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The Novelist, Theory and Reading

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The enthusiasm for critical theory that has predominated in literary studies for the last quarter of a century has not been shared by many novelists who, probably rightfully, feel robbed of a great deal of attention that has thus been diverted to theorising. This paper will discuss the myth of theory as undermined in novels by David Lodge, A.S. Byatt and Malcolm Bradbury and recently exploded by Valentine Cunningham in his forward-looking study *Reading After Theory* (2002).

The enthusiasm for critical theory that has predominated in literary studies in the last quarter of a century has not been shared by many novelists who, probably rightfully, feel robbed of a great deal of attention that has been diverted to theorising. Critical theory began to take hold in scholarly literary criticism in Britain in the late 1970s with the gradual spread and adoption of poststructuralist ideas and methods of inquiry. In parallel with developments in cultural studies, at the time marked by the battle of two paradigms – the empirical versus the theoretical – the poststructuralist approach to the study of literature was hailed as a new critical practice worth following (see Belsey 1980). Concise surveys of twentieth-century theoretical approaches to literature such as Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983), although critical of poststructuralism, helped to replace what was called orthodox literary criticism by what was quickly to become the new orthodoxy of critical theory. Despite voices to the contrary, as Eagleton's scathing critique of deconstruction as an academic power-game and an empty and hedonistic discourse, dissolved in the indeterminacy of language (144), the attractions of it proved to be irresistible. Applied further afield, to psychological criticism, feminist criticism, gender studies and postcolonial criticism, the poststructuralist/postmodernist discourse has given rise to a variety of theories that have dominated literary and cultural criticism for decades, albeit not always with unanimous approval, particularly on the part of novelists. This paper will discuss the myth of theory as undermined in novels by A.S. Byatt, David Lodge and Malcolm Bradbury and recently

exploded by Valentine Cunningham in his forward-looking study *Reading After Theory* (2002).

David Lodge began to voice his doubts about poststructuralist approaches in literary studies early on in the eighties. In the Afterword to the Second Edition (1984) of his *Language of Fiction* (1966) he makes clear his disagreement with Catherine Belsey – the then eloquent proponent of poststructuralist critical practice – and argues that those who subscribed to the doctrine could never produce a novel, at least not a novel of the kind he himself was writing (Lodge 2001 [1966]: 300). Open to accepting many of the tenets of poststructuralist thought to some extent, such as the inevitable intertextuality of writing, the production by readers of meanings that the author was not conscious of, the inexhaustibility of meaning in texts caused by the constantly changing circumstances of their reception (299), Lodge draws the line at the notion of “the abolition of the Author and the rejection of the idea of literature as communication” (300). On the contrary Lodge declares himself to be a believer in the manifest communicative project of the author, in spite of admitting that the very difficulty of communication may be its very subject.

Almost twenty years on in his new foreword to the same volume (2001), Lodge reaffirms his views on critical theories although he admits that the conflicts arising with their advent on the academic scene seem now to have “settled for some kind of détente” (xi) while back in the early eighties it was necessary to declare where one stood. In his novels Lodge implies and employs his critical attitude to the rise of critical theories in the academe in a comical mode. It can hardly be a mere coincidence that the novel *Small World* (1984), published in the same year as the aforementioned Afterword, is built on a parody of what Lodge saw as then the latest fashion in literary criticism. The American Professor Zapp from *Changing Places* (1975) is here again, now turned poststructuralist and lecturing around the world on decoding and encoding. Participants at high-flying conferences theorise the deferral of meanings on refined parallels between striptease and interpretation of texts, merging the high and low as the new critical orthodoxy requires. In keeping with Lodge’s own views, Zapp’s English counterpart, the traditionally oriented literary historian Philip Swallow emerges from the parody in a more positive light. Lodge carries on his critique of British literary studies in the following *Nice Work* (1988), where the realism cum parody of the state of British higher education is encapsulated in the “Shadow Scheme” of cooperation between Rummidge University and a successful engineering company. And while he is on the whole kinder to the heroine Robyn Penrose than to Morris Zapp of the preceding novels, her feminist poststructuralist analysis of the industrial landscape of the nineteenth-century novel bristling with the fallic images of the factory chimneys with which she keeps her students enthralled does not escape a satirical sense of ridicule either.

In 1990 A.S. Byatt’s Booker Prize winning *Possession*, too, presents a sustained attack on critical theories. With what looks like a remarkable coincidence, Byatt, like Lodge, a former university literature teacher, scholar, critic and novelist, makes light of theory. Although *Possession* is subtitled “A Romance”, it has a parallel subplot underpinned by satire. The target of it are several British and American literary scholars, each one of them pursuing a different methodology and none of them spared Byatt’s witty exposure. The poststructuralist theoretician Fergus Wolff, who can dazzle with his ability to work in several contradictory critical theories at the same time, is given a somewhat sinister air of unspecified danger. The libidinal theory of the American scholar Leonora proves to be quite wrong in interpreting the poetry of the nineteenth-century poetess figure, Christabel La Motte, as the topography of a lesbian body. That A.S. Byatt disapproves of this kind of creative criticism is unambiguously confirmed by her review of a similarly conceived feminist study of Willa Cather, which Byatt criticises for imposing an unwarranted sexual perspective on the writer (Byatt 1987: 507). Byatt’s heroine’s theorising may well have been inspired by Byatt’s

critical review. Nevertheless, Byatt does not unproblematically endorse older critical practices either and exposes their excesses to ridicule as well. She has Professor Cropper of a rich American university to lock himself up in somebody's bathroom and rather unethically make secret copies of private letters of his passionately admired author lest their current owner should fail to be persuaded to sell them. The private, intimate correspondence and various private objects for Cropper's American museum are part of the scholar/biographer's urge to possess his author's soul. Byatt herself finds such demands on a writer's privacy disturbing and unacceptable whether they concern dead or living authors (Byatt 1993: 3-7). In the novel, Byatt takes a critical stance to the sundry attempts to possess the author or his text while she undermines the hegemony of modern critical theories and their fashionable rhetoric by having their practitioners retreat from their principles and fall into a trap of wanting to find out the facts and the truth of the eponymous romance.

Like David Lodge, A.S. Byatt, too, defends the novelist against the creative critical theories. In 1993 in an article in the *Critical Quarterly* she says:

Mistrust of the author began with Wimsatt and the Intentional Fallacy and progressed to Barthes and the Death of the Author, and to the deconstructionists who read texts looking for what they can see that the writers did not see, did not 'foreground', and ipso facto miss what writers can see that *they* do not foreground. I think there are now writers who mistrust critics (7).

Against their annihilation of the novelist in his or her own text according to the Barthesian "death of the author", Byatt pits her eloquent metanarrative incursions in her novels to show her decisive presence in her texts. Undaunted by the notion of the alleged inescapable absence of originality of the postmodern author, she uses intertextuality and pastiche with original zest. Although Byatt agrees that "one cannot think at all without a recognition and realignment of ways of thinking and seeing we have learned over time" (Byatt 1985: 108), she persuades her reader convincingly that the writer is not a senseless tool in a boundless intertext, but has a decisive role to play. This is not to imply that Byatt speaks up for an authoritarian author, far from it. Reading and interpretation are given ample space to play in – from dry analysis, to looking for personal resonances, to trying to find new and better understanding, "where the mind's eye sees the lines move onwards and the mind's ear hears them sing and sing" (Byatt 1990: 471).

David Lodge commends Malcolm Bradbury's work "for its witty and acute observation of contemporary life and thoughtful, sometimes dark insights into the plight of the liberal humanist in the modern, or postmodern, world" (Bradbury 2000: ix). Lodge says those words in the year 2000, in a tribute to his close friend referring to all of his work in its extraordinary range from literary history and criticism to novels, radio plays and poems. Malcolm Bradbury's standpoint in literary studies seems to have remained stable throughout his extensive career as a man of letters. Martin Hilský sees Bradbury's campus novels as "studies of liberal attitudes and their changes in the British society of the second half of the twentieth century" (105). What in *The History Man* (1975) was a satire targeting the fashionable left-wing radical intellectual and academic, became a parody of structuralism and deconstruction in the novella *Mensonge* (1987). In it, similarly to Lodge's *Small World*, Bradbury argues against the "death of the author" and the new "philosophy of absences" expounded by deconstructionists and parodies the way critical theory has replaced literary analysis in universities.

Bradbury's last novel *To the Hermitage* (2000) debates many of Bradbury's views on writing and reading through the narrator, whom David Lodge identifies as "a wry Shandian self-portrait" (Bradbury 2000: ix). The narrator believes in books and writers: "As random life

is to destiny, so stories are to great writers – who (despite modern theory) really exist, and provided us with some of the highest pleasures and the most wonderful mystifications we can find” (84-5). On the other side in the debate, there is a Professor of Contemporary Thinking, wearing a designer baseball cap – a funky professor who, according to the narrator, signifies “trouble” (89). Against him and what he stands for, the narrator discourses on writing, writers, biography, graves and libraries. In the face of the large amount of evidence from them, Barthes’s concept of the Death of the Author begins to pale. The author has not died. He has a long life to live after his natural death as the Diderot expedition of the novel proves. Bradbury concedes that we all interpret (“the shadowy theatre where we all bury, disinter, translate, interpret, study, revise, amend, re-edit, parody, quote, misquote, traduce and transcend in a wild anxiety of criticism and influence”, 153) and he also admits that “books breed books” (414), but, for Bradbury, the author is always there, not to be theorised out of existence.

Nevertheless, the notion of the death of the author on everybody’s lips plays but a symbolic role. It has become a synecdoche for all the modern critical theories that seem to sideline the author. Valentine Cunningham with his 2002 critique *Reading After Theory* is not the first to point out in what ways theory diminishes the author as well as the text to be analysed. In the 1990s James Wood was one of those who defended the traditional pleasures of reading Shakespeare against cultural materialist and poststructuralist analysis (see “Bardbiz correspondence” in *London Review of Books* 1990-92). Iris Murdoch’s philosophical critique of deconstruction has also literary overtones and debates the impact of its relativism and nihilism in literary terms (Murdoch 1993 [1992]: 185-216). In 2003 Rupert Christiansen claims that while theory has ruled the higher study of literature for the last 20 years, “it has proved to be a dead-end street” (2). He supports his statement by what he calls “some 11th-hour backtracking” on the part of Frank Kermode, Toril Moi and even Jacques Derrida as reflected in conversations with them recorded in *Life. After. Theory.* (2003, edited by Michael Payne and John Schad).

Although himself a practitioner of contemporary critical theory (e.g. in his study *In the Reading Gaol: Postmodernity, Texts and History*, 1993), Valentine Cunningham has recently subjected postmodern critical approaches to severe criticism in *Reading After Theory* (2002). He believes that poststructuralist Theorists are characterised by having revolutionary dreams while there is nothing so utterly revolutionary in Theory (29). There is only one history of literary theory which he defines as “merely a history of the varying, shifting preoccupations across the ages with [...] three zones [...]: a writer, a text, a reader – the act of writing, the thing written, the reading of the written thing” (29). He then goes on to emphatically sum up that “criticism has never been quite new; and the history we’re dealing with is all about swings and roundabouts, about the Big Three items going around and coming around, again and again, in a process of constant reaction, resurrection, rereading, repositioning, revision” (34-5). In contemporary critical Theory, in the very same sense of revision and rereading, “Marx is Foucauldianized. Freud is indeed Lacanianized [...] The ‘biographical fallacy’ of the New Critics reappears more extremely as Barthes’s Death of the Author” (36). What makes Cunningham concerned though is the impact of the spread of Theory. He believes that Theory is bad for texts, because as a result of Theory the text is “disappearing”: due to canon purging – to get rid of all the Dead White European Males (70); secondly, under Theory’s complex gaze, the text is “seen as eviscerated, holed, fragmented, a set of absences, of not-thereness” (71); thirdly, there is extinction of texts by what Cunningham calls “interpretative excess” (79) – the absolute creative freedom of interpretation by readers.

Apart from being bad for texts, Theory, in Cunningham’s view, is also bad for reading, resulting in prejudiced readings, causing violence to the meanings of texts by, as he puts it bluntly, “textual abuse” (88). This kind of handling of the text reduces it to an illustration of a particular theoretical position. Critical results are then very similar, “one side,

one model, fits all” (122). What is more, “Theory monodichizes” or as Cunningham explains, “Theory invites you to read as a woman, a Marxist, a Deconstructionist, a Neo-Historicist, a Postcolonialist, or a Derridean or Lacanian or Foucauldian, as some such Theory singleton” (123-24). In this manner Cunningham finally exposes Theory as exclusionist, dehumanised and showing disrespect for both the author and the text (141).

In conclusion, Valentine Cunningham calls for the return of the human subject and for a “respect for the primacy of text over all theorizing about text” (169). He could well be responding to Lodge’s argument that “literary texts do not, except very rarely, come into being by accident” (Lodge 2001 [1966]: 299). He could be responding to Byatt’s insistent presence in the intertextual play of her texts and her critical view of theory. He could be responding to Malcolm Bradbury’s significant semi-autobiographical presence and literary debate in his last novel. All of them seem to be voicing their, and numerous other versions of the same concern: the defence of the literary text and its author against the orthodoxy of theory and its limiting impact.

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