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Response: Perspectives of Literary Theory

My response must first be autobiographical. Although trained as a literary critic, in Renaissance English literature, I have not quite practiced as such in well over 20 years, at least not in the conventional sense. Rather I have worked on establishing a firm theoretical basis for humanities computing, working from a close philological and literary study of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Much of the theorizing I have done is from generalizing discoveries made in the course of this philological and literary study.

My background thus qualifies me to address only the second of the questions. I have two responses.

1. On ›Theory‹

The greatest impediment to making clear, persuasive statements about *literary theory* is to have an idea of what ›theory‹ might mean in the context of literary studies. How do we recognize a theory of literature when we encounter one? What form does such a theory take? What does it set out to do, and how does it accomplish its work? Is a *theory* of literature different in any essential respects from reflections on literature, and if so, how?

A helpful way of approaching these questions would be to identify works of literary criticism that seem to qualify. (In the Anglophone tradition, Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* is an obvious candidate.) Also helpful would be to contrast theoretical with practical criticism. What is a literary *theory* not? Examining the notion of theory in various of the social and natural sciences will also provide powerful means of contrast. What is a *literary theory* not?

The questions I pose are not meant to have definite answers. I intend only to alert students of literature to an urgent need for critical awareness of what is suggested, even more than what is asserted, when identifying reflective work as a theory. The participial ›theorizing‹ or the adjectival ›theoretical‹ are far less definite, and so less potentially misleading. The noun ›theory‹, at least in English, is apt to bring along subterranean connotations from the natural sciences. We are apt to be glad for these connotations, for the sake of the analgesic prestige and security they infuse into consciousness. (How lacking in self-confidence hu-

manist scholars are nowadays, how unsure of the social basis for their work, how ill-equipped to respond to public criticism!) Very old cultural prejudices confer social superiority on theory, inferiority on practice. These prejudices run very deep. We must work hard to eradicate them. We must be able to say what we mean by ›theory‹ in a way that helps rather than undermines literary criticism.

2. On Literary Theorizing in the Digital Age

From the perspective of the ›new philology‹, as Roberto Busa called it (1990), our ideas about literature are as woefully inadequate as our ideas about language. To take only one example from many: the computational linguist Graeme Hirst declares that the highly useful notion of context is a ›spurious concept‹ (2000); in much the same spirit, Jonathan Culler points out that context is merely more text and so explains nothing (1988). Both are right, both miss an important point, as follows.

Certainly one of the greatest challenges that literary theory now faces is to bridge the gulf between the digital and readerly perspectives on literature. I do not mean by this that we must salvage what we can from the old while it is still afloat. We are still readers! Rather I mean two things: first, the digital perspective requires the contrastive value of the readerly to be of any use to criticism; second, for all of us to meet the digital age in the fulness of our strength – all of which we need – we must take on the digital knowledgeably as foil to the readerly. This foil strengthens our hand with both analytic and synthetic approaches to literature.

I return to the example of context to draw out the analytic approach. The digital view of context allows us to identify word-forms and other discrete entities in the neighbourhood of whatever we are studying. Digital tools allow us to be rigorously consistent in how we identify and value these entities, then to sum up and present the effects on the object of study. The readerly view yields contextual effects not captured by the digital method. Perfective iteration improves the digital result, but finally one is left with an irreducible difference. In some cases, the scholar can then propose theoretical entities as responsible for part of the digitally unexplained result. Perfective iteration on these theoretical entities can then stabilize them, thus quasi-materializing what has been clearly present all along but attributable only to context (cf. McCarty 2005, 20–72).

Such is the first contribution from digital literary criticism that literary theory needs to comprehend. The second, a synthetic approach to literature, has been sketched in a preliminary way by Jerome McGann and others in the *IVANHOE Game* and in an amalgam of theory to support it (McGann 2006, 148–171). The critical discourse we have, including the Bakhtinian kind McGann invokes, lacks the vocabulary for bridging the gulf separating criticism from system design and

implementation. For this reason he reaches into theoretical biology and quantum physics for help. A somewhat bumpy ride results, but such reachings are exactly right and need to be extended, e.g. into biological anthropology, anthropological linguistics and improvisational musicology, where forms of dynamic, creative synthesis of self-organizing, impredicative, complex systems are also studied.

The point for literary studies is to supplement microscopic text-analysis with telescopic text-synthesis, so that we may better look outward from within any given part of the literary cosmos toward the context which is all literature. In 1989 Northrop Frye foresaw such a project to model from what we know toward a science of literature (Frye 1991). At the time, our understanding both of computing and of science was not quite ready. The time has come.

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