

THEORY VERSUS CRITICISM*
(A BRIEF ACCOUNT OF THE PRESENT SITUATION
IN HUNGARY)

ANDRÁS KAPPANYOS

Institute of Literary Studies, HAS, Budapest
Hungary

I should begin with a quotation from a non-public text, an application for research support that was sent to me for review. The applicant tells us that in the proposed work, namely a monograph of a recently deceased British poet, “textual analyses and close reading will be central. This does not mean, however, that I should ignore anything from theory that can be used in practice, be it Marxist, feminist, deconstructionist, or any other method.”

Shall we believe this pledge? Does this applicant know what he is talking about? Can you imagine the researcher, who uses these “methodologies” like a carpenter uses the items in his toolbox? Such a scholar always appears to keep some useful theories, and most especially these three, in the drawer of his desk and ready for application. But does this approach describe the connection between theory and research?

I think our suspicion is not without foundation when we expect from such research a result with no theoretical reflections whatsoever. None of these theoretical complexes provide a clear-cut methodology of analysis; and even their connected methods, such as the sociological approach of Marxism and, say, “meta-rhetorical” approach of deconstruction, seem incompatible. I suspect that we are dealing with some sort of bluff. There would be only one way to convince me that this is no bluff: the clear formalisation of those *questions* to which Marxism, feminism and deconstruction can provide the proper answers. Unfortunately, even the proper wording of the questions would require considerable knowledge of these theories.

* This paper was presented at an international symposium at the Tartu University on August the 9th, 2000. The event was organised by the Under & Tuglas Institute of Literary Studies, Tallinn, as an “appendix” to the Congressus Nonus Internationalis Fenno-Ugristarum, held in Tartu, 7 to 13 August. The symposium, called “The Role of Theories in Literary Research” was initiated by a very witty and mind-provoking “questionnaire”, worded by Jaan Undusk, the director of the Under & Tuglas Institute. Most of my statements try to address the questions put by him.

Two interrelated questions arise. First, what is the reason for this kind of apologetic and self-justifying, though apparently empty, reference to theory? Second, should our colleague really use these or other theories in his work? I will try to answer the second question first. I think the proposed monograph will work very well without the slightest touch of theorising. The whole idea of a chronologically organised account of an *oeuvre* is deeply rooted in positivist thinking. From this aspect we are able to deal with the question involved in the title of this symposium. Does theory have a role in literary research? The word 'research', according to a recent dictionary, means "an endeavour to discover new or collate old facts etc. by the scientific study of a subject or by a course of critical investigation." Meanwhile theory is "a supposition or system of ideas explaining something, esp. one based on general principles independent of the particular things to be explained." Research deals with facts, theory deals with principles. The only theoretical background that seems generally significant from the aspect of research, including such important fields as textology or bibliography, is positivism. And, although out of fashion, positivism is not a theory and a methodology that we can ignore very easily. We sometimes still have to answer questions such as who, when, where, and for what reason produced a certain text. These are sometimes very important and intricate questions that can be answered only on the basis of literary research, a quest for the facts. Structuralism sometimes also deals with facts such as what is the proportion of high and low vowels in a certain text, but in these cases the answer is based on counting, rather than researching.

Such a project as the one proposed by this colleague operates with such principles as development, authority, or impact and does so without any scruples. So it is able to find new facts or new relations between old facts and sometimes can be very useful. As T. S. Eliot writes, "for 'interpretation' the chief task is the presentation of relevant historical facts which the reader is not assumed to know." Or, elsewhere, "'Interpretation' is only legitimate when it is not interpretation at all, but merely putting the reader in possession of facts which he would otherwise have missed." We don't have to agree with Eliot in every point, nevertheless historical facts are still important elements of our knowledge. So an 'interpretation' that presents nothing but facts can be quite legitimate and valuable even today. It is produced by research, which in fact has nothing to do with theory, as theory does not deal with facts but principles and ideas. The questions of theory do not concern the truth-value of any concrete affirmation, cannot say anything directly of its 'factuality'. Theoretical questions are rather about the meaning of such notions as 'fact' or 'truth'. This means that such a 'factual' monograph is not expected to say anything of theory, but theory can say significant things of factuality itself. The proposed work can be absolutely legitimate within its own limitations without theory, but it will not even consider its limitations without theory. The competence of theory does not include the 'factual' competence of research activ-

ity; however, theory is able to judge the competence of research activity. We could call it a hierarchical division of labour. For example, the mayor of a city is unable to keep the streets clean; nevertheless, he is the one who knows which streets are to be cleaned.

And at this point we come to the second question: why does a person feel that he has to boast about his theoretical competence, even if he doesn't have any? It is clearly superficial to *ab ovo* deny the value of a positivist inventory of facts. However, 'value' has no meaning without a context, and today's context expects theory. The weightless reference to theory is a concession to this context. Sometimes it can be annoying to hear absolutely established elderly academics making such concessions. Probably this indiscriminating conformity to the new trends is even worse than what Paul de Man calls the *resistance to theory*. In other circles it has become virtually obligatory to prove one's expertise most convincingly even in smaller, less ambitious writings. Sometimes we can read three-page book reviews with ten or more footnotes. What is it that constitutes this context where the proficiency in theory has become the licence to speak of literature?

Literary theory as an independent discipline, and especially as an independent profession, is a relatively new development in our countries. After the political changes and the end of Marxist hegemony in the humanities, theory quickly became an important issue at the universities, a part of the agenda with its own examinations and, at some places, even with its own departments. At the same time we witnessed a certain kind of a cultural shock: learning western languages, studying at Europe's best universities, and accessing the newest developments either in printed form or through the Internet has become dramatically easier than before. In the last ten years a whole generation of young experts has emerged, who are very well versed in theory (or, at least, their own idiom) and represent it very prominently in their writings.

It is possible to interpret the tension around theory as a conflict of generations. Many elder scholars with great merits from the past, but weaker theoretical background, feel their positions threatened. They have to choose as their survival strategy either resistance or submission to the new trends. Both strategies can lead to some awkward utterances as well as sharp and dignified insights; but unfortunately the former seems to be more common. The youngsters might seem even more dangerous as they were brought up in a democracy (or partly in a disintegrating autocracy), so they do not seem to care that much about personal prestige. For them there are no sacred cows. In their beneficent naivety they evaluate a member of the academy with the same standards as they might judge a clever student.

From this point of view the introduction of theoretical thinking has an advantageous effect on the whole spectrum of literary studies. This does not mean however that I would attribute an utterly positive role to this new generation. They

have their shortcomings as well, but I will return to these somewhat later and consider it from another aspect. I have to shift to another aspect because this generational view, revealing as it might be, constitutes a simplification of the issue. The professors of this new generation, the real initiators of theoretical thinking in literary studies, are well into their fifties today; and there are quite a few scholars in the intervening generations who have a deep and committed affinity towards theoretical thinking. But the conflict revolves primarily around the young and merciless representatives of theory.

This other aspect I would like to introduce is an interpretation of the conflict as a turf war between individuals belonging to different branches of literary criticism. This conflict can have an ideological appearance, but at the end of the day it is a real struggle for existence, for institutional power, for professorial and academic chairs. Consequently, it is quite natural.

At one end of the world of letters resides the traditional 'literary research', and at the other end is theory, as they are featured in the title of this symposium. As we have seen, research very rarely meets theory, though theory sometimes condemns traditional research for affixing living, writable texts to dead, readable works of art (Barthes). But this forms only a very thin segment of the conflict.

The problem lies in the fact that we usually deal with things that are not facts, such as meanings and values. Interpretation and evaluation of literary texts constitutes the primary professional activity of literary people. So the main question of the conflict is about criticism. Who should have the right to interpret and evaluate literary works, and upon what basis? Who should determine that basis? And above all, who should dominate the literary canon?

Apart from these struggles, theory seems to be deeply concerned with the question of the basis of judgements and the source of the validity or legitimacy of interpretations. I have set up a little typology, without any claims to completeness, of the answers theory has offered. It is based on the commonsensical hypothesis, or rather on empirical experience, that a literary text can have several valid interpretations, however, not every interpretation is necessarily valid. The question arises: how can we tell the valid ones from the rest? Different theories treat this problem in their different ways.

- 1 Substantial negation of the fixed criteria of validity, boundless pluralism. Every interpretation is equally valid or invalid, or "anything goes." Pragmatic epistemology (Rorty), radical deconstruction.
- 2 Negation of the plurality of interpretations, or "absolutism." E. D. Hirsch.
- 3 External limitation of validity from the outside (that is, from beyond the text itself):
 - a: in historic time: H-R. Jauss and his "historical reading" (based on H-G. Gadamer's hermeneutics)

b: in social space: the theory of interpreting communities, Marxist “class-interest”.

- 4 Internal limitation of validity, or a language–parole relationship between text and its interpretation. Ingarden (concretisations); Wellek (norm); Mukařovský (intentionality); Iser (empty space and perspective); Eco (open work and *intentio operis*), etc.

So, the answers are many and varied. What theory provides for the critic is a consensual field within which his conclusions count as valid, or sometimes even necessary. But is it necessary to choose one paradigm? What is criticism: a field of science or a field of art?

That was the basic question in the so-called ‘criticism-debate’ that took place in Hungary in 1996. A young ‘theoretical critic’ initiated the debate, a member of the young and merciless generation I mentioned before. He gave a penetrating (and merciless) account of the reception of a rather nonconformist contemporary literary work. In his essay he exposed the ‘blind spots’ of several critical schools, methods and personalities, provoking many diverse counter-opinions.

Some of these concerned the language of ‘theoretical criticism’. This language in fact diverges from standard Hungarian, uses foreign terminology rather widely, and also incorporates many translated, though foreign-sounding expressions. Linguistic purism has been very strong since the beginning of the nineteenth century, when through the so-called linguistic renewal movement standard literary Hungarian was created. That was the time when, among many others, a Hungarian word, independent from the Latin, was created for the notion of literature. And another important consideration of the nineteenth century also comes to account here: the sacred position of literature as a depository of national values, the very essence of national identity.

So a new and foreign-sounding jargon, especially connected to the subject of literature, provokes strong opposition. The usage of this new language is obviously a question of choice. Its users can justly refer to the language of law or medicine. There might be notions and ideas that simply cannot be expressed in standard Hungarian. However, in some cases this language is merely a part of the struggle for power, expressing nothing but one’s ‘expertise’ and the membership of its users in a certain group.

The other disadvantage of the specialist language, as it was noted in the debate, is the limitation of a publication’s effect. Is it worthwhile to give up general intelligibility for theoretical accuracy? Sometimes yes, sometimes no, we would have to answer. It depends on the questions, the genre, and the actual purpose of the writing. And this is where we might see one of the blind spots of many theoreticians. Criticism cannot be monopolised by scientific theory, because that way it cannot fulfil some of its functions. Even the least theoretical literary journalism

has important functions in the reception and social life of literature and art. Theoretical criticism is structurally unable to take over these functions; and it is pointless and unfair to expect theoretical proficiency from literary journalism.

Other opinions referred to great critics of the past whose judgements have proven to be correct, and who were completely unaware of the existence of literary theory. There is no denying that there are great personalities who actually possess the necessary wisdom to make valid judgements. This appears to be a strong argument, although it also implies that one has to be a genius in order to put forward watertight judgements without leaning on theory. This is not necessarily so. According to a *bon mot* by Kurt Vonnegut, in order to distinguish good paintings from bad ones you only have to look at about a million pictures, and then you will know. So a critic will either have to be a genius, enjoy exceptionally extensive experience, or cultivate a theoretical way of thinking. Critics without any of these are self-appointed judges, without a constitution or a code civil. As there is no fixed analysing method and no fixed criteria for determining the validity of judgements, there is no immediate way to separate bunglers (or, rather, unashamed, exhibitionist members of the general public) from real experts. From this point of view theory can provide no less than a moral background to their judgements. Theoreticians on the other hand can be accused of simply using the actual texts as experimental fields to prove their own ideas. They neglect the aesthetic pleasure and understanding that is the ultimate purpose of any work of art. As one influential critic remarked in the debate, "Criticism is a problem, but not of theory."

I think we have to understand that the profession of criticism divides into several castes. Theoreticians, sometimes referring to particular texts, create literary theory based on epistemology, ideology-criticism, linguistic philosophy, sociology, and other fields of the humanities, while literary journalists make concrete judgements without referring to any of these fields, based on either 'common sense' or their own wisdom and experience. And there are several additional possibilities, which can be located between these two. These fields of interest and activity seem much more clearly separated in western countries. The positions and functions are more clearly distinguished, and it is unlikely that a theoretician would criticise the ephemeral judgements of literary journalists. On the other hand, in eastern countries, even calling someone a journalist can be an insult in certain contexts. Because many times the same person can be a theoretician in one writing, a serious critic in another, and a literary journalist in the third.

This is how we live; this is how we make our living. And I wouldn't necessarily call it a disadvantage. Anyone writing of literature should be systematic and consequent, but also pragmatic, or even eclectic: applying the appropriate method for the genre and the questions he has formulated. Theory can teach us to be systematic, but it is not less important what history can teach us: not to be dogmatic.