This contribution explores ideas and representations of theory and post-theory which have recently emerged from the scientific arena, examining the tendency of those who promote science as a form of post-theory to represent science as the last metanarrative and, as Lyotard pointed out, to judge literary and narrative knowledge by the scientific criteria of evidence and proof. Likewise the essay also pays attention to those on the literary side of the divide who accept the representation of science as the last metanarrative and are hostile to many aspects of recent literary theory. This hostility stems from their vision of post-theory, which involves approaching literary studies from what they call an evolutionary perspective. The issues and debates resulting from these and other implications of a ‘scientific’ post-theory are explored in relation to Subscript, a novel by Christine Brooke-Rose. This text engages with scientific concepts of evolution and genetics and their implications in a manner that is at once considered, meaningful and playful. On one level, it seems to obey the injunctions of evolutionary approaches to literature by locating human beings in time and in scale as products of neo-Darwinian evolution. It parts company with such an approach however by representing alternative streams of evolutionary theory alongside the neo-Darwinian one and contests the construction of Science as the only theory worth having post-Theory. Instead the novel posits a post-theory that resists attempts to silence those without formal scientific training from pronouncing on, exploring, embellishing or resurrecting alternatives to dominant scientific theories.

The Third Culture: Science as Post-Theory

Contemporary attempts to articulate ‘post-theory’ are strikingly diverse in their understanding of what constitutes both theory and post-theory. Martin McQuillan, for instance, draws attention to the temporal and spatial semantic possibilities implicit in the term ‘post-’,
arguing that theory’s strength has always been “an ability to snap at its own heels” and calling for theory to reassess the Theory Industry and think through its own aporias (see McQuillan et al. 1999: xiv-xv). His belief in a connection between theory and post-theory – his suggestion that theory is always already inhabited by post-theory – is different from Valentine Cunningham’s hostile perception of theory and his desire for a critical future free of what he sees as the excesses of theory.\(^1\) Catherine Belsey, on the other hand, assumes like McQuillan that theory is here to stay. Her call for reform urges theory to take heed of at least one aspect of the current backlash against it and pay more attention to the signifier and its power to disturb.\(^2\) Other examples of varying interpretations of theory and differing visions of what post-theory looks like could be given. This contribution, however, will look at just one other example. It will limit itself to exploring ideas and representations of theory and post-theory which emerge from interdisciplinary studies on the relationship between science and literature. This exploration will be located in the context of contemporary versions of the Two Cultures Debate, and will have a double focus. It will examine the tendency of those who promote science as a form of post-theory to represent science as the last metanarrative and (as Lyotard pointed out) to judge literary and narrative knowledge by the scientific criteria of evidence and proof (Lyotard 1984: 27). It will also consider whether those on the other side of the divide are tempted to construct science according to what could well turn out to be the equally incommensurable terms of narrative and literary theory. These issues will be explored in relation to Christine Brooke-Rose’s *Subscript*, a text that engages with scientific concepts of evolution and treats them in specifically literary ways.

“Their intention is clearly to produce theory, and it is on this ground that we criticize them.” In *Intellectual Impostures*, Sokal and Bricmont (1998: 8, 14) accuse “international stars” in the theory firmament such as Lyotard, Derrida, Baudrillard and Deleuze of

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\(^1\) Cunningham sees ‘Theory’ as a “monstrously loose baggy sack” that is “all too often, bad for texts” – partly because “its models of their being… are driven by a huge negativity and despair” and partly because it “promotes a view of text… which plays fast and loose with the idea and then also the praxis of a demanding textual thereness” (Cunningham 2002: 54, 69).

\(^2\) See Belsey (1999: 123-137) where she discusses Harold Bloom’s insistence that the greatness of a work lies not in its ideology or politics but in its form. Being post-structuralist in emphasis, her idea of what constitutes form and what lies behind it is of course thoroughly different from Bloom’s.