

The Future of Literary Theory

The future of literary theory, its ‘whither’, depends on the future of literature. Let me explain what I mean by that. Literary theory is a secondary, subordinate discipline, as is ‘theoretical physics’. Literary theory is ancillary. It is a handmaiden to literary study proper, just as theoretical physics depends on the empirical data gathered by physicists. People will need literary theory only as long as literature continues to exist and to have importance for societies and for individuals in those societies. If literature ceases to have great importance in a given society, literary theory will continue to be necessary to account for literature of the past. This will happen when new media become dominant, as, it can be argued, is currently happening, at least in the West. If literature becomes less a central social force, we will still need literary theory. We will need literary theory, however, more for antiquarian purposes, that is, to help understand literature of past centuries. In those past centuries, receding further from us every day, literature still had a central cultural and individual role in the formation of citizens. Victorian novels, for example, played that role in Victorian England. Literature will go on being written and read for a good while yet. Nevertheless, film, television, popular music, video games, the Internet, and other tele-technological prestidigitizing media are replacing literature. What might be called (though with great caution) the ‘literary’ use of words or other signs is migrating to these new media. I say “with great caution” because any features of ‘the literary’ that I can think of also characterize non-literary uses of words or other signs. To call something ‘literature’ is a speech act: “I declare this is literature.” If Shakespeare were alive today, I would wager that he would be writing film or television scripts, where the action is, just as he would have written novels if he had been a Victorian, or poetry if he had lived in the Romantic period. Shakespeare was a professional writer who wanted to make money and influence people.

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The function of literary theory

The theoretical component of cultural studies is quite different from literary theory. Why? Cultural studies’ object of study is the totality of culture or of social life. Literature proper is an increasingly marginal aspect of what cultural studies study. Cultural studies comprise a branch of sociology or anthropology. More and more people nominally in the humanities have appropriated the subject matter and the protocols of these disciplines. These days, cultural studies are often made in what are still, sometimes misleadingly, called ‘literature departments’. Nothing is wrong with this, since young scholars in the humanities, like my hypothetical twenty-first century Shakespeare, are shifting to where the action is,

that is, to film, television, video games, etc. It is, however, a big mistake to confuse literary theory with cultural theory. The data they are intended to account for are quite distinct.

The function of literary theory is to account for specific bodies of literature (in the old-fashioned sense of printed poems, novels, and plays). Literary theory characteristically works by way of formulations that, apparently, have a quite high degree of generality or universality. One example is Aristotle's definition of tragedy as "a process of imitating an action which has serious implications, is complete, and possesses magnitude; by means of language which has been made sensuously attractive, with each of its varieties found separately in the parts; enacted by the persons themselves and not presented through narrative; through a course of pity and fear completing the purification of tragic acts which have those emotional characteristics."¹ An example of literary theory from our own time is Paul de Man's apodictic assertion in "Allegory (*Julie*)" that:

The paradigm for all texts consists of a figure (or a system of figures) and its deconstruction. But since this model cannot be closed off by a final reading, it engenders, in its turn, a supplementary figural superposition which narrates the unreadability of the prior narration. As distinguished from primary deconstructive narratives centered on figures and ultimately always on metaphor, we can call such narratives to the second (or the third) degree *allegories*.²

In spite of the high degree of generalization in such literary theoretical formulations as those Aristotle and de Man make, however, literary theory is historically rooted. It belongs to a single time, place, and culture. Formulations such as literary theorists make promote good reading of specific literary works. Literary theories are an aid to reading, even if good reading, as de Man thought, means a discovery of the impossibility of reading. Literary theories have no other legitimate function than to aid the reading of literary works, though whether they actually do that is another question. This subordinate role is the true one even though it may be attractive to think of literary theory as an independent, self-enclosed discipline that can, as Edward Said put it, 'travel' from country to country. Literary theory, it appears, can be translated from language to language, from culture to culture, and still remain valid. It can remain performatively effective in a new place and in relation to new bodies of literature.

This is not really the case. The formulations literary theorists make look universal are in truth tied to the specific body of literature that generated them and for which they were originally intended to give an account. The paradigmatic example of that in the West is one of our oldest literary theoretical works, one I have already cited, Aristotle's *Poetics*. Aristotle's primary goal was to account for a specific body of literature, Attic tragedy: the plays of Sophocles, Euripides, Aeschylus, and others in fifth century B.C. Athens. As Renaissance and subsequent theorists discovered, it is extremely difficult, without considerable awkward twisting, to make Aristotle's formulations work for the more or less Christian tragedy of

1: Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Gerald F. Else (Ann Arbor: Ann Arbor Paperbacks, The University of Michigan Press, 1978), 25.

2: Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 205.

sixteenth and seventeenth-century Europe. Examples of the latter are Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1603–4?), or his *King Lear* (1606), or Racine's *Phèdre* (1677). In a similar way, Paul de Man's goal, in the essay cited above, was to account for Rousseau's *Julie*. Bakhtin's goal, in his works of literary theory, was to account for Dostoevsky or for a specific body of novels.

The testing of literary theory

The close relation between a given literary theory and the literary work or works it is meant to account for may be further elucidated. A literary theory, like a scientific hypothesis, is of no use unless it is falsifiable, that is, capable of possibly being proven wrong. If I say the moon is entirely made of green cheese, scientists would want some proof of that, for example a piece of green cheese brought back from a voyage to the moon. If I bring back a moonrock, not cheese, my hypothesis would need to be revised. At least some of the moon is not green cheese. I have proved my initial hypothesis to be wrong. In a similar way, Aristotle's definition of tragedy is of no use unless it can be shown that it actually fits real Athenian tragedies. Aristotle primarily shows how well his theory fits Sophocles's *Oedipus the King*. De Man's formulation would take a lot of testing, since he says, "The paradigm of *all* texts . . . etc." That covers a lot of ground. Surely, there is some one literary text that does not fit this paradigm? If that can be shown, de Man's hypothesis will have been falsified. De Man's essay at least shows that his theory more or less works for *Julie*. That is not surprising, since the reading generated the theoretical statement in the first place. Even in these cases, however, that is, in my citations from Aristotle and de Man, the relation between literary theory and reading is not that of total congruence or confirmation, but that of disqualification and modification. This disjunction generally characterizes the relation between literary theory and the empirical data it is meant to explain, that is, actual literary texts as they are encountered in reading. Close reading may be motivated by theory, but it leads to the modification of theory, often its severe modification.

A longer version of this paper compares Thomas Pynchon's short story, "The Secret Integration" (1964) with Miguel de Cervantes's "The Dog's Colloquy" (1613) to show that the distinguishing features of 'post-modern' narrative posited by theorists like Fredric Jameson already characterize Cervantes's story. For example, a conception of the community as self-sacrificially turned against itself is, it turns out when you read both stories, a fundamental feature of both "The Secret Integration" and "The Dog's Colloquy," though they are separated by three hundred and fifty years.

Conclusions

What conclusions would I deduce from my juxtaposition of Pynchon's "The Secret Integration" and Cervantes's "The Dog's Colloquy"? I draw five conclusions: 1) Theoretical definitions of postmodernism in literature by way of formal and structural features tend not to be valid, since they can be shown to characterize earlier literary works too. No doubt, an adept reader can easily tell, from thematic elements, from décor, from place names, and so on, whether he or she is reading Pynchon or Cervantes, but the repertoire of available narrative techniques is remarkably the same in both the exemplary tales I have discussed. It follows that the theoretical hypothesis of distinctive formal features in postmodern

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narrative is disproved by an investigation of actual literary works. 2) My comparison of the two stories is evidence that the repertoire of narrative techniques used in Western narrative has not changed all that much since Cervantes. One way to define Cervantes's greatness is his mastery of those techniques already, at the very beginning of what today we call the history of the novel. 3) I conclude from this that definitions of period styles in literature, and even periodizations in literature generally, are highly problematic, always to be interrogated and viewed with suspicion. 4) I claim to have shown that the Derridean concept of the community's auto-immunitary logic has wide and provocative relevance for understanding the presentation of communities in works of fiction from Cervantes to Pynchon and, as I have elsewhere shown, Toni Morrison. Jacques Derrida's hypothesis that every community, including those represented in literature, exemplifies what he calls "auto-immunitary logic" is confirmed by the reading of at least two exemplary works. Further readings would be necessary to see whether this hypothesis has general heuristic value. 5) I claim to have shown an example of the peculiar disjunction between literary theory and the reading of literary works, in this case the disjunction between the theory of postmodernism in literature and what happens when you test this theory against the data of actual literary texts. The disjunction is 'peculiar' because the theory orients and motivates the reading that disqualifies that theory.