

Twentieth-Century Notions

Religious uncertainty appears to be at least in part what drives the writer Stephen Reynolds's to launch the term 'autobiografiction' in his 1906 essay of the same title. Autobiografiction designates a contemporary literary genre in which fiction, autobiography and essayism are blended in order to obtain and convey in an adequate, authentic and engaging manner experiences of a spiritual nature (in a broad and secular sense). Apparently unaware of the potential width and inclusivity of the concept and unsuspecting of the predominance that this conspicuously postmodern-sounding literary form was to have in Modernist literature later in the same century, as well as in the following, Reynolds presents autobiografiction as a 'minor literary form'. He explains the undecidable nature of autobiografiction by comparing it to sulphur in its state of equilibrium:

> So long as the very definite temperature and pressure are unchanged, the sulphur remains in that indefinite state of neither solid, nor liquid, nor gas, but something between the three. So with autobiografiction. It is so indefinite, and shades off so gradually into better marked, well-known forms, that its existence as a distinct literary *genre* appears disputable. At the same time it is the outcome of definite tendencies and has a very definite position on the literary chart. Where the three converging lines – autobiography, fiction, and the essay – meet, at that point lies autobiografiction.[10]

'Autobiografiction' is one of the earliest examples of an explicitly formulated literary theoretical concept of uncertainty and remarkably captures a literary form the prevalence of which has since only increased. It anticipates both Serge Doubrovsky's coining of the term 'autofiction' in 1977[11] as well as more recent terms such as 'autotheory' (which designates the blending of autobiography and theory in contemporary literature).

The growing awareness of the literary potential of uncertainty in the early twentieth century is further demonstrated by Ford Madox Ford's 1914 essay 'On Impressionism'. Here Ford describes literary impressionism both as a genre that is based on the recognition of the productive potential of uncertainty of meaning and as a method in which uncertainty is used as a narrative and stylistic device in order to mimic life and persuasively render its distinctive character of 'odd vibration' and 'haze' and its quality of 'shimmering'.[12] Impressionism is represented by Ford as a

form of psychological or epistemological realism in literature and as a method that takes seriously the fundamental insight that a writer, as any other human being, is determined by a particular subjectivity and a naturally restricted memory. Ford's literary impressionism is based on the view that 'the general effect of a novel must be the general effect that life makes on mankind'.[13] Ford thus explains that he and his friend and collaborator Joseph Conrad accepted the label 'impressionists' because they recognised that life appeared to them in a certain way, namely through impressions; they 'saw that Life did not narrate, but made impressions on our brains. We in turn, if we wished to produce on you an effect of life, must not narrate but render … impressions'.[14]

The theories of Reynolds and Ford are examples of early signs of authorial awareness of the significance and potential of uncertainty as a literary device as well as a fundamental and unavoidable element in literature. They entail a view of uncertainty not as a problem or obstacle to interpretation but, on the contrary, as a quality and a possibility. Their appreciation of uncertainty as a strategy for production of meaning illustrates a general shift in the cultural attitude towards uncertainty in the first half of the century and a first step in the solidification of the notion of uncertainty in literary theory and culture.

Ford's approach to literary uncertainty is, then, indicative of a general shift in how the world and human existence in it are perceived in the twentieth century. The recognition and the ideas of uncertainty and undecidability begin to challenge and irrevocably reshape epistemological and ontological categories and change the way the world is experienced, conceptualised and represented. The increase of

uncertainty in the literature of the first half of the century thus corresponds and is connected to an increasing awareness of the significance of uncertainty in society and culture more broadly. In the twentieth century the notion of uncertainty appears at the centre of some of the most influential theories, playing a crucial role in science and technology as both an object of ground-breaking discoveries and a driving force for new developments. In physics the theory of quantum mechanics is established, building on Einstein's theory of relativity of time and space. Wave/particle duality is discovered. And with the Uncertainty Principle, Heisenberg proves that the position and the momentum of a particle cannot be measured with absolute precision, and that the more accurately one of these values is measured, the less accurately we know the other, thereby showing that the act of observation affects the observed object and thus pointing to the indeterminacy of scientific knowledge. Other ideas that significantly undermine the classical realist and logical positivist positions are developed, such as the notion of observer-induced retroactive causal influence. In 1931 Gödel publishes his Incompleteness Theorems which show the limits of provability in formal axiomatic theories as they demonstrate that in any sufficiently complex and coherent formal system there exist propositions which cannot be proved or disproved within that system. And in early computational theory the 'undecidable problem' is formulated in accordance with Gödel's incompleteness results.

In psychology, Freud further opens up the already partly registered space of uncertainty and obscurity between the conscious and unconscious with his explicit formulation of a theoretical distinction between these two levels of the human mind.

With the establishment of psychoanalysis, concepts of uncertainty such as ambivalence, overdetermination, the latent (vs. the manifest), the uncanny and the repressed are introduced. These fundamental psychoanalytical categories soon become widely adopted and used in contemporary culture. In the field of philosophy phenomenology develops a definition of reality from an experiential vantage point as it investigates the appearance of objects and the process of perception of the human mind. Thereby it includes the notion of subjectivity in the description of reality, rejects the logical positivist conception of an objective reality and the notion of the unity of science. In the study of language Saussure undermines the notion of the referentiality of language and the idea that meaning arises in a relation between signs and the world as he puts the notions of the arbitrary and the differential character of the sign at the centre of linguistics and semiology, showing that the meaning of a word is a value that is delimited by the other words in the same enclosed, self-organizing and non-referential language system.

The recognition of the incompleteness and uncertainty in all seemingly consistent and complete systems and of the potential unresolvable ambiguity of (physical) phenomena, then, also gains influence in the humanistic scientific fields, particularly in relation to the accounts of the system of language and of linguistic representation. Roman Ingarden develops a phenomenological theory of literature in which the concept of 'Unbestimmtheitstellen' designates a fundamental form of literary uncertainty. And with New Criticism theorists such as William Empson and Cleanth Brooks put uncertainty of meaning at the centre of investigation in literary studies, albeit with attention primarily to poetry. Here uncertainty becomes the

primary and explicit focus of a broader literary theoretical movement, primarily in the form of the concept of ambiguity and with particular attention to the notion of over-determination and condensation of many meanings around a particular word (or image or sentence). In New Criticism poetic language is presented as defined by its inherent ambiguity as well as its deliberate use of this form of uncertainty. Brooks thus writes that 'Even the apparently simple and straightforward poet is forced into paradoxes by the nature of his instrument'.[15]

As philosophy, linguistics, art, political and literary theory begin to merge into the field of Critical Theory in the second half of the twentieth century, uncertainty remains a central notion, and the emphasis is shifted from inherent textual uncertainties to the uncertainty of interpretation. The concept of the 'text' is widened to include all forms of discourse. Interpretive and critical strategies of uncertainty are developed by a range of theorists, and a variety of terms of uncertainty are developed. Building on Ingarden's term of spots of indeterminacy or indistinction, Wolfgang Iser posits the concept of 'Leerstelle' or 'gaps of indeterminacy', and argues that 'The indeterminate elements of literary prose – perhaps even of all literature – represents the most important link between text and reader'.[16] Giorgio Agamben develops the concept of 'zones of indistinction' in his politico-theoretical theory of the state of emergency. Gilles Deleuze works with the notion of indiscernibility. Derrida introduces the concepts of 'undecidabiliy' and 'undecidabilities', distinguishing these from the notion of 'indeterminacy'.[17] Paul de Man too uses the term 'indeterminacy' in his analyses of the tension between the rhetorical and grammatical in literature. And Geoffrey Hartman argues for a

particular 'hermeneutics of indeterminacy' as he uses the concept of indeterminacy to develop his theory of literary criticism, arguing that 'Indeterminacy, as a concept, resists … the complicity with closure'.[18]

At the same time uncertainty is, as already mentioned, foregrounded in Modernist literary narrative. In the post-impressionist and through the Modernist period writers such as Ford, Proust, Kafka, Woolf, Musil and Joyce use uncertainty extensively, as a structuring principle and a guiding philosophical idea in their literary-philosophical explorations of fundamental categories of epistemology, reality, subjectivity, representation and interpretation. And uncertainty continues to feature prominently in late Modernism in works by writers such as Beckett and Blanchot.

Towards the end of the century, a general, albeit implicit understanding seems to form in literary theory of uncertainty as a crucial twentieth-century notion and as particularly characteristic of Modernist literature. Uncertainty of meaning and interpretation appear to be theoretically somewhat naturalised and appears as a central notion in several prominent theories and conceptualisations, including Wayne C. Booth's concept of the unreliable narrator, Julia Kristeva's perspectives on the undecidability of poetic language, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's structural theory on the concept of ambiguity, J. Hillis Miller's deconstruction-based notion of 'unreadability', Allon White's study of early modernist 'obscurity' and Umberto Eco's notion of the 'open work'. The terms 'undecidability' and 'indeterminacy' also begin to be used pejoratively in the critical responses to deconstruction and the relativism that some consider it to entail. Defending the notion of 'determinacy' Charles Altieri

writes critically of 'indeterminacy theories' and states that '[i]f there is any doctrine that constitutes a shared ideology in recent literary studies, it must be the belief that substantial aspects of literary meaning are indeterminate'.[19] And Stanley Fish, defending his own claim of the instability of the text, includes himself among what he calls the 'accused apostles of indeterminacy and undecidability'.[20] While these theories do not grow clearly out of a collective critical movement, as is arguably the case with New Criticism and the poststructuralist concepts, they nevertheless mark significant points in the further development of theory of uncertainty and demonstrate a continued theoretical interest in the notion and a sustained, although largely implicit understanding of uncertainty as fundamental and fundamentally meaning-productive in literature.

Uncertainty in Contemporary Literature and Beyond

Uncertainty continues to be a defining feature in postmodernist and contemporary literature, although the more productive forms appear to morph into more problematising forms that challenge meaning altogether in late Modernism and postmodernism, and literary experiments with epistemology seem to be replaced with experiments with undermining ontological categories. In today's literary environment, the belief in the ability of nonfictional narrative to objectively represent reality has been severely reduced, and at the same time the status of fiction has been radically altered. As a result, the dichotomy between nonfiction and fiction is in decline, the relation between referentiality and construct is being reshaped, and the conception of truth and truthful representation is changing. The

conventional notions of truth and objectivity have largely been rendered vacuous, and nonfiction has gained a reputation of being naïve, based on the illusion of objective and direct presentation of reality. Fiction, in turn, has come to be perceived as being detached from reality and thus irrelevant and futile, and there has in recent years been a growing disinterest in conventional fictional narrative. At the same time contemporary literature and readership are characterised by impatience with post-modern meaning-relativism and a longing for literary commitment to truth and authenticity. In this context, uncertainty appears as an increasingly central notion on which credibility and truthfulness hinge.

Uncertainty has come to play a particularly significant role in the recent trend in life-writing of blending of fictional and autobiographical modes and in the literary forms that are often branded as 'autofiction'. Contemporary works of autofiction entail a move away from the postmodern condition and indicate a return of a need for meaning and truth in literary culture. Instead of reviving an outdated concept of truth or reality, contemporary literary works of generic uncertainty, however, imply a concept of truth based on honesty and authenticity for which the indistinction or undecidability between fiction and fact becomes a precondition. There is thus a tendency in contemporary literature to combine referentiality and construct, fiction and fact, and thus to use uncertainty to obtain a more credible expression in tune with today's conception of truth and reality.

This movement has morphed into the recent trend of 'autotheory' in which theory and essayism are fused with autobiography, as in works by Karl Ove Knausgård, Chris Kraus and Maggie Nelson.[21] Although generally perceived as a new

phenomenon, this contemporary blending of philosophy, criticism, theory and personal experience and narrative clearly invokes Reynolds's concept of 'autobiografiction' as well as the merging of the philosophical work and the essayistic with fictional or nonfictional life-narrative that is so characteristic of Modernist literature (for instance Proust, Woolf, Musil, Kafka and Joyce). This testifies to the continued relevance of theory of uncertainty. In an era where new notions of truth and credibility are being challenged by genres and forms of 'post-truth', new dimensions of uncertainty of meaning and interpretation are coming into light. In this context it is becoming more critical to distinguish between productive forms of uncertainty in literature and other, more cynical forms and genres of uncertainty such as fake news.

The notion of uncertainty clearly has relevance beyond the field of literature and for the study of meaning and interpretation in a much broader sense. It has traction in other media, including visual arts, film and performance, and in other disciplines, such as philosophy, critical theory and cultural studies. Recognising the significance of the notion of uncertainty in the field of literature specifically, the volume also points to the relevance of the notion in the study of meaning and interpretation in general. This volume on literary theories of uncertainty, then, represents one path in a critical exploration and of a general theory of uncertainty.

Connections and Tensions in Theory of Uncertainty

With New Criticism uncertainty of meaning is brought to the fore of literary theory, and as the poststructuralist theories engage with the role of uncertainty in the production of meaning, they enter into an already established discussion. This theoretical relation is indeed explicitly expressed in several of the poststructuralist theories. Hartman presents his hermeneutics of indeterminacy as being both in opposition to and based on New Criticism. He recognizes certain elements of New Criticism as valuable but rejects the primacy given to art over criticism.[22] De Man too presents his views on formal analysis as partly developed in extension from and partly in opposition to New Criticism, arguing that New Criticism reproduces the false metaphorical model that explains literature in terms of an inside/outside opposition which has long been governing criticism.[23] And Derrida also distances himself from New Criticism, though more implicitly so, as he denounces undecidability in the sense of 'lexical richness' and polysemy and argues for a radically extended notion of undecidability as a precondition for all language and discourse.[24]

Even though the poststructuralist theories of uncertainty do not in any unified manner present a clear and delimited definition of a concept of undecidability, they also all to some extent contest the definition of meaning as determined by the text only and emphasize the role of the reader and critic in the production of meaning and thus in the very formation of literature. In this way they represent a dismissal of the delimited focus on textual (a conventional, narrow sense) and poetic ambiguity that characterizes New Criticism and a radical widening as well as destabilization of the concept of meaning, since meaning is made to hinge

on interpretation. And they reflect a shift in the view of the system of language as they emphasize the instability and incoherence in this system and its elements of arbitrariness. Their aim is, however, not simply to reveal the dysfunctions of the system and criticize the existent models of literary analysis that assume its coherence and decidability. They also show a strong interest in investigating and illustrating the effect of meaning production and readerly stimulation of the instability and undecidability in the literary system. And notably, the conception of uncertainty as the crucial point of meaning-production and reader-engagement in a literary text is maintained in the poststructuralist theories of uncertainty. As the notion of uncertainty as a meaning-productive device and a fundamental literary quality thus appears as a clear link between these two theoretical movements, it also becomes evident how the question of uncertainty runs through literary theory in the twentieth century as a central line, structuring the discussions about the meaning and nature of literature. While the notion of uncertainty itself is generally not granted thorough or focused attention in poststructuralist theories of uncertainty,[25] the notion of uncertainty functions as an indispensable element in the arguments.

The conflicts between the theoretical positions of twentieth-century theory of uncertainty arise not so much out of fundamentally contradictory conceptions of the nature of literature and interpretation; rather the tensions between New Criticism and poststructuralist theory, on the one hand, and between structuralism and poststructuralist theory, on the other, reflect a difference in focus and emphasis in the theorisations of literature and uncertainty. In fact, certain similarities and

shared interests point to a co-implication of New Criticism and deconstruction and challenge the general assumption of their opposition and contradiction. The New Critical definition mainly determines ambiguity as a textual phenomenon, and the deconstructive definition of indeterminacy establishes this form of uncertainty primarily as an interpretive problem. As such their definitions are not contradictory but rather oriented towards different areas of meaning. It is thus possible to view the two as part of the same conceptual movement and as marking a sequence of steps from a focus on text to a focus on interpretation in the production of meaning, as Timothy Bahti has showed.[26] Similarly, the view that theories of ambiguity in New Criticism focus on polysemy and plurisignation, and that poststructualism is, in contrast, generally interested in the impossibility of deciding on meaning in texts, and the resulting view that uncertainty in New Criticism is conceptualised in relation to the *presence* of meanings in texts and in poststructuralism in relation to the *absence* or impossibility of meaning, neglects a certain feature of poststructuralism. There is also in poststructuralist theory clear awareness of the potential production of meanings by uncertainty. The claim of the absence of certainty and decidability of meaning that is present in some form or other in the theories formulated by de Man, Hartman and Derrida is linked to a simultaneous assumption of the presence of several possible meanings in the literary text. The notion of uncertainty in this sense designates the impossibility of deciding *between* several potential meanings and thus does in fact entail a notion of plurisignation.

The main difference between New Criticism and the poststructuralist position is better explained as an epistemological one: New Criticism views

plurisignation as actually manifested, realised and objectively present in the text, whereas the poststructuralist theories tend to view the multiple meanings of a text as present as a 'potential', the realisation of which depends on the reading and interpretation of the text. The most obvious and significant divergence of the poststructuralist theories of uncertainty from New Criticism, then, is the radical extension of the notion of uncertainty of meaning as they use it not only to designate a fundamental feature of poetic language but of literature, literary criticism and discourse as such.

Another theoretical tension which is often misread as a contradiction is at play between the structuralist conceptualisation of uncertainty as ambiguity, as represented, for instance, by Rimmon-Kenan's formalist inspired approach in *The Concept of Ambiguity – the Example of James*,[27] and the poststructuralist concepts of uncertainty, for instance as represented by the concept of 'unreadability' in J. Hillis Miller's comment 'A Guest in the House', which is written as a direct critical response to Rimmon-Kenan's logics- and linguistics-based reading of James's 'The Figure in the Carpet'.[28] This is the tension between, on the one hand, the view of uncertainty as a deliberately applied literary device and as such a specific historical and context-dependent feature, and, on the other, uncertainty as a fundamental characteristic of and precondition for all literature. The main difference between Rimmon-Kenan's theory and the poststructuralist approaches is that while deconstruction typically makes claims about the area of uncertainty that concerns the fundamental nature of language and thus the fundamental uncertainty of all texts, Rimmon-Kenan looks at the forms of uncertainty that are deliberately and

strategically employed by the author. Miller thus develops 'unreadability' as a form of uncertainty that is fundamental to literature; and Rimmon-Kenan is interested in the notion of ambiguity as an authorial strategy rather than as an inherent literary feature. Rimmon-Kenan's approach is, however, not incompatible with an awareness and acknowledgement of the inherent uncertainty and undecidability in language and literature. And although her focus is on a different area of meaning, her method is not contradictory of the deconstructive emphasis on the unresolvability of uncertainty of meaning in literature. Although Miller, arguably quite rightly, criticises Rimmon-Kenan's approach for being reductive, simplifying and mistakenly trying to 'master' the interpretation of literature, thereby failing to recognise the fundamental unreadability of all literature, Rimmon-Kenan does in fact accept the possibility of sustained and unresolved uncertainty in literature. She thus writes that '[a]mbiguity exists in the in-between land of hesitation'[29] and that ambiguous works 'teach us the nearly impossible lesson of being capable of belief and doubt at the same time'.[30]

While the theories of uncertainty differ in their views and emphases, and there are tensions and disagreements both within and between the critical positions, they are all founded in the view that uncertainty of meaning is a fundamental trait and a constitutive element of literature, and that it is from the points and sites of uncertainty in a text that its most interesting meanings spring. As such the poststructuralist theories clearly continue the theoretical line which began to take shape already in the nineteenth century and which was brought to the fore of

literary criticism with New Criticism. To Iser, the production of meaning and thus the very formation of literature happen through the reader's engagement with the text's points of undecidability; de Man, not unlike Cleanth Brooks, views the contradictions and undecidability between grammar and rhetoric as the defining feature of literature and proposes to 'equate the rhetorical, figural potentiality of language with literature itself';[31] Hartman makes his idea of an adequate critical approach hinge on the application of indeterminacy in the engagement with the literary work; and Derrida views undecidability as a precondition not only for literary expression but for language and all discursive expression. Similarly, the theories of Rimmon-Kennan and Miller clearly build on the existing theory of uncertainty and explicitly position themselves in relation to both New Criticism and poststructuralism, and they testify to the continuation of the line of theory of uncertainty into the late twentieth century.

On the Volume

The present volume sheds light on uncertainty both as an intrinsic literary aspect, a specific device in literature, a reading strategy and a prevalent notion in twentieth-century and contemporary literature and literary theory. Its content is characterised by a considerable degree of experimentation and inventiveness and by a theoretical and conceptual variation which will hopefully trigger in the reader a stimulating bewilderment. A certain diversity in perspectives and variety of approaches follow naturally from the topic of uncertainty of meaning and interpretation which itself entails obvious tensions and (seeming) paradoxes and contradictions. Uncertainty

appears, consequently, as a highly complex and flexible notion in the volume, at once elusive and evident and of relevance and at play on several different levels and in different stages of the formation, communication and reception of the literary and the literary-theoretical text.

The volume is structured into three sections. In the first section on the poststructural legacies of uncertainty, Patrick ffrench first looks at the notion of 'suspension' which he presents as a problematic strategy of uncertainty in deconstructive thought that draws its force and its sense from the phenomenological register and literary representations. He explains the double nature of suspension, describing it as a mode of uncertainty that oscillates between the decision and its other, and which is both the suspension of a decision and a decision to suspend. ffrench looks at the deployment of the motif of suspension and its effect in literary examples in which the phenomenological and corporeal aspects of suspension are foregrounded. Assembling a number of instances of suspension, he sheds light on the heretical phenomenology of Bataillle and explores how existential states of contingency and improbability in Bataille's work translate themselves into tropes of physical suspension that entail a negative critique of groundedness, meaning and subjectivity. With Blanchot he shows how suspension as a mode of decisive undecidability pertains particularly acutely to the instance or event of death.

Norris, in the third chapter, revives the conception of poetry as a mode of critical discourse and as such not strictly distinct from the discourses of the disciplines of philosophy, history and science. With a series of poems or 'verse-

essays' he foregrounds some of the central scientific ideas of uncertainty which became predominant with quantum theory in the early twentieth century, such as Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle and Gödel's Incompleteness Theorems which inspired Derrida's formulation of deconstruction. Undecidability functions both as a theme and as an operative formal strategy in Norris' exploration of the status of such ideas when they are transposed from a broadly scientific or logico-mathematical context to that of literature, the arts or humanities.

In the second section on uncertainty in the context of life-writing, Christopher Fynsk first looks at the profoundly indeterminate writing of Robert Antelme in a letter to Dionysos Mascolo, written a little over a month after Mascolo had helped rescue him from Dachau, underscoring in his reading Antelme's strong ambivalence regarding the knowledge he relays in the letter concerning his experience in the camp and his return to the world. Juxtaposing Antelme's letter with Mascolos commentary on the letter four decades later and a text by Blanchot, Fynsk in this chapter investigates uncertainty in the form of the infinite in the human relation to speech and the bounds of linguistic freedom in social usage and sheds light on the significant impact of Antelme on Mascolo and Blanchot.

In chapter five Max Saunders uses examples from Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* – a work he defines as an autobiografiction – De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, Ford's *The Good Soldier* and the To-Day and To-Morrow series of predictions from the 1920s and 30s in his investigation of temporal uncertainty. Juxtaposing the retrospective narrative of autobiography and its hybrid forms with the prospective narrative of futurology, Saunders shows how these two

apparently incommensurable forms of writing share a kind of temporal dislocation, relocation or 'time-shifting' which disturb the reader's sense of time and place and demonstrates how such converse temporal dislocations of both modes can be mutually illuminating.

Rejecting the notions of 'authorial intention' and 'implied author', Mieke Bal, in chapter six, nevertheless sets out to complicate the potential presence of authorship in a narrative. Juxtaposing two different instances of novelistic undecidability, namely Cervantes *Don Quixote* and her own video-installation MADAME B, which explores the narrative uncertainty of Flaubert's novel, she develops a notion of the author as a ghostly presence that appears at the points or moments of undecidability in a text, not to determine or dictate what the text means, but as a presence and a spectral after-effect that make readers think beyond the obvious narrative plot. To the uncertainty of the author's ghost, Bal adds and sheds light on two other forms of uncertainty: between linguistic and visual imaginative thinking, and between showing and invoking trauma.

In the volume's third section on uncertainties in contemporary literature, Bruce Robbins, in chapter seven, investigates the uncertainty that results from the current socio-political circumstances in which our confidence in sovereignty and in the authority of the deciders of society has been shaken. He defines this as a contextual and relative undecidability, rather than a philosophical one, and he illuminates it through a discussion of the Nordic noir *The Keeper of Lost Causes* by bestselling Danish crime author Jussi Adler-Olsen. As Robbins shows, in this novel the essential task of the state of assigning responsibility for a murder has

succumbed to a form of undecidability that is specific to the Scandinavian welfare society, and he derives from the analysis a specific and conspicuous kind of Scandinavian welfare undecidability.

In chapter eight, Hannah Vinter sheds light on the inherent uncertainty of the collage form as she explores how the heterogeneity of Turkish-German author Emine Sevgi Özdamar's novel *Seltsame Sterne starren zur Erde* relates to the author's practice of creating theatre collages. Through an analysis of Özdamar's *Hamlet* collages – some of which are shown for the first time here – Vinter shows how the disruptive aesthetics and anti-authoritarian politics of the collages illuminate Özdamar's novel; and she sheds light on how Özdamar uses the material ambiguity of the collage form to challenge political ideologies and historical interpretations that impose fixed images of the world.

The volume ends with Nicholas Royle's dialogic chapter, set out in two parts: one interrogative and one reflective. By means of the quintessential uncertain linguistic form of the question, and with reference to Padgett Powell's *The Interrogative Mood* (2009), Royle challenges the fundamental premise of the very anthology in which his text participates, sheds light on the irreducible uncertainty of metafiction and demonstrates the literary dimension of theoretical writing. Uncertainty is then explored in the form of the double, the undecidable and the double-bind and as the single word 'twilight', in Royle's own novel *An English Guide to Birdwatching,* in the work of Hélène Cixous and as a figure in Derrida's reading of William Collins' 'Ode to Evening' and Thomas Gray's 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard'.

Divergent in their views on the nature of interpretation and uncertainty, the theories of and on uncertainty in this volume, as in the twentieth century generally, are nonetheless connected in that uncertainty plays a fundamental and indispensable role in their conception of the meaning of literature. Uncertainty is consistently presented as constitutive of meaning and as a defining feature of literature.

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[1] Moreover, literary theories of uncertainty tend to accentuate the unresolvedness of uncertainty and its effect of producing and nurturing meanings as particularly significant qualities, thereby evoking the notion of a distinct sustained and productive form of uncertainty. In my PhD dissertation *Undecidability and Uncertainty of Meaning and Interpretation in Twentieth-Century Literature and Literary Theory*, I investigate this specific form of uncertainty which I term 'undecidability' and distinguish from the notion of 'indeterminacy' – the latter designating an unlimited and unproductive form of uncertainty. The present introduction is in part based on and uses extracts from my thesis.

[2] Hartman, Geoffrey, *Criticism in the Wilderness: The Study of Literature Today* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 265.

[3] 'Letter to George and Tom Keats, 21 December 1817' in John Strachan (ed.) *The Poems of John Keats,* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).

[4] I do not wish to conflate 'undecidability' with 'uncertainty', and in fact I view the two as distinct, but related. My distinction in this chapter is based on an understanding of undecidability as a specific form of uncertainty of meaning, as explained in the note above.

[5] As Paul de Man remarks in 'Autobiography as De-Facement' 'the distinction between fiction and autobiography is not an either/or polarity but … is undecidable'. 'Autobiography as De-Facement', in *Modern Language Notes* 94:5, 1979: 919-30, 926.

[6] On the basis of this synthetization of modernism and life-writing, Saunders study challenges the description of modernist literature as impersonal and redefines Modernism as a period that engaged with the auto-/biographical by reinventing it, rather than rejecting it. *Self Impression,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[7] Various terms are used for this mode of representation in the study of narrative. In German it is usually referred to as 'erlebte Rede', in French as 'style indirect libre', while 'free indirect discourse' is used in the *Handbook of Narratology*, where it is also described as 'the most problematic and, no doubt for that very reason, still the most widely discussed form for representing speech, thought, and perception'. McHale, Brian 'Speech Representation' in Hühn, Peter Wolf Schmid, Jörg Schönert and John Pier (eds.), *Handbook of Narratolgoy* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), 435.

[8] And Kierkegaard arguably exercises a form of narrative deconstruction, undermining canonical works and conventional readings, for example as he rewrites the biblical story of Abraham in *Fear and Trembling* (published in 1843).

[9] Indeed, literature played a seminal role for the formation of psychoanalysis – see for instance Meg Harris Williams and Margot Wadell's *The Chamber of Maiden Thought* in which the authors explore the literary sources for the psychoanalytical ideas, starting with Shakesepeare and including Romantic and nineteenth-century writers such as Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and George Eliot.

[10] 'Autobiografiction', in 'Speaker', new series, 15, no. 366 (6 October, 1906), 28-30, 28.

[11] On the cover of his novel *Fils,* (Paris: Edition Galilée, 1977).

[12] I.e. to capture 'The complexity, the tantalization, the shimmering, the haze, that life is'. *Joseph Conrad. A Personal Remembrance* [1924] (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 191.

[13] Ibid, 180.

[14] Ibid. 182.

[15] Brooks, Cleanth, *The Well-Wrought Urn. Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1947), 10.

[16] Iser, Wolfgang, 'Indeterminacy and the Reader's Response in Prose Fiction' in J. Hillis Miller (ed.) *Aspects of Narrative* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), 1-38, 43.

[17] Derrida thus firmly rejects the notion of undecidability as an unlimited form meaning that has often been associated with deconstruction and presents undecidability as a restricted form of uncertainty, contrasting it to the notion of indeterminacy in order to refute the common accusation of deconstruction that it leads to relativism of meaning: 'I do not believe I have ever spoken of "indeterminacy", whether in regard to meaning or anything else. Undecidability is something else again ... I want to recall that undecidability is always a *determinate* oscillation between possibilities (for example, of meaning, but also of facts). These possibilities are themselves highly *determined* in strictly *defined* situations.... They are *pragmatically* determined. The analyses that I have devoted to undecidability concern just these determinations and these definitions, not at all some vague 'indeterminacy'. I say 'undecidability' rather than 'indeterminacy' because I am interested more in relations of force, in differences of force, in everything that allows, precisely, determinations in given situations to be stabilized through a decision of writing (in the broad sense I give to this word, which also includes political action and experience in general). There would be no indecision or *double bind* were it not between *determined* (semantic, ethical, political) poles, which are upon occasion terribly necessary and always irreplaceably singular. Which is to say that from the point of view of semantics, but also of ethics and politics, 'deconstruction' should never lead either to relativism or to any sort of indeterminism.' *Limited Inc.* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 148-49.

[18] *Criticism in the Wilderness,* 272.

[19] 'Literary Procedures and the Question of Indeterminacy', in Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle (eds,), *Critical Theory Since 1965* (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1986), 545-558, 545.

[20] 'Is There a Text in this Class?´ in Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle (edds.), *Critical Theory Since 1965,* (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1986), pp. 525-535, 525.

[21] 'Auto-theory' was used by the writer and philosopher Paul B. Preciado to describe his book *Testo Junkie* (2008) and picked up by Maggie Nelson to designate the hybrid form of her work *The Argonauts* (2015) on the book jacket of the same work. Since it has been used in literary journals and circulated in online literary criticism as a description of an emerging genre.

[22] *Criticism in the Wilderness: The Study of Literature Today* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 180.

[23] *Allegories of Reading. Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust,* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1979).

[24] *Dissemination,* trans. Barbara Johnson (London; New York: Continuum, 1981), 229.

[25] Iser is an exception as his theory of 'gaps of indeterminacy' is developed directly from Ingarden's concept of 'sites of indeterminacy' ('Unbestimmtheitstellen'). And as noted earlier, Derrida too insists on the importance of clear terminology as he establishes the distinction between undecidability and indeterminacy, although tellingly under pressure in the context of an interview where he is confronted with the accumulation of charges of nihilism made by critical readers against his theory of deconstruction.

[26] 'Ambiguity and Indeterminacy: The Juncture', in *Comparative Literature*, vol. 38, no 3, 1986, 209-223, 210.

[27] (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1977).

[28] , 'A Guest in the House: Reply to Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's Reply', in *Poetics Today*, Vol. 2, No. 1b (1980-81), 189-191.

[29] *The Concept of Ambiguity*, 15.

[30] Ibid, 16.

[31] *Allegories of Reading,* 10.

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