

## The Greenhouse Effect and a Cool Field of Study\*

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**Résumé:** *La théorie littéraire semble aujourd'hui, comme il y a quelques décennies, le territoire de toutes les expérimentations méthodologiques et notionnelles. C'est l'espace où d'habitude sont faites toutes les vérifications techniques de la machine du discours littéraire. Ici, on soumet au test les prototypes, on établit les principes de fiabilité, on conçoit les nouvelles technologies et les nouvelles techniques du déplacement dans le texte, les nouvelles modalités de démarrer et d'arrêter les moteurs de l'interprétation. Les théoriciens de la littérature sont des assistants de laboratoire, chacun avec son périmètre de travail, chacun avec ses mesures à faire, ses essais et graphiques de suite. Le discours de la théorie littéraire est un composé non intuitivement, mais techniquement articulé. La théorie littéraire fait des incursions dans la sémantique verbale, et non pas dans l'existence de facto.*

**Keywords:** *literary theory, literary criticism, Roman Jakobson, Julia Kristeva, Tzvetan Todorov, Hans Robert Jauss, Umberto Eco*

Whenever we start discussing “the role and place” of this or that, something is not right. When it is not just a catch phrase, this syntagm hints to a crisis situation. The role and place of literary theory in the field of humanities can be a festive theme, right for the self-righteous, but it can also be an expression of anxiety. This condition of disquietude can be of various kinds. We can talk about an anxiety of landmarks, about an apprehension of the journey, an anxiety... of influences and the waste into alterity.

Neither literary theory is exempt from influences, pressures, epidemics, system diseases. Today, after a time of quiet and relative methodological and conceptual health, we can say that Structuralism, for instance, was a system condition. When a body is given too much attention, it runs the risk of getting sick for too much good. A bone system in which too much calcium has been injected is likely to become rigid. No matter how balanced in calories the American food is, it still leads to obesity. Too much nomenclative diet can produce a conceptual concrete of the kind Umberto Eco speaks about in his treatise on semiotics.

Literary theory seems today, much like a few decades ago, a territory of countless methodological and notional experiments. This is the space where, as a rule, the literary discourse vehicle runs a technical check. Here is where prototypes are put to test, reliability principles are set, new technologies and new techniques for travelling within a text are designed, new ways to turn on and off the interpretation engine are experimented. Literary

theorists are like laboratory experts, having assigned their own working perimeter, their measurements, tests and graphs to follow.

Linguistics aside, literary theory is the only humanist discipline to serve a life sentence in language and the relationship to language. To the philosopher, language can be a topic of meditation, an invitation to caution, nuances and the adequacy of terms whatever the undertakings. To the literary theorist, the language of literature is a boundary and a working condition. It is the very substance feeding his/her discourse. As there is no need of ontology to have life, likewise there is no need of theory to have literature. Notwithstanding this, each and every cultural phenomenon is doubled by its own abstract epure. Identity is recorded in textuality. Identity is described, explained, interpreted. The identity of literature is a value placed beyond its contextual appearances. Literary theory does not establish values. It tries to unravel the grounding of value.

Unfortunately, or why not, fortunately, the discourse of literary theory is a technically and not intuitively articulated compound. Without being essentially scientific, this discourse is first and foremost rigour-bound, and leaves aside, if necessary, expressiveness and forms of *captatio benevolentiae* rallied by today's persuasive criticism. It exhibits a drive for accuracy so as to suspend the imponderability of nuances. It favours the operability of concepts and ensures their functionality through periodic reviews. Literary theory seems obsessed with the use value of suprasegmental notions. Provided that this value succeeds to hold its ground and join the inner circle, then it can become an exchange value as well.

As a rule, the exchange process seems to unfold in a univocal direction. Literary theory manufactures and exports but finds it difficult to import. In general, it comes down to raw materials, to literary textuality as such. Literary criticism can be wary of the notional and methodological market of literary theory; nonetheless it can, by no means, overlook it. Subject matters are subject matters because they have their own language. In many cases the terms can be ignored or denied, but they can never be used at random. Random speech and the primacy of taste need to make use of critical metaphors, aestheticising comparisons, revealing analogies. The literary theorist cannot afford this luxury, or risk. His groundwork is restrictive. Literary concepts have a history, rhetoric and poetics have their own exact configuration, even great insights have a memory. Forms have substance.

Literary theory deals with the hollowness of language, and not its fullness. It does not have access to objects, but only to their delineation. Literary theory makes inroads into verbal semantics and not into *de facto* existence. When it examines literary texts, it makes demonstrations of internal coherence and not of truth; when it searches for articulated reading perspectives, it is encumbered with neither urgent analytical constraints nor populist contextual imperatives; when it discovers and discusses the complexity of a text, it makes neither judgments nor hierarchies. It is a free ride, with no practical function, sympathized out of respect and acknowledged out of fair play. It does not instil the pleasure of reading, it does not seduce, it does not strive to please, it is not afraid of austerity and dryness, it does not love talk shows, it does not like disguises. It is a cool field of study in its own way, whose main obsession is lucidity.

These days, theoretical lucidity looks more like an anachronism. Even literature specialists seem tired of methods, awards, jargons, classifications and reclassifications. The genre discourses have reached inflation. This produces an irreversible slide towards media and its perlocutionary forms. In its turn, literary theory too seems to be waiting to be mummified. It has become immortal and cold. This is a guarantee that literature still is a big deal. Although it is no longer as compelling as before. The thoroughbred theorists migrate toward other locations, discovering the genuine benefits of multi-disciplinarity. Even the modern tradition of this discipline, starting with the Russian Formalists, seems to have been limited to didactic training exercises.

When he doesn't raise interest through his insights into the history of mentalities and anthropology, Bakhtin seems to be repellent and recondite. Jakobson is the workhorse for all the theories on poetic language. Roman Ingarden is the inventor of schematic literary characters and also a landmark ritually invoked for his "layers" theory. Wellek and Warren look from the current perspective like some collectors of clichés. Gérard Genette is much too clear and sophisticated, while Roland Barthes is too sophisticated and obscure. Kristeva remains a semiotics fundamentalist, while Todorov is an exceptional bricoleur and an enviable analytical talent. Hans Robert Jauss is generally remembered for his theory of the horizon of expectation, simplified to the point of becoming unbearable in the most dumbfounding situations. The Americans are canonical while the Postmodernists are not. The British are stationed in literary criticism, their theoretical philosophy is a variant of empiricism. Not everyone has the stomach for it.

Stylistics, rhetoric, poetics are dead and gone, frozen in their own complexity and perfection. Much like linguistic semantics, text theory has triggered a chain sublimation of distinctions to establish formalized models, more for the sake of logicians. And despite all this, having always at hand, well preserved in warehouses and libraries, its more and more airtight armours, literary theory continues to breathe like a healthy body marked by sequelae. What we learn from this discipline is that we do not know yet the best way to speak accurately about the issues of literature – and perhaps never will.

Literary theory is cool since it refuses to be taken for scholasticism. It is always just in time because it always has something to call back into question and does not spend its energy in vain just for a parade speech picture. It is viable since it manages every time to regenerate the body without long periods of convalescence. It is sensitive to diseases, but it does well with the immune system. It is a field of study that carried itself well through diseases which other disciplines still have to overcome. It has paid credits to Formalism, immanentism, systemic mythology, the author's demise, narratology on square centimeter, neorhetoric, thematicism, methodological terrorism, messageless code and codeless message. It took its exams and passed them. Literary theory is a vaccinated patient. It looks quite ready for the notional flu of Postmodernism and the relativistic drift of deconstructive methodologies.

Postmodernism cultivates greenhouse discourses and fast blossoming exotic theoretical plants. Ambient temperatures increase. The signifier's proliferation is an ongoing process. Fiction has become the Cinderella of metafiction. Philosophy has left metaphysics to deal

with demolitions. Effacing the real allows for the free access to virtual reality and the focus on intermittences. The world reveals its constitutive obscenity and metabolic precarity. The trivial, the mundane, the minor, the feminine (in the feminist sense of the word), the local, the racial, the accidental, the fragmentary all join the space of equal opportunities. Superstructures vanish, infrastructures go into hiding. The founding narrations collapse. Notions are genetically modified. Philosophy, anthropology, sociology find out, somewhat perplexed, that the world is a discourse about the world. And, like any other discourse, it is an image already interpreted, i.e. there is no primary reality, only a perpetual confusion of plans. And, after all, this is it.

Literary theory has never taken the flask for the content, the water for the child in the bathtub. From the onset, as early as Aristotle's *Poetics*, it has targeted the mechanisms of representation and expression, the plausible and the possible, the particular and the necessary. For a while, it got intoxicated with the illusion of norms, later on it discovered the warfare of forms, genres and categories. It took the war seriously and followed its algorithm. It always evolved around texts and not in the quicksands of reality or truth. It remained rooted in grammar, it did not symbolically killed its parents or repudiated its origins. It safely subjectivized itself and managed to timely snatch itself away from the claws of case-container model designers and builders. It did not overstate its role and place. It did not question literary criticism. It did not try to replace aesthetics as a general science. When it had something to say, it proposed, it did not impose.

It has always known how to be an available, helpful and hospitable but austere field of study. Its power of seduction is limited. Its conceptual pathos makes it obnoxious. Its aulic looks can disarm. Its lack of warmth insulates it from the intellectual trends of the day. Nonetheless, it knows how to reply to requests, to wait for customers and partners. It is a universal literary vademecum. Absorbed into the general movement of Babylonian discourses, its role is to hold ground. However streamlined, a four-wheeled discursive vehicle can under no circumstances do without the proverbial spare tire.

## NOTE

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