Bulletin of the *Transilvania* University of Braşov
Series IV: Philology and Cultural Studies • Vol. 4 (53) No.1 - 2011

THE PRACTICE OF (LITERARY) THEORY

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Abstract: *The fact that literary theory may have exhausted its resources is already common knowledge. Following Stanley Fish's argument that theory as theory can have no consequences, this article suggests that by focusing on other aspects of theory we can both understand that its death is not a recent episode and that its power may actually reside in its problematic core.*

Keywords: *literary theory, practice, consequences, discipline.*

One of Stanley Fish's main concerns in the last thirty years has been to elaborate an argument that was, at first, aimed against literary theory and then, as it further developed, against all philosophical positions, an argument that posits that there is no exchange between the theoretical level and the practical one, that, in other words, general accounts of human practices have no consequences. While this argument was already to be found in *Is There a Text in This Class?*, his book that nevertheless was an instant classic of literary theory, over the years it became more and more obvious that if, as he himself suggests, his view may have no consequences when it comes to literary criticism, it nonetheless touched a sore spot in respect to the increasing fear that theory was by now an obsolescent discipline, exhausted and tamed within the academic mechanisms. If one wants to defend theory, to state that it still has the power and vitality that earned its fame during the 1960's and 70's, there are two ways to go about it: you can either try to prove that there is something wrong with Fish's perspective, that it is false in one respect or another and that there actually are theoretical consequences in practical criticism, or to agree with him and still claim that consequences are somehow possible. Of course, attempts have been made in both directions, with little if no success in shaking his position, that is, if you accept to play his game and not simply refute it as a performative contradiction. What I will try to suggest in this paper is that, while Fish might as well be right, and I believe that he is, the concerns about the fate of theory that might ensue from his view are insubstantial and that there is more to theory than meets the eye.

In an article published in 2007, Tzvetan Todorov tells what might be perceived as a story of sin and repentance. Todorov shows how the discipline he helped build ended up by altering the French educational system, how high-school students have been drawn further and further away from what literature really is about by being taught not how to relate literary texts to their own every-day experience and thus to broaden their horizons, but rather how to master a methodology, a set of theoretical concepts which may prove useful to teachers, but that are sterile and unappealing to students, when something that was supposed to be simply a means was turned into a goal. While Todorov feels partly responsible for

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what happened, he states that the work he and his colleagues developed during the 60's and 70's was meant to shift the balance of power within the French university and the balance between theory and practice, but "the pendulum did not stop swinging when it reached the midpoint and went very far in the opposite direction, reaching the point of exclusive concentration on intrinsic approaches and on the categories of literary theory" [6, p.20]. The complementarity between poetics and hermeneutics was indeed part of Todorov's and Genette's structuralism, but, if he is right about the current state of French educational system, they simply got more than they asked for. Yet, nobody can deny that these are consequences of theory, negative and unintended as they may be.

However, they are the kind of consequences that Fish or Knapp and Michaels, in their article *Against Theory*, were thinking about, the kind that would satisfy a theorist. If theory is "a special project in literary criticism: the attempt to govern interpretations of particular texts by appealing to an account of interpretation in general"[4, p. 723], then the consequences that one would be entitled to ask for regard the success of such a project, its capability to deliver. As Fish also points out, Knapp's and Michaels' exclusion of poetics doesn't really alter the claim, for the free usage of theory and poetics as synonyms during the structuralist period and Genette's hope that, when finally developed, poetics could account for all present and future literature prove that the project of the French theorists is no less theoretical, in Knapp's and Michaels' employment of the word. If successful, a literary theory should be something like a grinding mill for texts, some sort of a computational device that could provide valid interpretations as its outcome, working in the (presumed) absence of a human agent, that is to say, it could provide a means that would make interpretative variations obsolete. Put in this way, it is pretty obvious that theory fails to live up to its promise and that most probably it will never be able to provide such an interpretative tool. This is not to say that theory didn't help override some confusion, that some of the instruments and vocabulary developed within the theoretical discourse didn't prove useful in the practice of literary criticism, but the direct or implicit pretense that it could govern interpretation in general is simply unattainable and thus it has no consequences. In Fish's words: "by definition, something that cannot succeed cannot have consequences, cannot achieve the goals it has set for itself by being or claiming to be theory, the goals of guiding and/or reforming practice" [1, p.434]. As it follows, theory is actually just another form of practice and, since "thematizing remains the primary mode of literary criticism", it serves just as an object of appropriation, no different from psychology, sociology or economy, disciplines that provide a ready-made vocabulary for the various interests of criticism. What Fish doesn't say is if, due to its inherent failure, theory is actually a less legitimate and reliable discipline in respect to the contextual needs of literary criticism.

But what about the consequences that we came upon when discussing Todorov's report on the negative influence that theory had on the teaching of literature? Most probably, Fish would dub them as political consequences, part of the institutional array of consequences that follow the rise and settling of a discipline within the academic establishment, truly a shift in the balance of power due to the symbolic capital that theory accumulated during the last decades. Theory may and does have such consequences, but, in comparison to what it ought to have offered, they are weak outcomes, external to the concerns, hopes, and promises that informed its development and actually gained its current position. Theory failed as theory and may be considered a closed chapter in the history of literary studies – in fact, as is often the case in the last years, the teaching

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of theory is nothing more than a historical survey of the rise and fall of the discipline, of the schools that at one moment or the other held the primacy within the field. But isn't Fish too quick to dismiss the political consequences?

On the one hand, one could chose to extend the idea that theory is a practice and link it to the Foucauldian concept of discursive practice just in order to emphasize the political and institutional dimension associated with every form of knowledge, to point out not only that a discipline creates its own objects, but also that "the discipline is a principle of control over the production of discourse" [3, p. 61] within a network of power relations. The will to truth that animates theory, the questions that it created, the answers that it made possible and those that it excluded, the utterances it allowed and those that it made unthinkable, its methods and instruments are all part of what theory is, just as much as its hopes and its failures. Theory was and maybe still is similar to a religion: with its dogmas, high priests (Todorov, Foucault, but Fish as well), rituals and excommunications. The word itself, theory, was at one point a password that granted access into the high society of the academic world. The civic wars and the conflicts with other disciplines shaped theory and its vicinities. Now, even "if there is no commerce between the mundane and theoretical levels" [2, p.411], no exchange between literary theory and literary criticism, don't theoretical assumptions turn, in the long run, into believes and archives that will determine our course of action in pragmatic contexts? And don't they do so due to this dynamics of power? But maybe theory isn't there yet, maybe it is still too general in its assumptions, even if it fails on precisely that ground.

On the other hand, one may feel that theory is not just like any other practice within the field of literary studies and not because it regulates the other practices, but because its diversity and permeability renders it as rather impossible to be grasped in these terms. This is the common argument that there is no theory, but only theories, and that what we call theory is not the sum, nor the peaceful cohabitation of all its variants, but their conflict and the questions it generates. If one needs to be convinced, she simply has to open any anthology of literary theory and she will find texts and authors that fall within such disciplines as philosophy, sociology, linguistics, psychoanalysis and so on, text which are however considered to be part of literary theory. While each of these variants may be perceived as a theory and thus be accused of failing in the same way as it was previously showed, the fact that they are sheltered under the same discipline may generate much confusion, but also interesting problems.

This aspect is actually constitutive to the birth of theory: "the emergence of literary theory was conditional upon the process of disintegration and modification of monolithic philosophical approaches that occurred around the time of World War I" [7, p.65] and also determined by a specific politic and cultural context. Tihanov acknowledges the importance of German philosophy in the making of literary theory and, while others may be inclined to focus more on the importance of Saussurean linguists, the main point is that, from the very beginning, theory absorbed a great variety of discourses, even as it struggled for autonomy. As stated before, this could only generate conflict and, soon enough, theory turned on itself in an attempt to define an identity, not through purification, but rather by increasing its permeability. Therefore, what differentiates theory from any other practice is the fact that it became more preoccupied in understanding itself by developing a self-conscious awareness that it apparently simultaneously determined it to drift away from its core concerns.

However, what Tihanov fails to see is that theory didn't "lost the edge of specificity and uniqueness" [7, p.62] due to the transformations in the status of literature in

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a postindustrial society, but it was precisely the other way around, literature was transformed by theory due to its very specificity or, to be more exact, due to its lack of specificity. Todorov seems to be aware of this when he accuses contemporary literature of submitting itself to the imperatives of the formalist view of literature. That theory itself was finally abandoned in favor of philosophical anthropology or cultural semiotics, as Tihanov posits, can only appear as natural in view of its beginnings and development.

Still, we must account for the slippage between the death of theory and its survival as a discipline within the university. Has theory survived its own death in the form of a mechanical advancement lacking self-awareness, the very thing that seemed to define it? If, as previously stated, every discipline creates its own object, one might wonder which is the object that theory created for itself: literature? Whatever we might call it, it is a shifting object, a mutable and mobile one, one that needs not be defined by a set of features, but can nevertheless lend its characteristics to other objects, one that can be found throughout the discourse for it may lack a place of its own. If we chose to call it literature we may find it in the narrative structure of historical discourse or of the subjective identity, in the metaphors of science or in the rhetoric of advertising. This could be perceived as a betrayal of literature, but one would have to know what literature is in the first place (this is one of the theorist's favorite argument). Indeed, the attempt to define literature by literariness only succeeded to further blur the borderlines between literary and non-literary discourse and it may be argued that theory died right after the failure of this endeavor and that its been dying ever since. But this object may also be called the given or the assumed background or maybe even "what was historically missing, absent, simply not, in this historical moment" [5, p. 426]. It may only further the confusion, but this confusion is part of theory, a discipline stuck in the project of continuously redefining its object. However, what it did succeed was to inform and alter other disciplines, to disseminate its questions throughout a body of knowledge. That we may no longer call it "literary" or even "theory" is only proof that its transformation is not over.

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