FAR FROM THE LITERARY CROWD: THE CONTEMPORARY LITERARY THEORY AND CRITICISM IN ISOLATION

MARCEL ARBEIT

There must have been times when literary theory and literary criticism helped readers to understand works of fiction, poetry and drama. Theorists came with literary terms that enabled critics to name, analyze and compare, and critics showed their audience that any book can be approached from many different points of view. And the writers received a proper feedback even if they decided not to take critical comments seriously.

Now, the whole territory of literary theory is hermetically sealed against any entrance of clever, enthusiastic, but not initiated lovers of literature. Most books of literary criticism could be as well written in Sanskrit; only a few members of the same sect can understand them.

While writers keep reviewing the works of their colleagues in periodicals, there are not many of them who are still interested in literary theory. Some of them even openly despise the everlasting debates on various theoretical problems of minor or no value. For instance, Harry Crews, a contemporary Southern novelist, set his tenth novel The Knockout Artist (1988) in New Orleans, just when an annual teachers’ conference, obviously a Modern Language Association convention, takes place there. Literary scholars from all over the United States listen to lectures in the morning, attend workshops in the afternoon and in the evening they go to porn theaters to see illegally made snuff movies where real victims are tortured, raped, mutilated and killed. The protagonist of the novel, a boxer who built his career upon his ability to knock himself out in front of an audience, comes to a café and listens to “two men and a woman having a drunken argument at the next table about something called postmodernism, whatever the fuck that was.”

The whole discussion on postmodernism as well as most of other similar debates seem to bear less and less relevance to literature. While literary scholars of postmodern strain question the nature of fiction itself and try to decide if a writer invents the

world or only accepts it, new books of all genres appear every day all over the world. Ninety nine per cent of them will never become subjects of any scholarly debate; compared with the annual production, the list of books that make it into indexes of theoretical and critical volumes is very short.

There are books, like Joyce’s *Ulysses* or Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, everyone feels obliged to mention at least, if not to build a new theory around them. There are other books which do not fit into any critical or theoretical preconception and are abandoned by theorists even if they received good reviews. Some authors are being written about so often that a number of pages devoted to their works exceed many times that of the works themselves.

William Faulkner is definitely one of these authors. Every year, two or three new monographs on him appear, and if not monographs, then at least some memorial volumes or books of essays from Faulknerian conferences. There are new and new interpretations of his novels and short stories. Some of the books are devoted to one of his novels only. There is even an attempt at combining literary criticism with fiction, *Recalcitrance, Faulkner, & the Professors* (1990) by Austin M. Wright.

Wright frames his analysis of Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* by a knightly debating contest at the Round Table organized by the President of a small college whose name is, logically, Arthur. Readers follow the argumentation of the two contestants, read several student papers on that topic, and, at the same time, they are given a love story of a graduate student and the President’s daughter whose hand in marriage is the prize for the winner although both scholars are married. In the prologue of his book, Wright expresses through one of his characters his opinion on the nature of literary analysis: “We’ll need a focus... He was afraid of a purely abstract discussion of theory would be like fog at a tournament, and the knights with their lances slip past each other unseen. We need a text, he said.”

Unfortunately, contemporary literary theorists cannot be even sure what the word “text” means. Being used in its broad sense, it can be related to any object in the world; one can speak about car as text, tree as text, or chair as text. Many authors of dictionaries and glossaries of literary terms gave up and did not include “text” as a separate entry at all. Others explain it in passing together with related terms like “textuality”, “textual criticism” and “work”. Roland Barthes’s definition of text as “a methodological field” is equally confusing as its characteristic as “the preferred term for referring to a literary or other work (not necessarily linguistic or verbal)

3. An even more interesting experiment on that field was performed twelve years earlier in Czechoslovakia where one of Czech Communist literary scholars wrote a dreadful, yet funny book in which a young miner and a beautiful shop-assistant explain to each other literary terms. See Miroslav Janoušek, *Dvá týdny za školou aneb Nebojte se literatury* (Ostrava: Profil, 1978).
stripped of traditional preconceptions about autonomy, authorial control, artistic or aesthetic force, and so on."

It is difficult to say what the “and so on” includes, but we can suspect that one more word has lost its meaning. The word “discourse” has a similar fate; it is so fashionable that if I had not used it here, I would have felt unseemly, yet it became a mere cliché. The process in which words lose their original meanings was registered even by a few novelists. One of them was Walker Percy who wrote about recurring periods of the exhaustion of language when even words like “love” or “friendship” do not carry a meaning any more.8 He says, however, that no one managed to explain the reason why this process started and how it will end: “We know something like that happens, but we don’t know what it is.”9

If the world of literary scholarship becomes the city of Babylon, how can literary theorists and historians find a mutual language for the presentation of their diverse ideas? Whatever one can think of structuralism, it at least made a serious attempt at creating a system and introducing a terminology everybody could understand. New Critics might have been too one-sided and too dogmatic and their conception of the American literary canon deserves criticism, but they put their ideas in a clear and unambiguous way and concentrated on primary sources, not on ephemeral interdisciplinary analyses.

Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, compilers of Understanding Poetry (1938) and Understanding Fiction (1943) were aware of the danger of transferring the theoretical discussion beyond works of literature; that is why in 1960, when they revised Understanding Poetry, they explained in their new introduction not only their criteria of selection, but also what, in their opinion, the main features of the genre of poetry are.

For the 1959 revised edition of Understanding Fiction, Warren and Brooks asked three writers to comment on their own stories. Beyond doubt, any authorial comment enters the field of literary theory and represents a challenge for literary scholars. Should we take writers seriously when they speak about their own works? I share the opinion that when a book is finished, it lives its own life and the voice of its author is equally valid as a voice of any reader, but not more. Especially scholars from Central and Eastern Europe are sensitive to writers’ commentaries as many authors from their region had to misinterpret their own works for political reasons during the socialist era.

One of the authors who saw the perils of ill-applied literary theory and criticism very clearly was Flannery O’Connor, even more so, as she was always interested in the teaching process. In her essay “The Teaching of Literature” (1963), she claims that unlike other artists, fiction writers write “about life, and so anyone living considers

7. Hawthorn 188.
himself an authority on it”. We cannot dismiss her argumentation as a complaint of just another controversial novelist who happened to become a classic, as she gives a superb description of the various ways in which primary sources can be eliminated from literature classes; it looks like the essay has been written today. Teachers use historical, psychological, sociological or other approaches, and when all of them become exhausted and there is a danger of the return to the literary texts, they “kill the subject altogether. Integrate it out of existence... I have found that if you are astute and energetic, you can integrate English literature with geography, biology, home economics, basketball, or fire prevention – with anything at all that will put off a little longer the evil day when the story must be examined simply as a story or novel.”

Here, teaching goes hand in hand with theory and criticism. Every decade brings new fashionable methodological approaches, and also new authorities who are followed and quoted in papers and books, whatever their topic is. In the 1991 MLA conference in San Francisco, you could count papers not mentioning Michel Foucault or Jacques Derrida on the fingers of one hand. The similar role of omnipresent gurus was played by Freud and Jung several decades ago. In 1958, William Faulkner, disgusted by the never-ending speculations on the Freudian roots of his fiction, said: “...I have never read him. Neither did Shakespeare. I doubt Melville did either, and I’m sure Moby Dick didn’t.”

Young scholars who want to master, for instance, the jargon of deconstruction must read more and more theory, must be familiar with philosophical sources of their idols to understand them properly, but they have no time to read fiction, poetry or drama before the retirement age. No wonder that even some theorists realize that contemporary literary theory and criticism is cornered. Harold Bloom goes even farther and speaks about an American “school of resentment”, a crowd of “pseudo-Marxists, pseudo-feminists, watery disciples of Foucault and other French theorists” who cannot tell a great literary work from a poor one, apply non-literary criteria on literature and whose only aim is to be politically correct. “There is no future for literary studies as such in the United States,” he concludes, and it is a statement that should be taken in earnest.

The more it is written about our era and its creative activities, the less able we are to find proper words for what we are doing. All seems to be reduced to the “Publish, or Perish” strategy. A certain consolation can be found in the idea that all theories and interpretations may be useful and can contribute to better understanding of cultures, but in spite of that, it is necessary to return to primary sources before it is too late.

10. Flannery O’Connor, Mystery and Manners, eds. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (London: Faber and Faber, 1972) 122. The essay “The Teaching of Literature” was derived from a talk to a group of English teachers (see p. 236).
11. O’Connor 127.
WORKS CONSULTED:


Bloom, Harold. Interview. “We Have Lost the War.” *Newsweek* 7 November 1984: 60.


