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Philosophy and Literature, Volume 32, Number 1, April 2008, pp. 1-10
(Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/phl.0.0015>



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LITERARY THEORY IN AN AGE OF GLOBALIZATION

When the blackbird flew out of sight,
It marked the edge
Of one of many circles.
Wallace Stevens, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird"

I

FORGET THE BLACKBIRDS FOR NOW. The question is: how many ways are there of questioning theory in our age? And if beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and the earth wobbles under the weight of six billion beholders, what is beauty then? Or is beauty unmentionable in academe, despite the indiscretions of some scholars—Elaine Scarry, Fred Turner, Charles Jencks, among others—who have recently taken the name of beauty in vain?

Again, forget beauty and the blackbirds; think of geography. Thomas Friedman went home one day and said to his wife, "Honey, I think the world is flat." He was echoing a technocrat in Bangalore who said to him, "Tom, the playing field is being leveled." Leveled or flattened, they both meant the world is very round: interactive, interdependent, instantaneous, contemporaneous—and viciously fractious withal.

The Taliban vandalize priceless Buddhist statues; thieves armed with computers loot Aztec and Assyrian treasures; fatwa establish new guidelines for literary criticism; and the great museums of the world wrangle with governments, with history itself, about the patrimonies of art. This is a nasty condition, both flat and round. What kind of literary theory, what kind of aesthetics generally, can emerge from a world that defies Euclidean and non-Euclidean geometries with every diurnal spin?

The answer to these real and mock queries seems lost in partisanship

and prejudice, abrasive ideologies and slick skepticism. Sane critics may look for a way out in ideas of pluralism, eclecticism, hybridity, and cosmopolitanism, recently propounded by Kwame Anthony Appiah. Sooner or later, though, these ideas crash on the realities of our time: “ethnic violence, economic volatility, and empires in decline,” as Niall Ferguson puts it in *The War of the World*. Above all, they crash on the obdurate self, on self-interest without borders. Is there a way out?

II

World history tends to abstractions that art can flesh. Last year, the Louvre sponsored an ambitious, multi-disciplinary event called “The Foreigner’s Home.” Toni Morrison served as presiding spirit. She chose Géricault’s painting of 1819, “The Raft of the Medusa,” as an icon for her theme. For her, the distraught sailors struggling to stay afloat provides a haunting—perhaps also melodramatic—image of millions in search of new homes, wandering about, as she put it, “like nomads between despair and hope, breath and death.”

Imagine the tempestuous sea, seething with monsters; imagine the splintered, overloaded raft and shredded sails, tossed about, without destination; think of them symbolizing our collective destiny. What kind of art can emerge from this wreck, what kind of criticism or aesthetic theory? Morrison’s answer is: look to the individual human body, a choreography of blood and bones. In a sea of distress, she says, “you have the body in motion and you have the obligation of seeing the body as the real and final home.”

The phrase resonates: “the body as the real and final home.” The body not only as a political or aesthetic entity, the refuge of exiles who sew their lips and artists who mutilate their genitals, but also as the locus of experience, an epistemological ground, waiting to be worked, waiting to be known, leaking away its life. Can this sense of a death-heavy body serve not only art but also theory in an age of diaspora and division? Or does that sense, sooner or later, hit a dead end despite the brilliant efforts of thinkers like Bataille and Leiris? Death and the body: perhaps they can teach theory to accept its own transience, to refrain from systematizing the irrational, to acknowledge desire even as it opens itself to the void.

I will return to these issues. For the moment, I am tempted to remark that diverse and relative beliefs—in the West, at least—manage only to paint a Benetton rainbow over the wretched Raft of the Medusa.

III

Here's the D-word, diversity, dreadful in its glibness. Why dreadful? Because the issue goes beyond different cultural norms and sundry moral or aesthetic judgments; it affects the human capacity for responding itself.

I have stood frozen before certain objects in galleries around the world, feeling that no experience I've had at the Metropolitan or Uffizi, at Karnak or the Parthenon, can help me cope with what appears before me. I don't simply mean the shock of the new; I also mean the profound, and ultimately inexplicable, threat of otherness. And I also mean the paradoxical temptation of indifference. You end by asking yourself: do I really have to deal with this? Do I care?

Admittedly, our perplexity nowadays is partially due to the radically disjunctive legacy of modernism, postmodernism, and assorted avant-gardes in the last hundred years. But haven't we inured ourselves to the various avant-gardes by now? Haven't we absorbed their shock? We actually live their scandal, or, rather, we let the media, if not our servants, live it for us. In any case, the arts continue to create their audiences somehow—with the possible exception of contemporary music.

But the difficulties of aesthetics today, of literary theory as well, are due to something larger than catachrestic modernism and paratactic postmodernism: that is, a collision, not only of styles, values, and expectations, but also of radical assumptions of being. Call it ontological diversity, a clash not of civilizations but of ways of being and breathing in the world. *And yet, that may be precisely the creative moment in globalization, before homogenization sets in, before differences freeze into lucre or flare up into rage.*

Can this be the present task of theory, to grasp the creative moment of difference, of ontological diversity itself? A leap of empathy, you might say, a recklessness with all we know and are. A way of grasping the moment out of time, the *kairos* of aesthetic globalization. That may be too much to ask. In the end, most of us most of the time will fall back on habit, hypocrisy, or the common balm of indifference. At best, we try to translate—the etymology of the word implies transport, carrying something across—translate the different languages of being in this world, in other worlds too. And why not? As the poet James Merrill put it: all life is translation, and we are all lost in it.

So, theory as pragmatic translation, mediating ontological diversity, moving between art and abstraction—right brain, left brain—between creation and consumption: is that the best we can hope for?

IV

The alternative to translation may be fundamentalism, absolutism of one kind or another.

Just for grim fun, I try to imagine a Fundamentalist Aesthetic. Would it issue fatwa in the name of Yahweh, Christ, or Allah, but probably not the Buddha? Or, more philosophical, would it invoke Plato and hail Hegel? Or perhaps, more equable still, it would claim Universal Reason, dormant since the Enlightenment, as final arbiter. And if Fundamentalist Aesthetics discovers a heretic here or a deviant there, what then? Would it call the SWAT of Art or Taliban of Theory to expunge the miscreant from creation? I shudder, though part of me, part of us all, yearns for the simplicity of fundamentalism.

All fun aside, literary theory demands a semblance of articulation, a gesture toward generalization, as the arts do. Once, the Bible, or Shakespeare, or the myths and archetypes of the world, or the Freudian Unconscious, or the Marxist version of History, or powerful concepts like mimesis, or the basic structures of language itself, provided frames of generalization. But now, general principles, pragmatic “universals,” however soft, dare not breathe their name in academe.

Yet universals, not Platonic but empiric, abound. For instance: languages; human emotions; marks of status; ceremonies of birth, marriage, and death; gods, spirits, taboos, and rituals; not to mention the sixty-seven socio-biological practices that E. O. Wilson calls, in *Consilience*, “epigenetic rules.” In other words, cultures and individuals not only vary infinitely; their variations also follow patterns; and even chaos seems to follow complex rules. Without self-revising rules, no theory would carry conviction, and no aesthetic response would share itself with another.

V

I will return to the word “conviction”—yes, my theme is recursive—but now, I want to brush base with Kantian philosophy, and so relate pragmatic universals—call them generalizations, if you prefer—to the more traditional concerns of theory.

From the New Critics of the forties to the Poststructuralists of yesterday, theorists have nodded toward Königsberg, whether to adapt, adopt, or reject the *Critique of Judgment*. Improbably, I want to allude to Kant by way of Walter Benjamin. It’s just a hint, really, from his murky-written essay of 1917, entitled “Program of the Coming Philosophy.”

Benjamin wants to derive from Kant an epistemological concept of experience. “A concept of knowledge gained from reflection on the linguistic nature of knowledge,” he writes, “will create a corresponding concept of experience which will also encompass realms that Kant failed to truly systematize.” And what is experience for Benjamin? It is simply “the uniform and continuous multiplicity of knowledge.”

There is a chicken and egg effect here, one that would fail to trouble a resolute pragmatist, who would give no priority to knowledge or experience. But Benjamin is more than halfway to pragmatism anyway, and his Neo-Kantian project might well serve to critique the arts. An epistemology of experience would allow effective generalizations, a basis for judgment. Grounded in experience, it would also acknowledge the body—Morrison’s “real and final home”—and make a place for death among its abstractions. Still, one thing lacks for me here: a fiduciary principle, a working idea of trust, which would apply to the arts.

VI

This leads to the core of my essay. An epistemology of experience, relying on pragmatic principles, depends less on metaphysical truth than on human trust. This trust, as William James shows in *The Will to Believe*, depends on another’s trust, just as our faith “is faith in someone else’s faith. . . .” Hence the self-defeating character of radical relativism, of extreme particularism. Hence, too, the innate sterility of fundamentalism, which spurns human trust in favor of fiats, ukases, edicts, writs, and gospels of every kind.

The fiduciary principle I invoke here, this idea of trust, is also the trust on which knowledge rests and by which knowledge is shared. Call it the epistemic contract; call it the aesthetic compact as well. Without this tacit compact, the artist can not create, let alone communicate; without it, the aesthete can not theorize; without it, the critic or reader or viewer falls silent. This trust, I would argue, has a spiritual character.

Why on earth spiritual? Because trust comes from self-bracketing, self-emptying, self-dispossession, comes ultimately from what theologians call *kenosis*. Trust is a quality of attention to others, to the created world, to something *not* in ourselves. “All mean egotism vanishes . . . I become a transparent eyeball. *I am nothing, I see all.*” That’s the vision of the Man at Concord, perhaps the vision of us all when we profoundly trust. The Woman at Amherst went farther:

By homely gift and hindered words
 The human heart is told
 Of nothing—
 “Nothing” is the force
 That renovates the World.

Emily Dickinson might as well have said: Nothing is the force that renovates Trust. Nothing—that notional mother of death—is the force that renovates Creation, yes, but Nothing also underwrites our faith in symbols and representations. Silence, absence, and the void cradle language, cradle Being itself. As the poet Paul Valéry once put it: “God made everything out of nothing. But the nothing shows through.” This intuition, central to both modernism and postmodernism—from Heidegger to Derrida, from Kandinsky to Bill Viola, from Webern to Cage—is spiritual in nature because it touches the ultimate mystery of existence. What does it really mean: “I exist”? No one knows. Not René Descartes. Not Dr. Johnson who used to stub his toes on stones.

VII

At this point, we might pause to catch our breath. So far, we have looked for a basis of theory—and by implication of art—in a globally fragmented age. The search brought us to soft universals, pragmatic generalizations, which underwrite all human discourse, a tacit compact of trust. Trust, I suggested, comes from self-dispossession, ultimately, a gift of giving oneself to the void. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with Nothing. Is this blasphemy? Is it mysticism?

I would rather think of it as an expression of our common faith that language, as a symbolic structure, rises arbitrarily from brute experience—from nothing, so to speak—to enable all the glorious ambiguities of human communication. Oh, it’s better than that: on a good day, language also creates for us a home-made world, in which we all trust and share. Somehow, against all odds, ours remains an answerable world.

The issue, then, is not only linguistic but also fiduciary, a quotidian miracle. But *can trust underwrite theory in a radically diverse and globally fractious age?* I am uncertain, and uncertain also that these notes can unfold all the meanings of trust, all its aspects and degrees. But I know that literary theory in a time of contested globalization will not find legitimacy in sectarian politics or fundamentalist dogma, not in cultural identity or transcendental philosophy. In what, then, beside pragmatic trust?

VIII

Might the vaunted universality of art underwrite theory and widen trust in the world? That “universality” was equivocal from the start. It is most convincing in the case of traditional music—the beat of foot, the pulse in the artery, is nearly ubiquitous—and most arguable in the case of literature, which embeds itself in the mother tongue.

I turn to literature precisely because its case is the most equivocal. I turn, inevitably, to Shakespeare. But this is a particular Shakespeare, touched by the hyperbolic brilliance of Harold Bloom. As we know, Bloom believes that Shakespeare’s plays read us, comprehend us; we all live within *them*—the Bushman, Patagonian, Londoner, Cairene, and Hairy Ainu alike. This seems extravagant until we recall the passionate scope of the Bard’s plays, which seem to excite, all at once, the lymphatic system, hypothalamus, amygdala, and neocortex, flashing even in the transparent eyeball of the visionary. (The conceit may not seem implausible to a neuroscientist like Susan Greenfield, who claims, in *The Private Life of the Brain*, that emotion is the most basic form of awareness.)

Specifically, for Bloom, Fat Jack and the Prince of Denmark reveal the most comprehensive consciousness in literature. Be that as it may, the two characters—could anyone include both in a modern play?—emerge as prodigious charismatics. They also share a deep vein of nihilism, which contributes, paradoxically, to their universality. Having plumbed the depths, they saw Nothing there, and that’s what we all see in our rare moments of unflinching clarity. “Our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own.” The lines are the Player King’s, scripted by Hamlet, acknowledging that the universe doesn’t give a fig for us.

I think Bloom—his penchant for psychomachia aside—is right when he remarks: “Hamlet’s universalism seems our largest clue to the enigma of his personality; the less he cares for anyone, including the audience, the more we care for him.” Indeed! But I want to speculate beyond Bloom: in the perspective of this essay, I trust Hamlet—yes, trust him—because he sees everything, cares about nothing, not even about himself. Because he is a center of a terrible lucidity and indifference in the world. Can this indifference, this kenotic quality, suggest a premise of literary theory in the global age? Or does kenosis serve only the elect?

Indifference and lucidity, when they are so richly embedded in the world as they are in Shakespeare’s plays, surely define noble attributes

of the critical mind, if not of theory itself. They clear the doors of perception and invite, not compel, assent. Thus they help create the condition to which theories aspire when theories aspire to trust.

IX

I seem to have cornered myself into the position that aesthetics generally, and literary theory in particular, have something to learn from great art. (I can hear Gotthold Lessing grumbling and tossing in his deep grave.) Learn nihilism or what?

Learn more than nihilism, I think. Theory can take a hint from the inexhaustible range of human emotions, sensual impressions, and artistic forms.

A good theorist will be as inward with the aching human body—the mortal “body as the real and final home”—and with the human mind and heart, as any poet or novelist. A good critic will know how to follow the “inner momentum of a poem,” as Helen Vendler does in *Poets Thinking*, rather than some extraneous thesis. (We can all do with a fix of “negative capability” now.) Best of all, both theorist and critic will find a way to withdraw tactfully sometimes, or at least turn aside, mindful of Cage’s insight that the best criticism of a work of art is another work of art.

These hopeful notes point toward a pragmatic theory, a theory nearly but never quite as wide as the world, a theory that trusts in imagination and play without insistence on itself. Theory is fading fast, anyway, smiling at us like the Cheshire Cat. So why not let theory fade even if we must coax back the Cat someday?

X

I have mentioned John Cage in haste, and want now to adduce him as a slant parable, a personal memory rippling out in circles across the surface of our subject?

Cage melds Western vanguards with Eastern precepts, Dada with Zen. Yet, the man remains an American original. Like his father, a California inventor, Cage recalls the down-home, crackpot anarchism and creativity of the New World. In him, American Puritanism, Transcendentalism, and Pragmatism—the pragmatism of James and the pragmatism of Suzuki—all find ludic affinities. In him, laughter and creation, self-heedlessness

and commitment, chance and order, all meet. In his spirit, if not in his music exactly, the human spirit, whatever its tribe, renews itself.

In short, Cage serves as a particular case—call him eccentric, if you wish—of the aesthetic compact, global in reach yet singular in persuasion, practical like chopping wood, playful like a child, loony like a Zen fool, spiritual without benefit of theology. His chance operations and aleatory techniques are exercises in *kenosis*, attempts at emptying the self, and so earn—grudgingly, I admit—our trust. It's all contained in a remark he once made to me in mock exasperation: "Don't you see, Ihab, that when you've delivered a judgment, that's *all* you've got!" His jaw then dropped in that soundless, goofy laugh of his.

XI

I may be utopian to think that art can inspire aesthetics, that kenotic trust can underwrite vanishing theory. Yes, it's a far ideal, like Rumi's ideal in "Infidel Fish":

In this world full of shape,
There you are with no form.

Can we hope for a diaphanous theory, unafraid of its affinities with silence, death, the void? Is that possible? Is it useful? Or are the lineaments of that ideal already part of our arts, like a vanishing blackbird making the last circle visible in the sky?

This I know: an essay of this kind will never catch the thirteenth blackbird in full flight.

XII

In this last section, all the blackbirds now invisible at the edge—the edge not of the topic but of my sight—I want to avoid closure and think against myself.

I realize that before Thales of Miletus ever drew breath, the claims of the particular and the aspirations of the universal had quarreled, and continue to quarrel still. Perhaps theory, then, should renounce the hope of becoming a global theory, satisfied to become, instead, a set of local practices, each looking over its shoulder at other practices, all of them aware of the great world.

I realize also that I may have put too heavy a burden on trust as a

theoretical principle. Perhaps a weaker version of it can do us for a while, something combining dispassion with empathy, something ready to translate itself, to risk its own assumptions, to let go when ripeness calls.

And I realize that I have spoken of spirit often without ever defining it. In Wittgenstein's sense, spirit is everything we mean when we talk about it. (*Webster* gives 25 definitions of the word.) But spirit is also more specific in my usage because it comes to us in the guise of self-dispossession, a way of suspending our wants to look and watch.

Finally, I realize how glib the tongue grows when it speaks of spirit, skimming the abyss. True self-dispossession demands, as Eliot said in *The Four Quartets*:

A condition of complete simplicity
(Costing not less than everything)

Who can afford simplicity at this exorbitant price, the obverse of the terrible simplicity of fanaticism, the antithesis of rooted self-regard?

What I have offered, then, is neither theory nor assured ideas, only hints and queries, in twelve perspectives—no, not thirteen. The possibilities, I hope, sketch a pattern, trace the fissures in our thinking about literary theory today. In the end, we cannot theorize literature completely without denying the essential shadows in ourselves. The “snowy mountains” and the “indecipherable cause,” as Wallace Stevens put it, will remain, and this is also something readers need to know.

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