Martin Middeke • Christoph Reinfandt
Editors

Theory Matters

The Place of Theory in Literary and Cultural Studies Today
CONTENTS

1 Introduction: The Place of Theory Today
   Martin Middeke and Christoph Reinfandt

Part I Metatheory

2 Comes the Revolution
   J. Hillis Miller

3 Literary Theory in Reverse: The Literariness of Theory
   Gerold Sedlmayr

4 Misreading Shelley, Misreading Theory: Deconstruction, Media, and Materiality
   Christian Huck

5 ‘I am, yet what I am’: Theory, Being, and Dis-appearance
   Julian Wolfreys

6 Matter Against Materialism: Bruno Latour and the Turn to Objects
   Benjamin Noys
7 Avoiding Poststructuralism at Its Root: Towards a New Literary Theory  95
Dino Galetri

8 Interlude I: The Cultures of Reflexivity  113
Martin Middeke and Christoph Reinfandt

Part II Cultural Theory

9 The University: A Matter of Theoretical Importance  119
Thomas Docherty

10 When Theory Is Not Enough: A Material Turn in Gender Studies  135
Ingrid Hotz-Davies

11 Luhmann in da Contact Zone: Towards a Postcolonial Critique of Sociological Systems Theory  151
Lars Eckstein and Christoph Reinfandt

12 Passive Voice: Democratic Indifference and the Vibrant Matter of Literature  167
Dirk Wiemann

13 Managing Complexity: The ‘Literary Turn’ in Organization Studies  181
Nicola Glaubitz

14 Interlude II: Ideologies of Habitus  197
Martin Middeke and Christoph Reinfandt

Part III Critical Theory

15 Ecological Transformations of Critical Theory  205
Hubert Zapf
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>The Literary Work as Ethical Event</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Derek Attridge</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Ethics and Agency: The Limits and Necessity of Ethical Criticism</td>
<td>233</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sebastian Domsch</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>The Art of Compearance: Ethics, (Reading) Literature, and the Coming Community</td>
<td>247</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Martin Middeke</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Narrative Theory at the Limit</td>
<td>265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Richard Walsh</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Interlude III: On Interpretation</td>
<td>281</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Martin Middeke and Christoph Reinfandt</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Part IV</strong> Textual Theory</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>The Fate of Texts Under Changing Theory</td>
<td>287</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Herbert Grabes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Latour and Literature</td>
<td>305</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>David J. Alworth</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Reading Textures</td>
<td>319</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Christoph Reinfandt</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Plato or Aristotle? Form and Textuality</td>
<td>335</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sukanta Chaudhuri</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Coda: Theory Matters</td>
<td>349</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Martin Middeke and Christoph Reinfandt</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Index</strong></td>
<td>351</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When theory matters to Bruno Latour, he turns to literature. Take, for instance, his latest effort, in An Inquiry into Modes of Existence, to clarify a core concept of Actor-Network-Theory (ANT):

So under the word network we must be careful not to confuse what circulates once everything is in place with the setups involving the heterogeneous set of elements that allow circulation to occur. The natural gas that lets the Russians keep their empire going does circulate continuously from gas fields in the Caucuses to gas stoves in France, but it would be a big mistake to confuse the continuity of this circulation with what makes circulation possible in the first place. In other words, gas pipelines are not made ‘of gas’ but rather of steel tubing, pumping stations, international treatises, Russian mafiosi, pylons anchored in the permafrost, frostbitten technicians, Ukrainian politicians. The first is a product; the second a real John Le Carré-style novel. (Latour 2013, 32)

Appearing in the first chapter, ‘Defining the Object of Inquiry’, this passage invokes the popular spy novelist in order to establish a key distinction. The term ‘network’, as Latour employs it, signifies ‘a quite specific double movement’ of two phenomena that are interrelated yet irreducible to one

D.J. Alworth (✉)
Harvard University, USA

© The Editor(s) (if applicable) and The Author(s) 2016
M. Middeke, C. Reinfandt (eds.), Theory Matters,
DOI 10.1057/978-1-137-47428-5_22
another: the assemblage or ‘series of associations’ that ‘makes circulation possible’ versus the ‘flows’ (of information, material, people, and so on) that can move only ‘once everything is in place’. Thus, in this example, gas flows through an international energy network, which is itself a ‘setup’ that comprises human beings as well as things, technologies, spaces, laws, texts, ideas, politics, and even emotions. Such a setup appears relatively stable, until ‘some geopolitical crisis interrupts gas deliveries’. Then, suddenly, ‘everyone notices’ its contingency and volatility. And, at this moment, everyone feels like they reside in Le Carré’s world. ‘If this happens to you’, Latour quips, ‘you will perhaps notice with some surprise that for gas to get to your stove it had to pass through the moods of the Ukrainian president’. In ordinary circumstances, the kitchen and the political sphere seem disconnected, but crisis reveals them to be situated in the same heterogeneous network, a causal chain that distributes the effect of a single event across a vast topology.¹ ‘Had you anticipated that link’, Latour asks, ‘between the Ukraine and cooking your risotto?’ (Latour 2013, 32–3)

This question concludes a conceit that exemplifies Latour’s highly literary pedagogical strategy. When teaching his readers an important concept, such as the concept of network, he often relies on the devices of narrative prose fiction. Indeed, this entire chapter (this entire book) takes the form of what he calls a ‘thought experiment’—‘Let us imagine an anthropologist who has come up with the idea of reconstituting the value system of “Western societies”’(Latour 2013, 28)—that produces a character (‘an anthropologist’) and something like a plot (a series of interrelated conflicts). As a reader, I am meant to identify with this character, to inhabit her subject position as she conducts an “anthropology of the Moderns”, but I am also grammatically inscribed into the narrative as myself through prolific use of the second-person pronoun (‘your risotto’). This rhetorical strategy propels the Inquiry forward, giving it the momentum of a gripping narrative, even though Latour’s wide range of reference also prompts intriguing tangential questions. If our anthropologist ‘still has doubts’ about the ‘double movement’ of networks, for instance, ‘she can rerun the video of The Godfather: how many crimes have to be committed before influence finally starts to circulate unchallenged? What exactly is the “offer that can’t be refused”?’ (Latour 2013, 32) This reference to film, like the Le Carré reference above, functions as an illustrative example of a fundamental theoretical claim, but Latour offers no reading of The Godfather: no interpretive analysis of whether or how it disambiguates the infamous ‘offer’. Rather, within the thought experiment of the Inquiry, the film stands as a thought experiment in its own right, one that poses layered
(if concisely rendered) questions about the way that influence circulates within a criminal kinship network.

As such examples indicate, Latour frequently cites literary texts and cultural artefacts, yet his relation to the literary amounts to more than mere citation. In what follows, I track this relation (especially as it ramifies in his recent work) and offer three ways of conceptualizing it in the context of current debates about methodology within the discipline of literary studies. Then, I demonstrate how another thinker, the sociologist Erving Goffman, can be understood as an important precursor to Latour because of his own engagement with the literary. Finally, by tracing the parallels between these two thinkers, I argue for a new interpretive method—a ‘sociology of literature’ that would seek to apprehend the sociology in literature—and I briefly exemplify a version of this method through a reading of Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*, his 2006 post-apocalyptic novel. My ultimate aim is not to show that either Latour’s ANT or Goffman’s dramaturgical sociology offers the hermeneutic key to a given literary text, but to suggest that these two thinkers provide compelling provocations to the discipline of literary studies at present, during a moment when critics are exploring basic questions of how, why, and even whether to read.

To read almost any paragraph of Latour’s writing is already to notice his commitment to a sort of literariness. His thought experiments often include fully elaborated characters, humorous dialogues, complex scenes of conflict and resolution, and densely drawn settings. His style of argumentation, which Rita Felski aptly calls his ‘exuberance of idiom’, can range from lively exposition to jovial hectoring—often in a single paragraph (Felski 575). And his most abstract theoretical claims, such as the claim that any network setup involves a double movement of both human and non-human constituents, are frequently supported by little stories: highly recognizable episodes of what Heidegger termed the ‘average everydayness’ of Being (Heidegger 16). Thus, while Latour himself frequently acknowledges the interdisciplinary quality of his scholarship—which resides at the intersection of anthropology, sociology, narratology, philosophy, and even cosmology—I want to point out its discursive heterogeneity. Evident in both form and style, this heterogeneity makes Latour’s writing decidedly novelistic.

What happens when writing gets novelized? A prominent strain of literary theory has sought to answer this question. As M. M. Bakhtin famously argued:

> When genres are ‘novelized’, they become more free and flexible, their language renews itself by incorporating extraliterary heteroglossia and the
'novelistic' layers of literary language, they become dialogized, permeated with laughter, irony, humor, elements of self-parody and finally—this is the most important thing—the novel inserts into these other genres an indeterminacy, a certain semantic openendedness, a living contact with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality (the openended present). (Bakhtin 6–7)

Such novelization manifests throughout the full range of Latour’s work, from his early ethnographies of science (for example Laboratory Life [1979]) to his most recent anthropology of the modern world. In Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory, for example, he downplays the conflict between C. P. Snow’s ‘two cultures’, rejecting any difference ‘between “scientific” and “literary” minds’.2 Instead, he argues, the salient difference appears ‘between those who write bad texts and those who write good ones’, precisely because ‘good sociology has to be well written’ (Latour 2005, 124). So what constitutes well-written sociology in his view? While it is always premised on a notion of textuality that is very familiar to literary critics—what Latour dubs ‘[t]he thickness of any given text’ refers to ‘its pitfalls, its dangers, its awful way to make you say things you don’t want to say, its opacity, its resistance, its mutability, its tropism’—such sociology can take many different forms, all of which embrace ‘artificiality’ while striving for ‘accuracy’ and ‘objectivity’. Indeed, from Latour’s perspective, sociological writing becomes ‘all the more accurate’ when it acknowledges its own constructedness, its proportion of artifice to argument, which is one reason why his own work is so novelistic, in almost the exact sense in which Bakhtin used the term (Latour 2005, 124). The ‘tropism’ of Reassembling the Social is frequently ironic, humorous, and self-parodic. ‘I was ready to drop this label’, Latour confesses, ‘until someone pointed out to me that the acronym A.N.T. was perfectly fit for a blind, myopic, workaholic, trail-sniffing and collective traveller. An ant writing for other ants, this fits my project very well!’ (Latour 2005, 9)

The book is also richly ‘dialogic’ in the Bakhtinian sense, and not just because it participates in an interdisciplinary conversation. Part I ends with ‘An Interlude in the Form of a Dialog’ between a doctoral student (‘a bit lost’) and a professor (a bit surly) on the intricacies of ANT. Latour has included dialogues in earlier books as well, most notably in Aramis, or the Love of Technology, a work of ‘scientifiction’, which employs the literary device of prosopopoeia to give voice to its object of study: a failed transportation technology.3 But this device, like other novelistic aspects of Latour’s prose, is not merely stylistic sheen. If, as Bakhtin argues,
novelization renders a discourse more ‘flexible’ and ‘indeterminate’ and thus better equipped to maintain ‘living contact with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality’ or with ‘the open-ended present’ (Bakhtin 7), then there is a reciprocal relation between the discursive and conceptual infrastructures of Latour’s scholarship, between its novelistic aspects and its conception of reality as an infinite series of networks that are themselves open-ended, unfinished, and still-evolving. 4 ‘The notion of network’, he writes in the Inquiry, ‘designates a series of associations’ among a ‘truly stupefying diversity of [...] entities’ that are governed by ‘a principle of free association’, which means that, at any time, these entities can attach, detach, and reattach anew (Latour 2013, 33, 35). Networks are therefore animated, volatile, contingent, and messy. Their dynamism is the dynamism of ‘the open-ended present’, which contains, as a kind of latency, the ‘surprise’ of the future. This morning’s ‘network failure’ in Kiev produces tonight’s undercooked risotto in Paris. 5

Still, when Latour finally defines the term ‘network’ in his introduction to ANT, he does not turn to, say, media archaeology (with its emphasis on ‘technical networks’) or to the sociology of organization (with its emphasis on ‘organizations, markets, and states’) but to eighteenth-century philosophy—to Denis Diderot’s Le Rêve de d’Alembert (1769) (Latour 2005, 129). The latter, a philosophical dialogue that includes, by Latour’s own count, twenty-seven instances of the word “réseaux”, inaugurates a tradition, to which ANT has ‘always referred’, a tradition that conceptualizes ‘a very special brand of active and distributed materialism of which [Gilles] Deleuze, through [Henri] Bergson, is the most recent representative’ (Latour 2005, 129). Latour’s engagement with this tradition has enabled him to define agency as a ‘distributed’ property that belongs to networks of actors, both human and non-human, and thereby to distinguish agency from subjective intentionality. There are, he asserts in Reassembling the Social, ‘many metaphysical shades between full causality and sheer inexistence’, so theories of agency must not be ‘limited a priori to what “intentional”, “meaningful” humans do’, but instead must account for ‘any thing’ (for example ‘a hammer, a basket, a door closer, a cat, a rug, a mug, a list, or a tag’) that ‘modifies a state of affairs by making a difference’ (Latour 2005, 72, 71). This conception of agency, however, is not only indebted to the materialist/vitalist tradition of Diderot and Deleuze; it also derives from Latour’s adaptation of literary theory for sociological inquiry. And this adaptation, of narratology in particular, suggests a second way of understanding his relation to the literary.
In addition to being a novelistic writer, Latour is also a narratological thinker. When he explains in Reassembling the Social that ‘ANT uses the technical word actant that comes from the study of literature’ (Latour 2005, 54), he is referring specifically to the narratology of A. J. Greimas. ‘[A]n actant’, Greimas writes, ‘can be thought of as that which accomplishes or undergoes an act, independently of all other determinations’, meaning it is ‘a type of syntactic unit, properly formal in character, which precedes any semantic or ideological investment’ (Greimas 5). According to this analytical model, narrative structure includes three binaries of actants—subject/object, sender/receiver, and helper/opponent—which become binaries of ‘actors’ once they are ‘invested’ or figured semantically. Greimas continues: ‘An actor may be individual (for example, Peter), or collective (for example, a crowd), figurative (anthropomorphic or zoomorphic), or non-figurative (for example, fate).’ (Greimas 7) Thus, Greimasian narratology not only grants agency to non-humans but also provides two different ways of rendering the capacity for action, either abstractly as an actant or concretely as an actor, which is why Latour tends to use these two terms interchangeably throughout his work. ‘[A]ny thing that modifies a state of affairs by making a difference is an actor’, he asserts, ‘or, if it has no figuration yet, an actant’ (Latour 2005, 71).6

One of Latour’s most compelling and productive manoeuvres is to extend the terms of narratology beyond their conventional use, engaging the Greimasian analytic to account for the social world.7 Through this engagement, he develops two interrelated claims about agency. First, he aligns agency with effectivity: ‘An invisible agency that makes no difference, produces no transformation, leaves no trace, and enters no account is not an agency. Period. Either it does something or it does not.’ (Latour 2005, 53) Second, he differentiates agency (an abstract capacity for action) from its figuration (an empirical manifestation of that capacity). With characteristic verve, for example, he describes ‘four ways to figure out the same actant’:

‘Imperialism strives for unilaterism’; ‘The United States wishes to withdraw from the UN’; ‘Bush Junior wishes to withdraw from the UN’; ‘Many officers from the Army and two dozen neo-con leaders want to withdraw from the UN’. That the first is a structural trait, the second a corporate body, the third an individual, the fourth a loose aggregate of individuals makes a big difference of course to the account, but they all provide different figurations of the same actions. (Latour 2005, 54)
A greater emphasis on ‘figuration’, Latour contends, would enable sociologists ‘to gain as much inventiveness as that of the actors they try to follow—also because actors, too, read a lot of novels and watch a lot of TV!’ His point is that, if sociologists want to understand ‘complex repertoires of action’, then they ‘need as much variety in “drawing” actors as there are debates about figuration in modern and contemporary art’. In this respect, ‘sociologists have a lot to learn from artists’ as well as from fiction writers, since ‘it is only through some continuous familiarity with literature that ANT sociologists might become less wooden, less rigid, less stiff in their definition of what sort of agencies populate the world’ (Latour 2005, 54–5).

This provocative assertion suggests a third way to conceptualize Latour’s relation to the literary. Although he has not said much about any given text, it is clear that he considers literature to be an instrument both for apprehending social reality and for producing ‘good sociology’. Just as he encourages sociologists to attend closely to ‘[n]ovels, plays, and films from classical tragedy to comics’ (Latour 2005, 54–5), so too he suggests that, ‘when everything else has failed, the resource of fiction can bring—through the use of counterfactual history, thought experiments, and “sciencefiction”—the solid objects of today into the fluid states where their connections with humans may make sense’ (Latour 2005, 82). Referring specifically to the poetry of Francis Ponge and to the novels of Richard Powers, Latour seems to be suggesting that literature, even and perhaps especially the most outlandish literature, figures sociality in an accurate way whenever it renders a dynamic field of interaction among human and non-human actants. Literature, in this sense, constitutes a way of knowing about collective life, and thus provides some traction on the elusiveness of the social, ‘the paradoxical presence of something at once invisible yet tangible, taken for granted yet surprising, mundane but of baffling subtlety’ (Latour 2005, 21).

This understanding of (or faith in) novels and other literary texts aligns Latour with Goffman, whom he cites as an authority on the ‘thick imbroglio’ of sociality (Latour 2005, 46). While the two thinkers are clearly non-identical, their respective projects share at least three components, all of which are relevant to literary analysis: an emphasis on ethnographic observation and site-specific fieldwork; a sustained interest in non-human entities (which Goffman often calls ‘props’); and a robust relationship to literature and literary theory. Goffman’s Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (1959), for example, redeploy the dramaturgical rhetoric of Kenneth Burke’s A Grammar
of Motives (1945), a study that itself builds on 'the philosophy of drama embodied in Henry James's prefaces' (Burke 489). Moreover, Goffinan's scholarship often uses literary examples to mediate sociological concepts, as in the case of Asylums, his 1961 analysis of psychiatric care, which draws on Herman Melville and other literary authors to develop its claims.  

In different ways, then, both Latour and Goffinan treat literary authors as intellectual allies. Unlike literary critics, however, they do not seek to provide thorough or conclusive interpretations of literary texts. Rather than attempting to teach us what a given text is about, they ask literature to teach them about social life. While Latour tends to read novels, poems, plays, and films as thought experiments that can stimulate sociological investigation, Goffinan tends to read such artefacts as illustrations of social phenomena, yet both thinkers understand literary authors as fellow travellers on the journey to explain the intricacies of sociality. Latour's reference to The Godfather, a film adapted from a novel, typifies his strategy: the film prompts a question, invites speculation, and thereby clarifies the need for a conceptual innovation (that is, a two-part understanding of 'network'). This strategy launches what Rita Felski calls a 'canny provocation' at the 'entrenched ways of thinking' within the literary disciplines, for it provides an alternative to the paradigm of critique that has dominated these disciplines for nearly half a century (Felski 575).  

As literary critics—such as Felski, Franco Moretti, Heather Love, Ross Posnock, Leah Price, Stephen Best, and Sharon Marcus—pioneer various alternatives to 'symptomatic reading' and 'the hermeneutics of suspicion', Latour's work offers its own prompt toward salutary reorientation of the literary-critical enterprise. In addition to leavening the dominance of critique, it suggests a fresh critical agenda: a 'new sociology of literature' that would strive to apprehend the sociology in literature.  

Latour is a rather peculiar sociologist, even a sort of anti-sociologist, because he rejects the traditional understanding of society or the social as a special domain of reality (distinct from, say, the material or the natural) governed by abstract laws, structures, and functions. Rather, he considers the social to be 'the act and the fact of association', as Felski puts it, 'the coming together of phenomena to create multiple assemblages, affinities, and networks' (Felski 578). In this analytical model, in other words, the social is not a fixed container where anything can be situated, but 'a process of assembling' whereby persons, things, texts, ideas, images, and other entities (all of which are considered actors or actants) form contingent and dynamic networks of association (see Latour 2005, 1). As its title implies, therefore, the objective of Reassembling the Social
is to articulate an ‘alternative social theory’ that concentrates on associative processes: the coming together of actors (variously defined) into networks that must be traced in order to be understood (Latour 2005, x). Society is not presupposed as a cause, then, but defined as an effect of how actors assemble, disassemble, and reassemble anew. This new definition of society has emerged because Latour and other social theorists have become increasingly convinced that the traditional definition, as Patrick Joyce explains, ‘does not describe the world very well, neither the world of the present nor the world of the past’ (Joyce 2). So how might these currents in social theory make waves in literary studies?

One answer is that they might disrupt long-held assumptions and entrenched protocols. If society were no longer conceptualized (however implicitly) as a pre-existing and transcendent container—what Émile Durkheim called ‘that total genus beyond which nothing else exists’ or ‘that whole which includes all things’ (Durkheim 443)—then the basic (historicist) procedure of “placing a text in social context” would make no sense, since the latter would not be prior to and broader than the former. Moreover, if society were defined as an effect rather than a cause, then the trajectory of a typical ‘symptomatic reading’ would be inverted: instead of asking how society and its attendant ideology cause literature to assume a certain form, the critic would ask how literature imagines society and social relations. These two questions are mutually inscribed, rather than mutually exclusive, but they reflect literature in different ways. While the former configures the text as an epiphenomenon, however complex, of what Mary Poovey would consider an ‘objectified abstraction’—a given social order such as Victorian Britain or post-war America—the latter seeks to identify something like a radically literary sociology (Poovey 125). To ask how literature imagines society and social relations is not (or not merely) to see it as a reflection of or response to the material and ideological conditions of its production, but to assume, with sociologist C. Wright Mills, that ‘literary work’ constitutes a potent act of the ‘sociological imagination’: an act that theorizes the mystery and complexity of collective life (Mills 14). Which is also to assume, as Latour himself would put it, that ‘sociologists have a lot to learn from artists’ (Latour 2005, 82).

Reading McCarthy’s The Road with such assumptions in mind reveals the novel to be preoccupied with a profound sociological question: what is sociality (kinship, companionship, friendship) after the end of civilization (the world as we know it)? The novel tells the story of an unnamed man and his son, two characters who are trying to survive in the ‘charred
ruins’ and ‘cauterized terrain’ of a ‘wasted country’ (McCarthy 130, 14, 6). An unspecified apocalyptic event (a nuclear war, a natural disaster, an asteroid strike, or something else) has transformed the planet into a barren and hostile site. Our protagonists are almost always starving and cold and terrified. They trudge southward toward the coast, faintly hoping to find food and shelter there, yet anxious to avoid the bands of roving cannibals who stalk the road. Eat thy neighbour, it seems, constitutes the supreme commandment in a world where ‘all stores of food ha[ve] given out and murder [i]s everywhere upon the land’ (McCarthy 181). There is no “dialectic of Enlightenment” here—no mutual constitution of civilization and barbarism—but only barbarism itself, for the world is largely ‘populated by men who would eat your children in front of your eyes’ (McCarthy 181).

And yet, our protagonists soldier on, convinced (convincing themselves) that ‘nothing bad is going to happen’ because they are ‘the good guys’ (McCarthy 83, 77). It would be easy enough to dismiss this conviction as a kind of false consciousness, if the novel were not persistently directing attention to the question of motivation. Whenever the situation gets especially bleak, our protagonists remind one another of their ‘good guy’ status, which includes a mandate to keep ‘carrying the fire’ of civilization, amid and against the barbarism of ‘the bad guys’ (McCarthy 83, 79).

But this mandate becomes no clearer, not least because ‘fire’ is a rather ironic figure for civilization in a ‘mostly burned’ post-apocalyptic world, so we are left wondering why the father and son keep moving forward, especially during one particular scene, where they discover an underground ‘bunker’ that is stocked with food (‘[c]rate upon crate of canned goods’), water, clothes, tools, and supplies—all told, a ‘sumptuous’ array of entities that figure ‘the richness of a vanished world’ (McCarthy 12, 152, 139).

Our protagonists could stay here, warm and well fed, for the rest of their lives, but after a brief stint, they decide to depart, ostensibly to avoid being detected by ‘the bad guys’. Since the road is no safer (and arguably more dangerous) than the bunker, though, it is both perplexing and painful to watch them leave and resume their trek, ‘thin and filthy as street addicts’ (McCarthy 177). What compels them to do this? One answer is the bunker itself. The latter is not only a potential trap—‘Anyone could see the hatch lying in the yard and they would know at once what it was’ (McCarthy 144)—but also an intentional object that conveys a clear imperative to the father and the boy: survive. This object, this built environment, therefore constitutes an actant, in both the narratological and sociological sense. If Greimas would have us pair the bunker, perhaps with the cannibals, as the
first half of the ‘helper/opponent’ binary, then Latour would urge us to recognize such help as a mode of social interaction. Help is what ‘flows’ or ‘circulates’ through the ‘network setup’ of the bunker, which connects the father and the boy to the unknown survivalists who built the site. And this connection, in turn, reminds our protagonists that they owe it to their tribe (‘the good guys’) to keep surviving: ‘They would want us to’, the father assures his son, ‘[j]ust like we would want them to’ (McCarthy 139).

Consisting of humans and non-humans, this actor-network straddles the pre-apocalyptic past and the post-apocalyptic present, linking ‘good guys’ from two different worlds in fragile solidarity against the ‘bad guys’ who dominate the ‘wasted country’. Thus, by Latour’s light, McCarthy’s novel affirms the persistence of sociality despite the end of Society or Civilization or Culture. The latter, Latour would argue, are effects rather than causes, and their emergence, in McCarthy’s post-apocalypse, is predicated on the formation of countless actor-networks of ‘good guys’ and their implements of survival. The Road, in this sense, constitutes a ‘thought experiment’ in ‘reassembling the social’—an effort, however bleak, to imagine the reconstruction and reconfiguration of the ‘invisible yet tangible’ thing we call Society. But my point, in lighting McCarthy with Latour, is not to offer anything like a definitive interpretation of what is, finally, an ambiguous, elusive, and richly textured novel. It is, however, to suggest that Latour, like Goffman, provides a compelling prompt, or ‘canny provocation’, to literary studies at present. What ‘ANT has borrowed from narrative theories’, Latour explains in Reassembling the Social, is ‘not all of their arguments and jargon to be sure, but their freedom of movement’, by which he means, most generally, their analytical ‘pliability and range’ (Latour 2005, 55). From the opposite side of the disciplinary divide, literary critics might borrow something similar from ANT: not the full breadth of its ‘arguments and jargon to be sure’, but its ‘freedom’ to rethink basic assumptions about text and context, literary and social form. This would be the beginning of a new sociology of literature.

Notes

1. With this example, Latour develops his own account of the relation between the political and the personal, the public and the private. But within the study of American culture, the kitchen has long been understood as a political site in a very different way. For one classic argument, see May.
2. In this respect, Latour rejects the notion that sociology must banish literary thinking in order to be adequately scientific, a notion that was central to the formation of sociology as an academic discipline. On this formation, see Lepenies. For Latour’s effort to reimagine the history of sociology, see Latour (2002).

3. ‘Scientifiction’ is Latour’s term for a work that combines science and fiction, but that is not exactly Science Fiction. In one scene from *Aramis*, for instance, the constituent parts of the vehicle bicker with one another: ‘I glide right over the tracks’, proclaims the chassis to the computer chip, ‘and I actually even let myself be bumped a bit’; to which the chip retorts, ‘Oh, stop pretending you’re an automobile!’ (Latour 1996, 59).

4. As Latour asserts in *Reassembling the Social*, he ‘refus[es] to be cut off from philosophy’, so his claims can sound metaphysical and ontological, which is to say they can assume that form of propositions about reality (Latour 2005, 55). For a thorough account of Latour as a philosopher, see Harman 2009. And for a powerful critique of Harman and other philosophers who have been inspired by Latour, see Galloway (2013).

5. In dialogue with Latour, Jane Bennett analyses a real-life network failure (that is, the 2003 North American blackout) in Bennett (2010), ch. 2.

6. Latour also cites other literary theorists, such as Louis Marin and Thomas Pavel, but Greimas seems to be the most important to his thinking. ‘It would be fairly accurate,’ he writes in a footnote, ‘to describe ANT as being half [Harold] Garfinkel and half [A. J.] Greimas’ (Latour 2005, 54). For a thorough account of the term ‘actant’ in literary theory, see Herman (2000).

7. On Latour’s use of Greimasian narratology to analyse sociality, see Alworth (2010).

8. On ANT’s debt to Goffman see Law.

9. For a different account of the link between Latour and Goffman, see Love.

10. On Goffman’s use of Melville, see Alworth (2014).

11. On his turn away from critique, see Latour (2004).

12. The quotations in this sentence come from Best and Marcus. I am also thinking of Moretti’s concept of ‘distant reading’; Felski’s polemic against contextualization; Love’s method of ‘close but not deep reading’; Posnock’s definition of ‘receptive reading’; and Price’s account of ‘not reading’ and ‘rejection history’.

13. For a concise and instructive overview of the sociology of literature, see English.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


