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Introduction: Practice Is Not What You Think

This is a book about what we call today practice-based research.¹ It has grown out of a twin interest. Firstly, the experience of teaching in art schools and, secondly, working with filmmakers in the cinema of ideas.² In both situations, the same problematic imposed itself upon me: does reading theory and philosophy make you a better artist? This is a deceptively simple question with a complex set of answers. If we were to contend that reading literary theory made you a better reader of literature, or at least a different kind of reader of literature, then that would not be the same thing as claiming that reading literary theory made you a better writer. Indeed, there could be a significant period of time in which reading literary theory actually makes you a worse writer. It is telling how many academic authors never escape from that phase of their intellectual development. However, reading literary theory is certainly interesting and gives one a broader vista on literature and culture, making you a more interesting and interested reader than might otherwise have been the case.

Literary Theory is of course one of those gateway drugs into more hardcore philosophical practices. The same is true of the art theory and aesthetics that is taught in art schools. One can take a view on the relative degrees of rigour with which those texts are explored in the literature seminar or the art studio but in both cases the theoretical canon has opened up these disciplines to a broader range of thinking and interests than is defined by their ostensible object of study. In the case of art schools this is more readily reflected at the level of fine art practice than it is in creative writing programmes. Contemporary art, inside and outside of an academic context, has for some time been comfortable with the conjunction of art practice, history, and theory as the basis of its own identity, to the point that the three terms are increasingly indistinguishable at the level of their own practices. This is less true of creative writing programmes in general, although there are heroic exceptions, which much prefer an insistence on craft, structure, and the lone genius of the author, to an engagement with the instability of the signifier. If anything, a creative writing programme that offers

a theoretical component is more likely to grow out of an institutional interest in creative criticism and its poetic overspill than it is from a programme staffed by 'professional' writers.³ Perhaps, this is telling about who makes art and who writes literature and the contexts in which the work emerges.

I am not suggesting that the part-time artists working in our art schools are more committed to their own academization than the part-time writers who supplement their income by teaching on our creative writing programmes. Rather, literary culture outside of the academy is still dominated by an institutional apparatus that privileges the figure of the celebrity author over the challenge of complex thought. To the extent that creative writing programmes themselves, theoretical or otherwise, and the vast majority are otherwise, tend to receive a bad press in the very literary culture they feed. It is thought that writing is something that cannot be taught and those 'studying' on creative writing programmes are somehow deluded fools or idle beatniks putting off the day when they will have to go get a *real* job. We find a similar kind of self-loathing in the media about Media Studies in which commentators cannot imagine their own business to be suitably serious as to merit its own academic study. Suspicion of creative writing degrees by industry professional is a reflection of that industry's own sense of self-worth. The under theorization evident on most creative writing programmes is an indication that those degrees, and those drafted in to teach them, remain semi-detached to the serious business of the Literature department that spawned them as a route to increased student recruitment. The same is not true of the art school where there is a hunger for concepts and the challenge of speculative thought as part of a formation of the student that informs their creative practice.

This is a reflection of the very different histories of the academization of fine art and creative writing. The former, in the United Kingdom at least, emerged from the radical politics associated with the art school occupations of the late 1960s following the publication of the Coldstream Report and the student uprisings across Europe and as part of the civil rights movement in the United States.⁴ Key to the demands of the students occupying Hornsey, Guilford, and elsewhere was the demand that an art school education should not be solely a vocational training but should include an emphasis on practice as research and inquiry, explicitly containing a theoretical and philosophical component. Hence a core training in aesthetics and art theory remains the spine of any art school education worthy of the name, despite the ever-increasing pressures to once again utilize the art schools as a service to industry. These art schools can all date their histories back over one hundred years and this contest between

utility and theory has constituted their educational dynamic over this period.⁵ In contrast, the explosion of creative writing in UK universities occurred at a time of expansion in student numbers and for the most part was initiated by senior managers as a means of maximizing the potential of new student markets. The older programmes can trace their history to the 1970s, but they are very much the exception and were very much places of selection rather than mass participation. This is not to criticize the widespread uptake of creative writing programmes, rather it is to suggest that from the beginning art schools have tilted around the intellectual problematic between theory and practice, while creative writing programmes have been shy even about the seriousness of their own practice as a contribution to academic life. Equally, this is not to insist that in order to be taken seriously or to take oneself seriously it is necessary to be associated with the institutional apparatus of the university. Rather, it is to suggest that there remains in English literary culture a persistent suspicion towards complex thinking that is considered somehow un-literary and un-English and moreover in some way unfortunately 'continental'. The other nations of the United Kingdom are not exempt from this way of thinking either. At least literature departments in England have for the most part opened themselves to theoretical idioms. There are of course exceptions and the history of the reception and dissemination of theoretical thought in the Humanities is complex and is spread across all the regions of the United Kingdom. Precision and scrupulous scholarship would be required to trace that history and to do justice to the relative contribution of the islands of thought make up the absorption of the theoretical tradition into UK universities. That history is not the subject of this book.⁶

However, the basic principle stands that it is in the art school and around art education that we will find a decisive case of the formalization of the problematic between speculative thought and creative practice. The interesting question here is not whether artists should read theory, let us take that as a given. It is no longer the 1970s and I do not propose to expend an excess of energy making the polemic case for the value of theory. If this is not the hot topic it once was, it is because for good or ill, theory has been domesticated by the disciplines of the Arts and Humanities. Whether, this means theory won or not is open to question, but again that is not the subject of this book. Rather, the interesting question for me in working with filmmakers and in teaching creative students is not what does theory contribute to creative practice but precisely what does theory not account for in the process of making? Something happens in creative work that cannot be wholly accounted for by theory. There is a gap that opens, however small, between concept and creation, epistemology and performance,

and theory and practice. It is in this crack that, as Leonard Cohen might say, the light gets in and the work takes place and takes its place.

This gap is characterized by a certain kind of unknowing in which thinking is suspended but not absent. It is this *not-knowing* that produces the creative outcome. No creative act – literature, film, drama, dance, or music – is the result of the programmed application of theory. Such work would be dead on the page or on the screen. In fact the only work that could ever be an adequate application of theory would be the book of theory itself, like the hyper-reality of Borges' map that covered the entire kingdom.⁷ Instead, something happens in the process of making that derails theory into something else and leaves it stranded in the work of art, no longer the thing it once was but now suspended in another frame of reference. Creative practice perpetually places theory inside inverted commas, making it something other than it once was. We could, and will, read a number of texts, films, paintings, dramas, and performances in which we could demonstrate this othering of theory. However, this is not necessarily to put our finger on the interesting question here. We have a rational discourse to discuss works of art, which are theoretically informed or otherwise, and that discourse is theory itself. So, using theory to describe something that looks like theory will only take us so far, and the object of our study here is not the output itself, although that is obviously something that will claim our attention. Rather, what interests me, as an itch worth scratching, is the gap. How can we know this moment of not-knowing? It is my contention that the process that takes us from theory to practice is not just one in which theory and practice inform one another to their mutual benefit, but one in which this encounter takes place as a radical disruption, in which the epistemological falls into not-knowing as a condition of its performance as creative work. In this sense, the only thing worth knowing is this not-knowing.

Now, this is not to surrender creative practice to the irrational, mystical, or eccentric notions of the divine or even the bodily. Rather, it is to challenge theory to think the moment when theory no longer thinks. By necessity this present account of theory and practice will have to take a theoretical form. It is what I do. This is a book about theory and practice written by a theorist who has worked closely with practitioners but who has never, straightforwardly lost himself in that practice. There are plenty of examples we will look at of where the idiomatic writing of theory edges into another type of creative work, and numerous examples of theorists who are also novelists and so on. I have made films and written screenplays, even won awards for some of them, but in this study as in other domains of my written output, I have retained the position,

personae, and intellectual apparatus, of a theorist. On such foundations are academic careers built, and I am not going to start apologizing for it now. However, theory loses nothing from its encounter with practice and equally loses nothing from recognizing within the creative process a moment that theory itself cannot master and is in fact transformed into something other than itself. I am not going to talk in a vague way about the alchemical processes of theatre or writing or some such half-baked mysticism. Rather, this book will deploy the resources of theory to discuss something that is a problem for theory, in a theoretical way. When we say 'problem for theory' we mean a question that is of interest to theory, it is not a problem in the way that having no money is a problem for someone who wants to eat lunch. The problems of theory might seem to some to be of limited importance at this moment in time. In truth they always have been, the issue we might say is academic, in a good sense. However, the astute reader will recognize in the discussion of this book an argument that pertains to the relation between theory and practice beyond the creative writing seminar or editing suite.

When we say that there is a moment of not-knowing or a disruptive gap between theory and practice, we are talking about more than writing a screenplay. It is true that the artist or maker (even the artist who reads theory) must to some degree not know what they are doing in order to initiate creative practice. Equally, it is true that *whatever* practice we seek to inaugurate we must in some important way not know what we are doing. On the one hand, there is the question of what happens to theoretical knowledge when it comes into contact with singular circumstances. Or, as the boxer Mike Tyson put it, everyone has a plan until they get punched in the jaw. The plan is necessary but not sufficient; it cannot survive contact with the enemy, and theory must always be transformed into something other than itself. It becomes practice, that is to say, it becomes the very thing that theory studies. Theory must become its own other. In this sense, practice is profoundly theoretical and what we are calling a problem for theory is just as big a problem for practice. On the other hand, there is the first mark on the page, the initial act of creative practice that is a launch from theory to practice. It is not straightforwardly the case that this is the moment of not-knowing, the unknowing might precede it, or be in advance of it, yet to come in the work that makes the work. However, it is the renunciation of certainty, not the abandonment of theory, which characterizes this disruption. Whether the path from theory to practice results in a film or a political movement is immaterial; the problem of unknowing and the transformation of theory into its own other is the same. What goes for art goes for politics; only the practical outcomes are different.

Equally, this fissure of the uncertain should in no way be understood as a fall into innocence. This cannot be stressed enough. The space where thinking is suspended is not an innocent space; the leap into an abyss can be fully informed. In fact, a fall is rarely innocent, there can be endless reasons for it, including suicide where a fall becomes a plunge, or be the result of a push or a trip, where a fall becomes a drop. Leaping into an abyss might not be a rational thing to do, but then again making art might not necessarily be a rational thing to do either. It is nevertheless something that reason has to account for. There is then nothing innocent about not-knowing, rather this unknowing is the condition for knowing itself. That is to say, the condition for the economic play between theory and practice that makes both possible. It is a black spot for theory in which theory will have to understand its own non-understanding. By definition, while we may be able to approach this black spot by theoretical means, we will not be able to pin it down without the performative picking up the pin and walking off with it. We are looking for the god particle of theory, the thing that is hidden to theory but whose traces are presented to us in the physical universe. Like the search for the Higgs boson, we are approaching this problem from the starting point of a theoretical hypothesis. Theory says this must be true and so we set out from theory seeking to prove the truth of our own theory. If we were to offer a critical reading of our own set-up it would be this, namely, that this investigation into the non-thinking of theory is profoundly complicit with theory's own rational colonialism and its desire to colour another dark part of the map. However, this location cannot be made pink, it is there like the unconscious or dark matter, but it cannot be fully articulated because it is the moment that undoes articulation. To ask theory to understand its own non-understanding is to ask theory to see itself seeing, or perhaps, to see itself seeing blindly.

Now, having established this intention, what will interest us in this book is in fact beyond the grasp of this book and will necessarily escape any attempt to master it through a rational discourse. So, where does this leave the business of practice-based research? Firstly, there is plenty more to concern us in the question of practice-based research than the issues at stake in this book. Other accounts of creative practice as research are available and the industry of practice-based research will not grind to a halt as a result of this book.⁸ However, and secondly, if our basic hypothesis is correct, that not-knowing is a necessary condition of making, then what does that mean for the academic, governmental, and institutional discourse of practice-based research that seeks to contain creative practice within the university? The literature on practice-based and practice-led research is, for good reason, deliberately vague on what it actually is.

There are some, by now, canonical examples of this. For example, the 2007 report commissioned by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and authored by Chris Rust, Judith Mottram, and Jeremy Till.⁹ Written in the context of a concerted attempt by the AHRC to reach consensus with British universities on a definition of practice as research in order to bring the creative disciplines within the funding regimes of the UK government, this report stops short of defining its erstwhile object of study.

This report emerges from the disciplines of art, design, and architecture and starts from the premise that for academics in these subjects, practice is the normal mode and method of inquiry when learning and scholarship is situated in a setting of professional practice. This immediately opens up the question of two types of practice. When we speak of an architectural practice or a design practice this does not necessarily imply a research content. Indeed, practice in this sense really means the working environment or office of an architect or designer. Practice, then, is what artists do but that is not the same as practice-based research. However, rather than seek to define these uses of practice as a mode of inquiry, the report's authors, following the example of the research council, suggest conditions that have to be met in order for practice to be worthy of the name research. There is a concerted effort not to privilege research over practice, stressing the mutual interaction of both. However, the fundamental point remains in this report, and it defines the whole exercise to understand practice-based research, that if practice can be characterized as research then it can be funded. More accurately, it can then be funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Higher Education Funding Councils' periodic assessments of university research. Practice as such, practice without research, is more properly the purview of the Arts Council or the commercial sector. The attempt to have practice in a university context recognized as research and to have it funded by the British government is highly commendable. This work has also been undertaken in Australian and North American contexts as well, and it is important that university-based practice be funded.

However, it is possible to see from the very beginning of the writing on practice-based research a series of inclusions and exclusions being set up in order to justify an institutionalization of practice that will allow it to be funded. I am not saying this is a good or bad thing, I am simply saying this is what has happened, and as the idea of practice-based research becomes normalized within the academy these conceptual manoeuvres will be forgotten and these definitions erased with time. The same is true of the Practice as Research in Performance project that the AHRC ran through the University of Bristol in which a deliberately generous

definition of practice as research necessarily disguises moves to accommodate practice within existing institutional definitions of research.¹⁰ Accordingly, it is recognized today that practice-based research should define a set of research questions, identify the research context of its inquiry, produce documentable outputs, and so on. This leads to the importance of meta-commentary on practice as one way of satisfying the definition of research. In this sense, writing about your practice is what makes it research as much as the outcome of the inquiry through practice itself. This expectation for documentation in turn takes us to a position that states that practice that does not include such processes is not eligible for support by the research council:

For research to be considered as practice-led, the [Phd] student's own practice must be an integral part of the proposed project, and the creative and/or performative aspects of the research should be made explicit. The research carried out should bring about enhancements in knowledge and understanding in the discipline, or in related disciplinary areas. Research to provide content is not considered practice-led research in this context. For example, if a film-maker wanted to make a film about refugees, the research questions should be about the process of making the film, not about the experience of the refugees. Work that results purely from the creative or professional development of an artist, however distinguished, is unlikely to fulfil the definition of practice-led research in this context.¹¹

Now, to an extent that is a fair definition of practice-led or practice-based, take your pick, research in that it should extend the boundaries of the disciplinary field and that field is practice not refugee studies. On the other hand, it is patently absurd that such a documentary could not be funded on its own terms by the research council. It would mean that films about asylum-seekers should be funded by commercial partners, but research projects about lens depths and shutter speeds can be funded by the government. Or, if you want to make a film about refugees you darn well better be documenting the impact of the camera angles you are using. This probably was not the intention of those early pioneers of practice as research who penned those reports for the research council. It hardly makes for a vibrant research culture in our university departments of film and media.

I have no investment in dismantling the edifice of practice-based research and its institutional funding arrangements. However, it must be said that something that we now take for granted as part of the academic landscape has a fairly recent history and that this history is characterized by a number of conceptual elisions

that are about the institutionalization of art forms within the framework of research funding and so the political priorities of the nation state. This places practice as research in the landscape of what Schiller calls the aesthetic state (*Aethetischer Staat*).¹² That is to say a situation in which the state accords a principle of political value to the aesthetic and claims an authority for it, and over it, to shape the possibilities and limits of freedom previously safeguarded by art. We might think this is quite mild in the case of the Arts and Humanities Research Council or even a price worth paying to ensure funding for practice in our universities. However, it introduces into the very idea of practice-based research a foundational compromise with the powerful ideological drive that accords a political force to the aesthetic and which in alternative locations has produced quite different historical outcomes.¹³ What makes this significant is the way that the formulations of practice-based research repeat the historical gesture of giving the aesthetic an institutional agency and so a practical, political impact by linking it to knowledge production. That is to say, practice-based research introduces a mode of formalization to art.

Without formalization there could be no funding, no research council for the arts, no university setting and no teaching programme. Aesthetic formalization is essential to the universitification of creative practice. That is not a criticism; it is fact as old as Schiller. The categories of practice-based research are those of our aesthetic modernity, they are Schillerian through and through and run deep in our pedagogical institutions.¹⁴ The reason one should be wary of such formalization without due critique is, to borrow a phrase from Paul de Man, that 'it stages a loss of hermeneutic control over art as a scene of hermeneutic persuasion'.¹⁵ It is the hermeneutic excess of art that must be brought within the institution and there is no better way to place a limit around that excess than by becoming its paymaster. It is precisely because the research paradigm cannot account for the hermeneutic overspill of creative practice that practice must be brought within it. And, as de Man says, 'when a persuasion has to become a scene of persuasion one is no longer in the same way persuaded of its persuasiveness' (p. 269). It is wise then that most of us remain wary about placing a definition of practice-based research to avoid a formalization falling into a schematization that quickly becomes a technique. What remains problematic is whether the research function can remain compatible with aesthetic effect. That is to say, can a funded programme produce art that is worthy of the name? Practice-based research can produce an institutional scene of education, the aesthetic state requires this, but it cannot programme, even if it produces, aesthetic effects. To be precise, the formalization of practice-based research cannot account for the gap,

the not-knowing and uncertainty essential to making, because practice-based research is an epistemological overlay onto something that cannot be mastered by knowledge. Practice-based research says that practice can be productive of knowledge. But practice is not epistemological, it is a matter of affect. To not know is to practice, without not-knowing practice would never get started. This is not an argument for defunding art programmes or for suggesting that creative practice cannot result in new forms of inquiry. Rather, it is to say again that there are genuine conceptual lacunae in the founding premise of practice-based research that need to be explored further and understood better if it is not to repeat the historical errors of research as an activity of the nation state.

But how can it ever do otherwise? All governmental policies on science and culture attempt to programme creativity. Any research programme attempts to include within it the benefits of contingency within the order of the measurable, calculable, and accountable. For research to be research as such, and not just practice (the sort that the advice to doctoral students quoted above says should not be funded) the aleatory must reside in the order of the same, within the conceptual frame of the programmable. This results in a creation or invention of the same, not something different at all.¹⁶ Practice as research places limits around practice that requires the outcomes of that practice to reside within a recognizable, knowable, and measurable set of possibilities. Even where a practice embraces serendipity, in order for it to retain the name of research it must be subject to a probabilistic quantification. That is to say, nothing can truly be invented, nothing that is wholly other to the frame of the research calculus, as a result of practice-based research. And yet invention and creation still take place. The other is not entirely absent from this process. How can it be? Despite the desire to recuperate the value of the aleatory, the gap of uncertainty or the moment of not-knowing, this dehiscence, still initiates any practice and in so doing opens up any attempt to measure the abyssal. In other words, practice ruins practice-based research from the very beginning and practice-based research would lose nothing by recognizing from the start its own impossibility.

This might not be welcome news over at the research council but is a necessary condition of the very activity that the institutional edifice of the academic arts and humanities is built upon, whether to facilitate creative practice or to support its study and criticism. In fact, the invention that practice-based research gives rise to is its own institution: the research council, that post hoc seeks to define and measure the very thing that brings it into being. Inventions that have status conferred upon them are always institutions, as Derrida says.¹⁷ It is not the university that gives practice-based research its identity; it is the other way round.

Without practice there would be no humanities and without the humanities there would be no university. The invention of practice-based research, very late in the day, is a rationalization of the inventive possibility of practice. It is an attempt to persuade that practice can be brought to account. That is to say, that creativity can be measured. There is a kind of madness in that, a folly that is just as recognizably human as it is doomed to failure, no matter how much money a research council throws at it. In response to the articulation of the frameworks of practice-based research one must be aware that the only possible thing to create, the only thing worth creating, for creation to be worthy of the name, is the impossible, that which does not exist. But creating the impossible is impossible, you might say. For sure, but it is still the only possible creation, creativity must announce itself as that which brings into existence that which did not exist before and did not appear to be possible, otherwise it is merely formalizing something that already sits as part of a set of possibilities within an economy of the same. Practice then has to be a passage towards the arrival of the impossible; it is a preparation for the chance encounter, the expectation of the unexpected. Practice itself involves a process, a formalization as technique of something that can be taught, repeated, and captured. But creativity is the name we give to the disruption of that process by the wholly other of the aleatory in the moment of not-knowing. In this sense, creativity must be incalculable, something no longer consistent with the calculable. Is such a thing possible? Of course not, and that is why it is the only possible creation, the only thing that creativity could create that would be an actual creation.

In this book we will take as our object of study something that we will call Theory-Practice. This is different from 'Theory' proper, that is, written works of a philosophical nature that constitute a body of knowledge concerning modern thought. It is also different from 'Practice' as such, which can either be a purely professional enterprise (playing first violin in a symphony orchestra does not require a familiarity with the work of Michel Foucault) or be an exercise in practice-based research that did not seek an explicit relationship with theoretical texts, for example, one could base a musical composition on a mathematical sequence rather than a text by Walter Benjamin, and still be of interest to the AHRC or the Research Excellence Framework (REF) panel. Theory-Practice by contrast refers to those texts, works of art, films, architectural outcomes, performances, or sonic pieces that not only bear a close and determining relation to the canon of Theory, but open

themselves up as theoretical endeavours in their own right. Theory-Practice, however, retains its own singularity in the continuum of idiomatic approaches to humanist study. It is both fully Practice and fully Theory and neither only Practice nor simply Theory. As one might expect in this scenario Theory-Practice pushes at the boundaries of what constitutes theory proper and what can be identified as practice. Theory-Practice happens around the limits of philosophy, where disciplinary philosophy most actively polices its boundaries.

For example, we might take the 'Envois' section of Jacques Derrida's *La Carte Postale* as an exemplary case of Theory-Practice.¹⁸ It is at best an autobiographical text, at worst a total fiction, situated at the core of an otherwise formal work of philosophical scholarship. It is the fragments of a one-sided correspondence that relates the story of a love affair between the narrator and the addressee.¹⁹ However, it also contains often long and detailed passages of a philosophical nature. They are not just a reflection on or expository of the action of the love story, but are an essential part of the written fiction. The various fragments of letters, or '*envois*' [postings or sendings] are individually and collectively the performance of a central thesis in the text of 'Envois' concerning the errancy of meaning. They cannot be separated from this context or their performative role. Equally, the rest of *La Carte Postale* cannot be read independently of the 'Envois'. The extended reading of Freud in the second half of the books refers to and depends upon everything that has gone on before in the 'Envois'. The narrator of the letters for example is writing a lecture called 'The Legs of Freud', which then turns up later in the formal philosophical text. In this sense, we would struggle to restrict the designation Theory-Practice just to the 'Envois' because the whole of *La Carte Postale* initiates, depends upon and cannot be separated from, the performativity of the letters as Theory-Practice. Derrida more so than other philosophers is quite deliberately experimenting with another type of writing that seeks to outflank the policing and policed borders of disciplinary philosophy. He speaks at the end of his 1968 essay 'The Ends of Man', of a 'change of terrain' and a 'new writing [that] must weave and interlace' the two persistent modes of deconstruction, firstly attempting an exit by using the resources of the tradition against itself without consolidating it, and secondly, affirming an absolute break from and difference to that tradition, while retaining an awareness of the textual effects that run the risk of naively repeating the ground that is said to be abandoned.²⁰ The 'Envois' would seem to be an attempt to capture something of that ambition in a daring confessional text that tells the story of a love affair in the context of public philosophy while disavowing it in the form of a fiction, which would have every and no relation to the facts of Derrida's

own life. If the 'Envois' is Theory-Practice then it is because it is trying to do something that neither Theory nor Practice can do on their own. It is being both Theory and Practice at the same time, while expanding the limits of both.

As an example of another writing that extends the idiomatic boundaries of speculative thought, we might consider the oeuvre of Hélène Cixous who would be labelled in the Anglophone world as 'a feminist theorist'.²¹ However, she has a considerable writerly practice that runs across genres, including drama, novels, autobiography, and literary criticism. It is importantly and increasingly undecidable in the case of Cixous where the borders of her idioms lie, her 'theoretical' books of mourning for Jacques Derrida, such as *Insister* and *Portrait of a Young Jewish Saint*, are every bit as writerly, transgressive as the novels that have won her the premier prizes of the French literary institution, such as *Manhattan* and *Hyperrêve*.²² These texts are theoretical, autobiographical, critical and fictional all at the same time, and this is also true of those earlier works such as 'The Laugh of the Medusa', which when received into English earned her the name of a theorist.²³ Derrida occasionally took on the rules and borders of formal philosophy, Cixous does it all the time and it has gone from being a strategy in the case of Derrida to being an established new frontier for writing in French in the case of Cixous. For example, and in contrast to *La Carte Postale*, one could look at Cixous' so-called novel *Love Itself: In the Letter Box* [*L'Amour même dans la boîte aux lettres*].²⁴ A text that treats poetically the history of literary and philosophical love letters, whose provenance and destinations are uncertain but nevertheless they continue to arrive, from Athens, Napoleonic Egypt and other unexpected locales, from Proust, Artaud, Derrida, and so many others. This work, however, is more than a novel of epistolary anthology. It is also a counter signature to the 'Envois', performing a contribution to the errancy of letters, raising that analogue argument into another writerly sphere in which address and language combine to create a certain deafness in love, in which it is only capable of speaking to itself. This is identifiably a novel, more so than the 'Envois', but one that would not be possible without a rich philosophical culture, to which it makes its own sustained contribution.

However, despite the claims of the gatekeepers of disciplinary philosophy it is not Cixous or Derrida who are the exceptional cases with respect to inventive writing and the philosophical genre. As soon as one begins to look at the history of philosophy, one can find, time and time again, the most interesting of speculative work taking places at the borders of the discipline, both inside and outside of philosophy, constructing philosophy just as it is excised by philosophy. We will see in the next chapter the ways in which the text of Plato, the heavily

structured and artificial dialogues of Socrates, should and must importantly be considered as fictions. In other words, philosophy begins in a consideration of style and genre. The normative idiom of philosophy today is simply the winner in a contest of genre that constitutes the philosophical tradition since Plato. For example, who would have the resources to seek to disentangle the literary dimension of Augustine's *Confessions* from its philosophical importance? How can its contribution to Christian theology be disentangled from *The City of God*, with one marked on a shelf designated for literature and the other earmarked for philosophy?²⁵ Similarly, Marcus Aurelius, Boethius, and Thomas More, all explicitly open up the philosophical genre to literature. While Teresa of Avilla, John of the Cross, and so many others of the mystic tradition, make it difficult to distinguish between poetry, philosophy, and the theological in their writing. Machiavelli was a poet, dramatist, author of novellas and a translator. Erasmus writes as part of a genre-bending tradition of philosophical-social satire. Francis Bacon wrote across genres, while Hobbes translated Homer. Pascal was responsible for notable experiments in philosophical style as was Spinoza. It would seem much easier to consider polymaths such as Leibniz, Descartes, and Francis Hutchinson to have retained a philosophical purity in their systematic exposition of multiple idioms than it is to accept the novel writing of Montesquieu or Voltaire. How shall we understand the complex writing of Rousseau if we were to seek to detach form from content or to raise one genre of writing over another? The same holds for Diderot, Lessing, and William Godwin in different national traditions. Schiller, Madame de Staël, and Thoreau are equally at home across philosophical and literary genres. Alexis de Tocqueville was a diarist, memoirist, and travel writer as well as a political philosopher. Kierkegaard wrote *The Seducer's Diary* as a supplement to the dialogue *Either/Or*.²⁶ Nietzsche's experiments in style define his opening in philosophy. One might say that it is not the case that Theory-Practice today is a peculiarly modern contribution to philosophy but that rather the erasure of questions of style and genre as constitutive of philosophical work is itself a deadening effect of the rise of systematic philosophy in the Modern period. In this sense, Theory-Practice has much more in common with the epistemological tradition it opens up than it does with the conventions of institutional academic philosophy that might view it with suspicion.

However, the twentieth century also presents us with a rich vein of Theory-Practice, an almost subterranean tradition in which the constative and the performative open one another in a chase across the philosophical canon. Santayana was also a novelist and essayist, Bertrand Russell was a prodigious

autobiographer, Gaston Bachelard's prose reaches the highest orders of poetry. One could cite Walter Benjamin's collected fictions in *The Storyteller*, which provide evidence of a theorist who was always on the furthest shores of philosophical style.²⁷ However, in terms of his experiments in writing he is a long distance from the mature work of either Maurice Blanchot or Georges Bataille, who are both comfortable working across the genres in which philosophy and fiction irreducibly pollute one another as a performance of thinking within a wider configuration of writing. Both Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir are similar figures who offer a complex writing practice in which works of philosophy and theory sit alongside texts covering a range of literary genres. It would be quite irresponsible to seek to understand the thinking of either by compartmentalizing the constative and the performative in their respective outputs. Albert Camus is cut from the same complex textual cloth, as is André Malraux, while the writing of Roland Barthes moves from the systematic and theoretical to poetic texts such as *A Lover's Discourse* and the posthumously published autobiographical texts of the *Mourning Diary*.²⁸ Philippe Sollers and Julia Kristeva both combine theoretical speculation and novel writing across a range of texts, which cannot be separated one from the other without damaging a just estimation of either's contribution to thought and art. Franz Fanon wrote dramas alongside his theoretical work, Louis Althusser, like Freud, provides us with a detailed autobiography, while much of Jean Baudrillard's output might be classified as experimental in style in its reflections on art, photography, and memoir. Didier Eribon's memoir *Returning to Reims* combines theoretical investigation with life-writing, much like Guy Debord's autobiographical books *Mémoires*, *Panégryrique*, and *Cette Mauvaise Réputation*.²⁹ Geoffrey Hartman's *A Scholar's Tale* is similarly part of the genre of theoretical autobiography, while Bernard Stiegler *Acting Out* is a genuine example of theorized life-writing.³⁰ Alain Badiou is both a novelist (*Portulans*, *Almagestes*) and playwright (*Ahmed the Philosopher*).³¹ Jean-Luc Nancy's text on Mary Magdalene in *Noli Me Tangere* is an example of theory-poetry.³² While Gayatri Spivak combines her theoretical writing with translating the stories of Mahasweta Devi.³³ There is, then, a rich history of work that one might reasonably identify as Theory-Practice, that critical practice which contributes to philosophical culture through the expanded idioms of writing as inquiry. This is before we even consider the opera of Rousseau (*Le devin du village*), the music of Nietzsche, the compositions of Adorno, the drawings of Paul Valéry, or the film collaborations of Slavoj Žižek (notably the two excellent *Pervert's Guides*, with Director Sophie Fiennes, which move beyond documentary and illustration to stand suggestively as a contribution to both film and theory).³⁴

There are also a number of academic theorists in the Anglophone sphere who have combined speculative work with writing that could equally qualify under the rubric of critical practice. Nicholas Royle is the author of several studies on Derrida and more recently two novels (*Quilt* [2010] and *An English Guide to Birdwatching* [2017]) both of which reflect a post-structuralist sensibility through the form of the English novel.³⁵ Susan Sellers is both a scholar of feminist theory (notably Hélène Cixous) and is author of theoretically inclined fictions, *Vanessa and Virginia* (2008) an account of Virginia Woolf, later adapted as a play, and more recently *Given the Choice* (2013).³⁶ David Farrell Krell is a significant interpreter of Heidegger as well as an accomplished novelist. He has authored fictional texts such as *Nietzsche* (1996) and *Son of Spirit* (1997) on Hegel.³⁷ His theoretical fictions that work in and around the philosophical tradition are quite different from the genre writing of Kelly Oliver. While Oliver is the author of noted works of philosophy and media analysis, her fictional writing in the Jessica James, Cowgirl Philosopher Mystery Series, is for those who prefer their theory hardboiled.³⁸ These detective novels, if they can be called that, rely entirely on a philosophical sensibility and work remarkably well by simultaneously nuancing and undercutting the seriousness with which academic philosophy treats itself. Frank Lentricchia is remembered for his early accounts of the theoretical scene in *After the New Criticism* (1980) but is now most active as a writer of detective fiction (the Eliot Conte novels) and tales of professors in peril such as *Lucchesi and The whale* (2003) or *The Sadness of Antonioni* (2011).³⁹ Patricia Duncker is now more successful novelist than theorist but her first novel *Hallucinating Foucault* (1996) betrays her origins in the academic study of post-structuralist writing.⁴⁰ Terry Eagleton has successfully combined an engagement with theory and writing for the theatre (*Saint Oscar* [1989]) and screen (*Wittgenstein* [1993]).⁴¹ Similarly, Willy Maley writes across theoretical, critical, and literary genres, although one might say that his creative writing is influenced by a theoretical tendency rather than explicitly reflects one.⁴² This is in contrast to Lars Iyer whose trilogy of short novels *Spurious* (2011), *Dogma* (2012) and *Exodus* (2013) are an account to what it means to have been a humanities academic in the UK since the 1980s and how theory has circulated around the lives of scholars and in the new university of 'excellence' and human capital.⁴³ In this sense, these novels are not mimetic but are inculcated within the institutions and discourses they describe, leaving their own mark within them, consciously philosophical, and opening the topic in the manner of speculative inquiry. John Schad's *Someone Called Derrida: An Oxford Mystery* (2007) is

an exemplary instance of academic autobiography (a dying father) inventively interweaved with a reading of theory (Derrida's *La Carte Postale*), which in turn theorizes what it means to write both biography and theory.⁴⁴

However, is there a difference between professors who write novels and novelists who write about philosophers? Here, I am not referring to the novel of ideas such as *Middlemarch* or *War and Peace*,⁴⁵ rather there are numerous examples of literature that takes theory as its object, for good or ill, as in the several fictional accounts of Paul de Man which find rich material for fiction in the scandalous event of a seemingly fraudulent professor with a secret Nazi past (Gilbert Adair's *The Death of the Author* [1992], John Banville's *Shroud* [2003] and *Ancient Light* [2012], and Bernhard Schlink's *Homecoming* [2008]).⁴⁶ None of these novels contribute to knowledge of figurative reading, nor do Henri Thomas's *Le Parjure* (1964) or Mary McCarthy's *The Groves of Academe* (1952) that fictionalize de Man's earlier life on arrival in the United States, significant resources as they are.⁴⁷ These novels draw on the narrative reserves of philosophy and theory, and because of that are important in their own right, but they neither engage with nor add to the thought that theory and philosophy encapsulates. They are similar in this sense to the large number of novels, dramas, and screenplays that feature Freud. Some are more informed about psychoanalysis than others, like Jed Rubenfeld's engaging detective mystery, *The Interpretation of Murder* (2006) or Irving Stone's *The Passions of the Mind: A biographic novel of Sigmund Freud* (1971) which treats fiction as another way of disseminating the principles of analysis.⁴⁸ Terry Johnson's drama *Hysteria* (1993) plays a fictionalized version of the genuine meeting between Freud and Salvador Dali for broad laughs.⁴⁹ Brenda Webster's *Vienna Triangle* (2009) is a more sombre take on the Freud as mystery adventure, Selden Edwards' *The Little Book* (2008) involves a time-traveller who meets Freud in fin-de-siècle Vienna, while Angela von der Lippe's *The Truth about Lou* (2006) is an attempt to write a biography of Lou Andreas-Salomé in the form of a fiction, Freud appears as a significant character.⁵⁰ The same relationship is central to Irvin D Yalom's *When Nietzsche Wept* (1992), one of several fictionalizations of theory by the author (a Stanford professor of psychiatry) including *The Schopenhauer Cure* (2006) and *The Spinoza Problem* (2012).⁵¹ In *Freud's Sister* by Goce Smilevski (2012, translated from the Macedonian 2011 edition) the author asks in the form of a fiction whether Freud's disregard for his sister resulted in Adolfin's death in a Nazi concentration camp ('based on a true story', as they say).⁵² All of this is just a sample of the figuration of Freud in popular and literary culture. It is

not the same thing as a Theory-Practice encounter with psychoanalytic work, of the sort that characterize the artistic engagements of the Centre for Freudian Analysis and Research in London, or even the thoughtful questioning of the history and practice of analysis we see in Cornelia Parker's art works based on the dust and fibres of Freud's belongings. No doubt a case could be made for how well informed these various Freud-novels are concerning psychoanalysis; the de Man novels are distinguished by their ignorance of deconstruction. There are other novels that are extremely well informed about analysis, such as Hanif Kureishi's *Something to Tell You* (2008) and Salley Vickers' *The Other Side of You* (2006) which both demonstrate a deep engagement with the therapeutic dimension of analysis but which do not proceed to advance psychoanalysis as a research question within the writing.⁵³ These are novels that reward the reader for knowing something of theory but do not contribute to the speculative endeavour, there is not necessarily an interrogative principle or research question to such writing. In the same vein Lauren Binet's conspiracy thriller about the death of Roland Barthes, *The 7th Function of Language* (2015), is an erudite and engaging read, but it is not scholarship in any conventional sense, any more than Philip Kerr's serial killer novel, *A Philosophical Investigation* (1992), contributes to an understanding of Wittgenstein.⁵⁴

There is then a continuum at work here across writing about philosophers and the stories of philosophy to works which engage and open the texts of philosophy as a contribution to advancing theoretical work. Equally, there is a question to be asked about philosophers who write novels and how far the form of the novel is advanced by the choice to pursue this idiom rather than a more formal genre of philosophical writing. Alain de Botton, Plato scholar and popular philosopher, adopts the novel form in *Essays in Love* (2006) a romance that leans towards Barthes' *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* with chapters on the philosophical history of love.⁵⁵ It is neither groundbreaking literature nor innovative philosophy but its hybridity leaves its own mark in the traditions of both. George Santayana's *The Last Puritan: A Memoir in the Form of a Novel* (1935) wants to make a philosophical case about the predestination of experience and looks to the history of the novel form to achieve that (it was the second best-selling novel of 1936 after Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*).⁵⁶ The fictions of Iris Murdoch often fall between novels too crowded by philosophy and philosophy that is distracted by novel writing. She is the author of several studies of formal philosophy, but in her novels there is always a balance to be struck between theoretical exegesis and the comic potential of the English middle class sleeping

with one another. Her contribution to the form of the novel in works such as *A Severed Head* (1961) might be despite her philosophical interests rather than because of them.⁵⁷ Perhaps, the point of reading her philosophical writing would be to better understand her work as a novelist. In contrast Umberto Eco's labyrinthine novels have a more obvious connection to his theoretical writing as a semiotician and scholar of medieval literature. From *The Name of the Rose* (1980) to *Numero Zero* (2015) Eco treads a thin line between scholarship and conspiracy theory but as a contribution to the European novel it is possible to discern a red thread that links Eco's academic research and formal expansiveness as a writer.⁵⁸ Christine Brooke-Rose is an even more experimental writer, a true, ascetic modernist in contrast to Eco's crowded post-modernism. She was also a scholar of structuralism and narrative theory, her later novels such as the autobiographical *Remake* (1996) sit somewhere between the nouveau roman and narratology.⁵⁹ Raymond Queneau was an editor at Gallimard, publishing work by Kojève and Hegel, his contribution to the nouveau roman takes both a philosophical inflection, *The Sunday of Life* (1952), and a linguistically innovative turn, *Zazie in the Metro* (1959).⁶⁰ Comfortable across a range of genres, including screenplay and essays, Queneau is not Hegel but is as worthy of any of his generation of French writers of the epithet philosopher-novelist. The South African novelist Zoë Wicomb and the English author Tom McCarthy have significant personal investments in reading theory, Wicomb was very many years a professor of English at Strathclyde University in Glasgow and McCarthy demonstrates his skill as a semiotician in his collected essays. However, it is less obvious how this theoretical sensibility is played out in novels such as Wicomb's *Playing in the Light* and McCarthy's *Remainder*.⁶¹ Drusilla Modjeska's *Poppy* (1990) is another autobiographical reflection that looks to theories of life-writing and offers a bold and poetic contribution to the Australian novel.⁶² Before a career in editing she was a Senior Research Fellow in race and gender in the post-colonial arts. The theoretical inflection and speculative inquiry jump out of every page; *Poppy* does not fall into the category of Wittgenstein as serial killer or Freud as amateur detective.

One could spend an entire book-length study working a path through this considerable reading list, seeking to show the difference between the philosopher who writes novels and the novelist who mobilizes philosophy in order to advance story telling or the literary avant-garde. The taxonomy would be encyclopaedic and the differences would become increasingly difficult to sustain as a systematic set of categorizations. The question is not whether one novel is more serious than

the other, the solemnity of philosophy is perhaps its most amusing characteristic, but whether the writing in question is compelled by an understanding of itself as an inquiry into its own status as critical. Equally, there is a difference between films that tell the stories of philosophy (Derek Jarman's *Wittgenstein* [1993], Liliana Cavani's *Beyond Good and Evil* [1977], or, Roberto Rossellini's quartet *Socrates* [1971], *Augustine of Hippo* [1972], *Blaise Pascal* [1972] and *Cartesius* [1974]), films that feature philosophers (Astra Taylor's *Examined Life* [2008] and her *Zizek!* [2005], or, Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering Kofman's *Derrida* [2002]), films with philosophical content (David O Russell's *I Heart Huckabees* [2004], or, Spike Jonze's *Being John Malkovich* [1999]), the European cinema of ideas (Bergman, Ackerman, Rohmer, Goddard, Tarkovsky etc.), and films that engage cinematic form as its own speculative idiom (Barison and Ross's *The Ister* [2004], Safaa Fathy's *D'auteurs Derrida* [1999] or Sophie Fiennes' *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema* [2006]). A just understanding of critical practice does not lie in determining the detailed classification of such a catalogue, or, in asking who has the institutional right or qualification to speak in the name of philosophy and theory. Rather, film as film, like the novel as literature, must stand on its own as film, or literature, otherwise it is worth very little. If it is nothing more than an illustration of philosophy, why mobilize the possibilities of such creative forms only to subjugate them to the authority of philosophy? Theory-Practice would be a form of critical reading as making that consciously pushed and interrogated the singularity of its medium as a speculative idiom.

Equally, one must not imagine that Theory-Practice can easily escape the trap it seeks to outflank. As writing, or film, no one text can be innately more philosophical than any other: this is a matter of reading. There might be nothing philosophical at all about Rossellini's quartet and everything to be said philosophically about a film by Katherine Bigelow. The most theoretically important work might well happen in the complete absence of theory, while conscious attempts to engage theory might result not in singular enquiries but a reduction of philosophy to a question of style. We see this in so-called 'deconstructivist' architecture in which a sustained reading of philosophy by critical practitioners (Eisenman, Tschumi, Libeskind, etc.) leads to stylistically similar buildings, and architecture that is as much defined by economic and social considerations as it is by theoretical enquiry.⁶³ As with any text, such works of Theory-Practice, and there is nothing more textual than architecture, will be judged on the merits of the affects they produce and will be studied in the context of their historical and social making. It is not quite enough simply to ask

of Theory-Practice, is it any good as art? The truth is that it is not homogeneous and will produce varying results with different degrees of success. Rather, in this study we will ask what are its merits and why is it interestingly different from other approaches to creative practice. If Critical Practice is above all a compulsive predisposition and vigilant attitude to self-analysis and speculative thought through creative idioms, then it will require its own degree of self-understanding. The first five chapters of this book seek to draw out the threads of Critical Practice through reading philosophical and theoretical texts as a way of understanding what happens when theory and practice come into contact in the ways that occur in the texts cited above. The final two chapters look at two necessarily brief examples of the textual play of Theory-Practice, not to judge them exemplary or to promote them as pre-eminent but to understand the difficulties that ensue when we read our knowledge of Critical Practice back on to creative texts.