UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM

UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Between romanticism and theory: the future of literary studies

Szafraniec, J.D.

Published in:
Frame

Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):
Szafraniec, A. (2011). Between romanticism and theory: the future of literary studies. Frame, 24(1), 66-79.

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: http://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

UvA-DARE is a service provided by the library of the University of Amsterdam (http://dare.uva.nl)

Download date: 28 Feb 2017

Between Romanticism and Theory: The Future of Literary Studies

ASJA SZAFRANIEC

If a discipline in the humanities overtly describes itself as devoted to the understanding of a given artistic medium, then its future should depend exclusively on the future of the medium. Or so it seems, for there are at least two considerations that can significantly complicate this thesis. First, it is true both of the discipline (literary studies) and of the medium (literature) that each of them must vie for legitimacy with other disciplines and media, and so their respective future is determined also through this tension. Secondly, a certain parallelism between the development of a discipline and the development of its respective medium may significantly change the nature of their original relation.[1] The parallelism between the cultural dynamics of a medium and that of its discipline means their potential substitutability and leads to a situation in which (a certain historical variant of) a discipline may enter in competition with its own medium: their original relation of mutual determination may change into one of a more predatory nature.

1 The current competition between the disciplines (literary studies and the film and media studies) parallels the past competitions in the realm of the media (such as the crisis of painting accompanying the development of photography or the crisis of static photography accompanying the development of film). Similarly, the more recent discussion of intermediality in the humanities mimics the older one of interdisciplinarity.

For these reasons we should perhaps distrust J. Hillis Miller's claim that literary studies is a discipline simply ancillary to its object, and that the future of literary theory will depend solely on the future of literature, of the works to come. (Hillis Miller, 111)[2] It may just as well depend on the future of other disciplines or on the re-definition of the discipline itself.

The thesis about the possible competition between literary studies conceived as theory and their primary object is supported by the developments of the last few decades: the near-identification of the discipline with what we came to call literary-, critical- or simply "theory" to the detriment of the focus on the readings of literary works for their own sake. For the moment at least it seems that the fate of literary studies is more connected to the fate of theory than to the fate of literature.

Taking into account that "theory" means initially no more than a way of viewing or beholding an object and that it has at least since Plato accompanied the reception of literature, the presence of theory (whether cultural, critical or literary) in literary departments might seem beyond dispute. But the fact of its dating back to Plato does not automatically make it neutral or innocuous. The dispute about the overgrowth of attention given to theory is there, and its presence is not only due to a kind of metonymic mechanism in which theory in general takes the blame for some of its elements or representatives falling into discredit or simply getting out of fashion. The dispute is also due to the regularity with which humanities are haunted by Romanticism: an ever-returning cultural phenomenon of a desire to abolish or at least to not have to depend on any theoretical framework. (This desire produces of course nonetheless its own theoretical discourse, for example, in case of the German Romanticism

2 To be precise, Hillis Miller says that about literary theory, while suggesting that it is possible to draw within literary studies a neat separating line between literary theory and cultural theory. "It is ... a big mistake to confuse literary theory with cultural theory." (112) Yet Hillis Miller does not provide convincing grounds for the rigidity of such a distinction. If, as he says, "to call something literature is a speech act (*I declare this literature*)", then it is difficult to hold as he does that "the data they [literary and cultural theory, a.s.] are intended to account for are quite distinct. (ibid.)

that of opposition between "presentation" and "re-presentation"). That this wish continues to return can be seen in the later work of Ludwig Wittgenstein which may be understood as an attempt to examine the degree to which the "ways of seeing" determine the content of what we see, and to see whether these "ways of seeing" can be separated from the act of seeing itself. Behind this attempt one can discern a desire to see things as they really are, beyond any possible distortion by a particular "way of seeing." (Wittgenstein, 165-195) We owe the realization of the Romantic character of that part of Wittgenstein's philosophical project to Stanley Cavell's work, which traces an itinerary between later Wittgenstein and the philosophical and literary Romanticism. I will return to Cavell's insights below.

In this paper I am exploring an interaction of these two philosophically motivated perspectives on literary studies: the Romantic desire to transcend theory (and to let the essence of literary works reveal itself to us unmediated) and the perspective in which the framework of theory dominates or at least vies for legitimacy with its own object. My analysis of those two possible developments has as a goal to show that their outcome may turn out to be the same: both the intensified engagement with theory and the Romantic reaction against it may lead to the increased appeal to the individual (and to the sphere of the private) as the major standard of judgment. One development testifying to this turn to the individual is the renewed attention in the Humanities to the domain of emotions and affects. I will return to this in the final section.

The first of the options suggests that we seek to discover, by patient probing of literary works themselves, a new, till now unknown, impulse that will reassert the autonomy of literary medium, and thereby its independence from other media (analogously to the way in which Impressionism asserted painting's independence from the principle of realist representation). Whether such a conception of literary studies can be successful will depend almost entirely on the dynamics of the medium itself (and of course on our ability to discern this dynamics). That such an impulse, which will inevitably draw in its wake its own theory, is not a counter-argument, it being part of the dynamics of a medium. What counts is that any theory we may come up with will be posterior to our experience of literature.

The second of the options is to re-examine the role of theory in literary studies – to ask the question whether it should be seen as merely parasitic (that is, substituting itself for and preventing us from seeing the real object of study) or instead as something that this discipline has absorbed as a part of its own foundation, so that literary studies can no

3 Cf. ancient Greek kanón, "measuring rod, standard."

longer be conceived without facing its own entanglement with theory. But to take this second path is also to have to acknowledge the consequences: the constant increase in intensity and velocity of exchanges between various theoretical frameworks weakens the disciplining force of all those frameworks. It makes theory volatile, endlessly mutable, even evanescent.

Without theory

With his reflection on "seeing aspects" – the modalities of looking that account for (but may also prevent us from) seeing things as they really are – Wittgenstein is the most influential thinker among those responsible for the critique of theoretical instruments of measurement, assessmentand examination. Among such instruments in the Humanities we must count not only various argumentative structures organizing our perceptions of the studied objects assembled under the name of theory, but also the canon, the list of fundamental works that serves as a standard for culture (the very word canon stems from the notion of measurement[3]). It is not by accident that the current debate questioning the role of theory in literary departments is being shadowed by another debate within the Humanities, questioning the need of the canon. The motive of questioning is in both cases the same: the sense that we have delegated the conditions of our judgment to a body (of canon, of theory) that may turn out to be alien both to us and to the object of the perception and in consequence distort or muddle our judgment rather than adding to its perspicuity. It is this sense that lies behind the desire for unmediated perception of what literature may have to say to us, or of the expressions of our culture. This desire is a wish to understand the object of study on the ground of its inner dynamics alone.

Thinking from within this desire, we are facing two questions: about the nature of this particular medium called literature and about the stage at which it finds itself. The questions are not new of course. The answer to the question about the nature of the medium keeps evolving, since it is being posed all the time in the literary departments (to what extent the limits of literature are permeable to difference, to what extent we can speak of an affinity between literature and other forms of language use for example, philosophy, or other forms of narratives as those rooted in visual means of expression. Is the self-referentiality the quintessence of the medium or is it rather its connection to the reality of history or of human nature?). But perhaps, beyond all those questions, another vantage point is possible with respect to literature.

When examining the medium of film, Stanley Cavell proposes to determine its nature by insisting that we should not connect it to the mechanism of the medium itself but rather should conceive it as the way in which it is related to the whole of human culture. A medium should be seen in the first place as a form of response to our human needs. (Cavell, 41) If we take seriously Cavell's idea that the medium of film is only in a secondary way defined by a cinematographic apparatus (whether understood in terms of a historical development or in terms of a particular technology) but primarily by its particular form of responsiveness (by its being a form of response, that is, in terms of a cultural need in which it provides), then we should also concede that the nature of any artistic medium should be approached in this way. This means that, on Cavell's terms, the first question we should ask about literature is not about its essential features or characteristic mechanisms (for example, narrativity, self-referentiality) but about reasons for which it appears in our human culture (that is in the way it responds to the cultural conditions). One of the needs in which cinema provided, according to Cavell, was a cultural need of experiencing or receiving the world in a very particular way – while being hidden and protected from it. In case of cinema it meant and still means being literally hidden in the darkness of the projection room. If we also grant Cavell that *any* artistic medium aims at a coming to terms with our distance from the world, at fostering our cultural cohesion with the world, then his definition of the medium of film, with certain mutations, could be useful for our understanding of literature. Also in literature we are coming to terms with our distance from the world, although in a different modality of experience, different degree of 'hiddenness', different ways in which the world is given to us. The distinct cultural need motivating our need of literature might for example be the need of having things said *for* us, of experiencing the vicarious saying of the world for us.

We can, and we have in the past, predicated a certain dynamics of artistic media. For example Alain Badiou advanced a claim that the "Age of Poets" is finished. (Badiou, 69 ff.) Or it was repeatedly held to be understood that the painting is exhausted as a medium. It might appear that literature might be threatened with the fate of the Greek vase painting, or miniatures, or portable altars, all of which seem to have lost their vitality as media. This means that within the Romantic paradigm I am considering here we should investigate not only the nature of the medium that literature is, but also its current state.

The state of an artistic medium is the felicitousness of the way in which it meets our cultural needs. In case of literature, we might measure this felicitousness in terms of the degree to which the vicarious saying of the world for us provides in our need of cultural cohesion. It depends on literature's felicity in saying the world for us, the felicity of its ventriloquism. Cavell calls this kind of felicity "candor" and it is precisely the successes and failures of its pursuit that account for him for the dynamics of the medium. Our judging of literary works (so the judging of the state of the medium) must in the first place assess the felicity of this pursuit. If we grant Cavell that the nature of literature resides in its ability to say things for us, then this felicity cannot draw on new techniques alone, it must draw in the first place on literature's ability to disclose that which is implicit in our culture. Examples of such 'revelations' that come to my mind are the suggestion made by the contemporary Dutch writer Arnon Grunberg regarding the Judeo-Christian tradition that what we take for its consolatory impulse may just as well be a predatory impulse;[4] or the revelation of the intricate play of the human spirit accompanying an ordinary conversation in Henry James. (James, 149)[5] These ways of

4 Arnon Grunberg, *The Jewish Messiah*. The ancient symbol of the Messiah evoked by Grunberg, the predatory pelican as a figure of salvation is only one of the multiple ways of representing this connection.

5 The very progress of the novel relies on making perspicuous the endless play of reflections accompanying such a conversation: "On this her smile came back, and with the effect of making him hear what he had said just as she had heard it."

disclosing the world cannot be accounted for by any theory, they require attention and responsiveness to the works themselves.

A possible objection might be that this approach to literary works is far fromimmediate. It remains mediated by thousands of factors, like knowing what are consolation, religion, the Judeo-Christian tradition or working out a theory of each. Cavell's reply would be that this is a kind of knowledge that is not alien to us (in the way theory is). It is a part of our upbringing, so that in applying it as a standard we are not alienating the grounds for our judgment. They are our grounds, ones from which we cannot detach ourselves. We cannot think ourselves separately from those grounds.

The state of theory: from discipline to control

What is the current state of our relation to literature? One known philosophical response to it, that of Gilles Deleuze, expresses the historical state of literature by pointing out (rightly or wrongly, that is another matter) to a cultural distinction between the Anglo-American and the French literature. According to Deleuze, there is not *one* current state of our relation to literature but there are two. One privileges symbolic principles of organization (it depends entirely on the play of significations, one meaning pointing to another and so on ad infinitum: Deleuze calls this diseased state of French literature "signifiance" and "interpretosis"), the other one does not rely on such means. It merely "experiments",that is, it tests connections between discrete elements of reality on the ontological level, on the level of their real encounters rather than merely on the level of meaning (on the level of metaphorical or symbolic connections being forged between them). It is not difficult to guess which form of relation to literature impresses Deleuze. (Deleuze and Parnet, 47)

Let us accept for a moment Deleuze's distinction, so as to be able to ask, with Cavell, in what social or cultural need does each of those ways of relating to literature provide? I have mentioned the Romantic answer to this question, the need of having the world disclosed to us. Another connected but perhaps less laudable need is that of controlling this disclosure: of understanding what has been disclosed to us by projecting it on a scheme of signification. Deleuze addresses this need in another reading, in his interpretation of Marcel Proust. We tend to read Deleuze's essay on Proust listening to its affirmative tones. I do not want to deny Deleuze's sympathy for Proust, in particular his unfailing admiration for the way in which Proust shows to us the reality of the

past and of the virtual. But I discern also a hidden voice of critique in Deleuze's reading of Proust. Deleuze is not unaware of the existence of another Proust, the Proust of the apprenticeship into being a "spider" (Deleuze 2000, 170): into forming networks of signification that are intended to confine what they envelop. In the latter sense (demonstrated in the narrator's effort to contain the phenomenon 'Albertine' by interpreting every sign she emits and forging a web of connections between those signs) Proust's work is a specimen of Francophone literature Deleuze in general condemns. Here *In Search of the Lost Time* seems to be a response to the need of the Proustian narrator himself, the need of disciplining the object of his love.

Now we can pass on to the question posed in the previous paragraph, about the distinct way in which each of the two approaches to literature discerned by Deleuze responds to our need of disciplining or controlling the disclosure of reality. The example of the Proustian narrator makes it clear that what Deleuze calls "signifiance" and "interpretosis" is a direct response to the latter need. On the other hand, Deleuze associates the opposed, experimental, way of relating to literature with the need to by-pass control. Deleuze spoke here about literature, about two ways of writing, two strategies of becoming an author. But this duality counts not only for the production of literary works but also for what we expect from and how we deal with theory. Theory has a paradoxical feature of being designed to emancipate its audience and at the same time ending up disciplining this audience (and so by limiting the degree of its emancipation). In this section I would like to consider the possibility that this feature of theory, the proportion of the emancipatory and disciplining impulse, is now evolving and that this evolution has to do with what Deleuze called the transition from the "societies of discipline" to the "societies of control." (Deleuze 1992, 3-7)

While giving an important theoretical impulse to the Humanities, Foucault's discovery and analysis of the conjunction of knowledge-power[6] at the same time subverted the status of theory by indirectly showing that it is potentially itself guilty of all it criticizes, that while it is designed to expose the disciplining forces in culture and society it itself may be seen as an example of a disciplining force. Foucault in this sense authored a self-subversion of theory (of its disciplining power) by revealing the failure of the theoretical project: it produces submission rather than liberation of its audience. This was not of course Foucault's final word; and Deleuze expressed it perhaps most succinctly when in response he said that Foucault's model of disciplinary society has been superseded by another one: "Foucault has brilliantly analyzed

the ideal project of these environments of enclosure (...). But what Foucault recognized as well was the transience of this model." (Deleuze, ibid.) While the notion of enclosure was often understood in its physical sense of "prison, hospital, factory, school, family," its range of meaning is in fact more abstract: institutional, conceptual, scholarly, and professional. Deleuze in his response to Foucault speaks explicitly about the crisis of the disciplinary society as involving the crisis of disciplines. (ibid.) It is clear that the actual materiality of interiors Deleuze has in mind is inconsequential. The scholarly interior is not an actual building but rather a conceptual niche, chosen by an academic to pursue an academic career.

Along these lines, 'theory' is a paradigmatic example of a scholarly interior of which Deleuze says that it is in crisis. Of course Deleuze's text is concerned primarily with the socio-administrative-political aspects of this crisis,[7] which by the way also fit perfectly with the current reorganizations in the university world. But I am more concerned with the way in which what Deleuze says in this text may bear on the crisis in theory, the crisis in the safe havens of academic thinking – and on the possibilities of engaging with it. What does it mean for literary theory (and for the relation to literature as organized by literary theory) to go from the stadium of discipline to the stadium of control? In Foucault's original analysis, "discipline" was characterized by the model of complete simultaneous visibility of the panopticon. It is not difficult to see how theory can function as a panopticon with respect to whole cultural heritages, illuminating them, allowing to classify, criticize, examine, and hence discipline them. But this approach

6 That is, of the structures of force that are *both* discursive, epistemological and political *and* that permeate our ways of seeing, speaking, our perception of history, our normativity, all our culture.

7 "[T]he administrations in charge never cease announcing supposedly necessary reforms: to reform schools, to reform industries, hospitals, the armed forces, prisons. But everyone knows that these institutions are finished, whatever the length of their expiration periods." (ibid.)

has lost its virtue. We are aware of the limitations of an analysis of a cultural phenomenon in the conceptual framework of one selected theory, whether Marxist or Freudian or Foucauldian or Deleuzian. As opposed to this static enclosed status of the conceptual environments in disciplinary societies, we increasingly have to do with "the ultrarapid [sic] forms of free-floating control." Deleuze insists that those forms of control replaced "the old disciplines operating in the time frame of a closed system." While interdisciplinarity in the Humanities is nothing new, and neither are intersections between major theories (think of Marx-Freud), it is not just that the connections increase in number, rapidity and experimental spirit (Cavell's forging a connection between Emerson and Wittgenstein, across and seemingly against cultural traditions might be an example here).

More importantly, with this analysis, Deleuze anticipates the progressive weakening of the role of conceptual frameworks as interiors or environments of enclosure. With the advent of the forms of "free-floating" control, theory becomes ephemeral, even when it remains pervasive. The designations of control, as "ultra-rapid" and "free-floating" indicate that in academic debate there is no longer space or time to focus primarily on reconstructing a theory in its totality, that whatever is to be said is to be said in virtue of synthesizing a multiplicity of implicit connections. The turn to individual judgment becomes in this way the result of the intensification of our engagement with theory (because then theory alone can no longer function as a standard of judgment).

Can we avoid dilettantism in such an approach? The question is clearly no longer of containing, *comprehending* or grasping traditions of thought but of surfing between them. It requires both increased intellectual agility and a cultural capacity of absorption, being able to draw those divergent theories to a zone of familiarity. But then, one might retort that in our everyday life we adjust from context to context all the time. To use a well-known example, even though in the sentences "Nobody is in the auditorium" and "Peabody is in the auditorium," the "nobody" and "Peabody" are confined within the same conceptual space (both of them function as the sentence's subject) we know perfectly well that "nobody" is not an object of the same category as "Peabody": in our everyday lives we do not let our thoughts be disciplined by the grammar of our language. It belongs to the future of theory to recognize that the concepts we use are not some higher-order tools of confinement with which to *discipline* our thoughts but the means of *controlling* our thoughts, with the concomitant and always open possibility of bypassing this control. The way in which Deleuze uses the notion of "control" itself

8 "Aversion to conformity" does not have to signify a rejection of theory or canon. According to Cavell, pedagogy is an indispensable moment in the production of such an aversion, even though it must ultimately be rejected.

exemplifies this possibility: sometimes "control" means a form of ultra-discipline, subtler and less visible but more pervasive and effective (where one password can be used to access a variety of data). At the same time however, control cannot but produce forms of ultra-resistance, a superior flexibility of approach, a form of interaction with the sources of control that bypasses if not disarms the latter's disciplining power.

Discipline, Control and the Individual

By shunning theory, the Romantic approach delegates the task of judging and acknowledging the disclosure of the world in literature wholly to the reading individual. In this sense this approach is one in which the reading subject is empowered. "Discipline" and "control" on the other hand have one thing in common: their goal is the production of a docile subject (this convergence indicates the point of focus through which they should be approached, the major site of change: the individual). But was theory not supposed to have emancipatory effect? In his "Militancy of Theory" Michael Hardt acknowledges that this pursuit of theory has failed. Foucault was the first to explain why this happened, by exposing a double bind in Kant's definition of the Enlightenment: any theory that administers the thought of emancipation to the people becomes a new tool of their subjection. It is for this reason, according to Hardt, that Foucault turned, immediately after having given a lecture course on Kant, to the last project of his life, the exploration of *parrhesia* ending with the analysis of the thought of the Cynics. Foucault's turn indicates that he searched for an antidote to the inherent weakness he discovered in all forms of theory. On Hardt's interpretation, this

part of Foucault's project was motivated by a wish to correct the paradox of the theory with an exploration of a collective militantism. But as Jonathan Culler rightly pointed out, there is no reason to believe that collective action has resources to achieve such a correction. (Culler, 225-226) It seems to me on the other hand much more plausible to see in Foucault's attention to the Cynics his interest in the way their thought promoted the *individual* rather than collective thought and action, by stimulating what may in the wake of Emerson be called an "aversion to conformity."[8]

Culler reports that the question of identity is nowadays in decline in literary studies: "doubtless because theoretical debates have led to a more subtle understanding, that identities are neither simply imposed nor freely performed." (Culler, 223) Does it mean that we have understood about this question all there is to be understood? Or does it mean that the question seems for the moment too complex? I'd say that this more subtle understanding makes identity, the individual, the care of the self, *more* rather than less interesting as an object of study. We are only beginning to learn to think of personal identity in less "disciplinary" terms. If we accept Deleuze and Guattari's concept of minorities, of becoming minoritarian, there is one thing that is nowadays most minoritarian of all: the individual, entangled in disciplining discourses which nearly efface its private core of intuitions, convictions and grounds of resistance.

Foucault emphasized that the Cynics put themselves on the path to be scorned, because they did in public what others did only in private. It is perhaps this element of his picture of the Cynics that we should pay attention to: the connection they made between the realms of the public and the private. Even though it seems inherent in the experience of literature, the sphere of the private has for a long time been neglected in literary studies. But it is now an emerging focus of attention. That it is so testifies the renewed focus in the Humanities on emotions (Culler mentions research on shame, compassion, envy, and sentimentality) and on normative intuitions. The investigation of the sphere of privacy is necessary considering the enormous progress of individualization in our society: individualization does not necessarily promote our knowledge of the realm of the private. It may, on the contrary, diminish this knowledge *by preventing it from being transmitted*. The understanding of the role the private and the individual play in the dynamics between the private and the public (the understanding which does not merely focus on the shaping of the private by the public but also on the reverse scenario) is necessary for counteracting the latter possibility: that we will fail to know our own souls.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Badiou, Alain. *Manifesto for Philosophy*, SUNY: Albany, 1999.

Cavell, Stanley. *The World Viewed. Reflections on the Ontology of Film*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1979.

Culler, Jonathan. "Afterword: Theory Now and Again." *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 110: 1 (2011): 225-230.

Deleuze, Gilles. "Postscript on the Societies of Control." *October*, Vol. 59 (1992): 3-7.

——. "On the Superiority of Anglo American Literature" in Deleuze and Parnet, *Dialogues II*. London: Continuum, 2002, 27 ff.

——. *Proust and Signs*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.

Grunberg, Arnon. *The Jewish Messiah*. New York: The Penguin Press, 2008.

Hardt, Michael. "The Militancy of Theory" *The South Atlantic Qua*rterly 110: 1 (2011): 20-32.

Hillis Miller, J. "The Future of Literary Theory." Ed. Willy Østreng. *Consilience*. Oslo: Centre for Advanced Study, 2007.

James, Henry. *The Ambassadors*. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classics, 1992.

Kant, Immanuel. "Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?" *Berlinische Monatsschrift* (1784): 481-495.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. London: Blackwell, 2003.

SUMMARY
The future of literary studies seems to oscillate between an intensified commitment to theory (whether cultural, critical or literary) and the theory's total rejection in favour of a renewed attention to the literary works themselves. The analysis of those two possible developments shows that their outcome may be almost the same: both the intensified engagement with theory and the Romantic reaction against it may lead to the increased appeal to the individual (and to the sphere of the private) as the major standard of judgment. One development testifying to this turn is the renewed attention in the Humanities to the domain of emotions and affects.

Asja Szafraniec (UvA) studied English, Comparative Literature and Philosophy at the University of Warsaw, University of Amsterdam, SUNY Buffalo and Johns Hopkins University. She is a lecturer in philosophy. She is the author of *Beckett, Derrida and the Event of Literature* (Stanford University Press, 2007) and of articles dealing with the relation between philosophy and other disciplines (literature, film, religion).