

Literary Trend after Theory: An Introduction

Yang Gexin

School of Foreign Languages, Huazhong Agricultural University
No.1 Shizishan, Nanhu, Hongshan, Wuhan, Hubei 430070, China
Email: ygx80080@163.com

Abstract This article is an introduction to the thematic cluster “Literary Trend Studies.” It begins with Nicholas Birns’s observation in his book *Theory after Theory: An Intellectual History of Literary Theory from 1950 to the Early 21st Century* (2010). The bulk part of the article is devoted to explicating the major arguments of all the contributions. In doing so, it reveals, if theory means a reasonably systematic reflection on our guiding assumptions, it remains as indispensable as ever. However we are living now in the aftermath of what one might call high theory. We can never be “after theory,” in the sense that there can be no reflective human life without it. So it is quite possible for literary trend after theory to find a new way or revisit some particular styles of thinking to meet the demands of the changing situation.

Key words literary trend; theory after theory; ethical literary criticism

Author Yang Gexin is associate professor at Huazhong Agricultural University. His interests in scholarship include ethical literary criticism and contemporary American fiction. Yang’s latest publications include “Ethical Turn in Literary Studies and the Revival of American Ethical Criticism.” *Foreign Literature Studies* 6(2013):16-25; “Ethical Literary Criticism: A New Approach to Literature Studies.” *Forum for World Literature Studies* 6.2 (2014):335-8.

Nicholas Birns in his book *Theory after Theory: An Intellectual History of Literary Theory from 1950 to the Early 21st Century* (2010) expresses his view that we currently exist in, not a theory-less time, but a period where we’re picking up the pieces and sorting through the rubble of the Theory Tsunami that struck the English Department at the end of the 20th century. Actually, among Birns’ central claims is that “the era of theory’s dominance is over”(11). How one views such an assertion, of course, depends very much on a definition of “dominance.” By it, does Birns suggest that we’ve emerged from a time of slavish conformity suffered under

a dictatorship? Or does he imply that a period of exceptional innovation has settled out into a new normal?

The real purpose of this cluster essays, then, is to situate the literary trend after the movement of the late 20th century in its historical and intellectual context. As Birns points out, “Theory was not suddenly interjected into the cultural system by aliens from outer space. It came out of a diagnosable set of historical processes and because of the existence of a few notable individuals” (40). The first essay of this cluster is a revisit to a notable individual — Edward Said. In the years that followed Said’s foundational argument regarding the relationship between knowledge of the colonial other and the exercise of colonial power, much of this work came to focus specifically on the way in which putatively liberatory efforts to represent colonized and racialized subjects fell into much same traps as overtly colonial representations.

While Vera Nünning from Heidelberg University and Ansgar Nünning, the founding director of the “Giessener Graduiertenzentrum Kulturwissenschaften” (GGK), of the “International Graduate Center for the Study of Culture” (GCSC), and of the European PhD Network “Literary and Cultural Studies,” focusing on the term “fictions of empire,” explore some issues that are of crucial importance for any attempt to come to grips with the logic of the fictions which provided the ideological backbone of British imperialism and rethink colonial discourse and post-colonial criticism with an attempt to conceptualize the relationship between fiction and reality, and between culture and imperialism, emphasizing the creative or performative role that works of fiction can play in the construction and deconstruction of the ideological fictions of imperialism. With the discussion on six of the main functions that both literary and conceptual fictions can fulfill with regard to the making, and unmaking, of imperialist mentalities, Vera and Ansgar conclude that a great deal of the value and relevance of the exploration of what we have called “fictions of empire” lies in the continuity between the past and the present. For Vera and Ansgar, it is surely a good place to start to demystify the discourse of popular imperialism by exploring fictions of empire from a postcolonial and narratological angle.

Following Vera and Ansgar’s exploration of British imperialism, Anne Lounsbury, from New York University, discusses the literature of another big power in Europe — Russia. What’s the relationship between “world literature” and Russian literature? Anne, focusing on Russia’s supposed provinciality, explains the importance of the *provintsiia* trope, in which Russia’s provincial places are characterized by an ambiguous, mixed-up temporality that reveals Russia itself to be neither “modern” nor straightforwardly “backward.” Here the the *provintsiia*

trope, in Anne's mind, is a mishmash of objects, styles, words, and times. By drawing a connection between chaotic simultaneity and creative potential, Anne observes Russia's insistence on its own provinciality helps illuminate how its tradition resists assimilation into "world literature."

If the British imperialism and Russian Literature can be called as "mainstream literatures," the next two contributions will switch to "minor literatures." Galin Tihanov, the George Steiner Professor of Comparative Literature at Queen Mary, University of London, revisits the notion of "minor literatures" and shows it to be an historical construct with a specific lifespan with regard to Bulgarian literature. Minor literatures, as Galin observes, first refer to a potential social and political energy that originates in the writing of a minority within a dominant majority, which is sustained in Deleuze and Guattari's classic book *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*, and then, an evaluative notion that sees "minor literatures" as small, derivative, deprived of originality when measured by the yardstick of "mainstream literatures," which has a longer pedigree that goes back to the intricate history of Eurocentrism since the 18th century.

Going on with the topic of minor literature, the cluster changes from East-European literature to the North-European with Knut's dealing with the modernization of Nordic literature in the 20th century and his showing the reasons why the aesthetic transition from imitation to construction produced completely new forms of literary expression. According to Knut, it is impossible to imitate what you cannot see or hear, the author is dependent on showing the reality behind reality with the help of constructions and models, which serve as door-openers into hidden connections.

The last two essays of this cluster are, to some extent, related to an approach to drama from a perspective of ethical literary criticism. Hyungseob Lee, from Hanyang University, Korea, using Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman* and Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* as paradigmatic works, analyzes the (sub)urban time-space relationship in the early postwar American drama. According to Hyungseob, the four dramatic canvasses on which time is materially embodied point, in their totality, to a multi-layered experience of time which in turn opens up, to different degrees, an ethical space of reading. Thus the fundamentally conservative nature of the early post-war American drama and its general confidence in the representational validity of the realistic-naturalistic form reflects the overall socio-cultural confidence in the American conception of the post-war world and itself.

The cluster ends with WooSoo Park, also a Korean scholar from Hankuk

University of Foreign Studies. With regard to the question “Is Shakespeare Unethical?” WooSoo critically reviews some of the major ethical criticism of Shakespeare from Samuel Johnson to Ludwig Wittgenstein, and to suggest an alternative idea of imaginative ethics in Shakespeare as a man of imagination. For WooSoo, Shakespeare has his own principle of poetic justice: Shakespeare’s “mingled yarn” is more than a melodramatic and bipolar black and white. Shakespeare’s music of forgiveness is touched by his creative mercy beyond the earthly idea of morality. Shakespearean living ethics is the ethics of sympathetic imagination and tolerance oriented towards the realization of transcendental co-presence and musical harmony, as is represented in his final plays of romantic reconciliation and forgiveness.

We are living now in the aftermath of what one might call high theory, in an age which, having grown rich on the insights of thinkers like Althusser, Barthes and Derrida, has also in some ways moved beyond them. What is the way out after theory? As Terry Eagleton points out, “If theory means a reasonably systematic reflection on our guiding assumptions, it remains as indispensable as ever”(2). We can never be “after theory,” in the sense that there can be no reflective human life without it. So it is quite possible for literary trend after theory to find a new way or revisit some particular styles of thinking to meet the demands of the changing situation.

Works Cited

- Birns, Nicholas. *Theory after Theory: An Intellectual History of Literary Theory from 1950 to the Early 21st Century*. Ontario, Canada: Broadview Press, 2010.
- Eagleton, Terry. *After Theory*. New York: Penguin Books, 2003.

责任编辑：王 卓