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'WHOM DO YOU SERVE WITH THIS?': TEACHING THE POLITICS OF POST-MODERNISM

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Abstract. *If Leavis's commitment to romantic individualism, inseparable from his tireless endeavour to ensure the continuity of resistance to the essentially totalitarian, depersonalising values of the technological-Benthamite civilisation and particularly to the growing menace of the American ethos, was a sheer mystification, concealing, as his post-modern critics now claim, his secret collusion with the Establishment, how is one to describe their own literary and cultural theory? What is one to make of the literary and cultural criticism which denies the individual any power to intervene in historical processes, which demonstrates relentlessly the ways culture entraps and expropriates the self, translating the individual into a subject, but marginalises equally tirelessly, almost perversely, the kind of literature whose theme was the reverse process - that of the transformation of the subject back into the individual - and yet declares its purpose to be social and political liberation? Perhaps, instead of defending the humanist critic from too many, often contradictory objections, one should begin to demystify his demystifiers: perhaps, rather than take them at their word, one should begin to ask what or whom they serve behind their confident democratic and revolutionary postures?*

This is the use of memory:
for liberation

T. S. Eliot

They use art
to confuse us.

Jim Morrison

Teaching contemporary literary theory and criticism- by which I understand various post-Saussurian, structuralist or deconstructive theories of mainly French origin - to

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undergraduate students is a problem, I believe, to most teachers of English Literature for whom humanist critics and teachers such as F.R.Leavis, Edmund Wilson, Lionel Trilling or Northrop Frye have been a lasting influence. It is not enough to say that these are difficult and demanding texts; for the sustained intellectual effort and a specialist knowledge of several disciplines demanded of the reader do not ultimately reward him with new perspectives and fresh insights into the way literature provides one of the few remaining vantage points from which, in the phrase of Lionel Trilling, the individual may criticise, judge, resist and perhaps revise his culture. On the contrary: beneath the scientific rigour of most structuralist criticism no less than beneath the anti-scientific exuberant obscurities or arrogant elliptical prophecies of various post-structuralist currents (Lacan is especially notorious for being more enigmatic than the Delphi oracle), uncritically reproduced by their commentators, one soon begins to suspect a deliberately created or unwittingly maintained terminological confusion whose purpose it is to render their common anti-humanist position - essentially the one that denies the individual any creative power - inaccessible to critical examination.

The teacher may, of course, find a way out of this quandary by following the example of a depressingly large number of introductory surveys or beginners' guides to contemporary literary theory: he may present an objective, non-committal description of facts, unaccompanied by any critical intervention on his part, and let the students digest them the best they can. Those of us, however, to whom beliefs and convictions regarding the function of literature are not transient fashion, but a choice of a kind of life, for whom the romantic notions of human creativity and of literature as the creative questioning and repudiation of institutionalised, dogmatic thought, are still the very *raison d'être* of their vocation, will find it impossible to be intellectually disinterested and morally neutral when dealing with such deterministic propositions as, for example, that the self - or subjectivity in postmodern parlance - together with what it produces is wholly constituted, or pre-scribed, whether the determining force be defined as the Law of the Father, the discourse of the Other[1], the ideological state apparatuses[2], or ultimately language itself, rather than any particular discourse - the inescapable play of *differance* of

[1] Both 'the Law of the Father or 'phallus' and the 'discourse of the Other' are Lacan's terms refering to 'the signifying chain' or symbols created and reproduced by patriarchal culture in which the human subject is entrapped from birth: 'Symbols in fact envelop the life of man in a network so total ...that they bring to his birth...the shape of his destiny...so total that they follow him...even beyond his death'.(*Ecrits: A Selection*, London, Tavistock, 1977, p. 68.) For Lacan, The purpose of psychoanalitic cure is not, as it was for Freud, to bring the patient to a greater consciousness and possession of himself, but to ' the radical acceptance, and assumption of his own self-expropriation'...' his radical de-centerment from from his own ego, from his own self-image and his own self-consciousness'. He assumes, in other words, 'the Other - in himself''... ...'this subject beyond the subject.' (Quoted in Shoshana Felman's 'Beyond Oedipus: The Specimen Story of Psychoanalysis', *Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism*, ed. M. Ellmann, Longman, 1994, p. 85.)

[2] According to Althusser the duplicate mirror-structure of ISA's functions by interpellating, or hailing 'individuals' as free subjects and order that they 'shall (freely) accept their subjection' to the Subject, the capital 'S' in the word 'Subject' denoting, as in Lacan's capitalised Other, the power external to the individual, or 'deity' as Althusser informs us in a foot-note. ('Ideology and Ideological State Aparatuses', *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, eds., J. Rivkin andM. Ryan, Blackwell, 1998, p. 303) In contrast to Marx, for whom ideology meant 'false consciousness' and presupposed the possibility of true, or authentic awareness, Althusser's ideological theory, as John Fiske remarks, 'tends to imply that the power of ideology and the ISA's to form the subject in ways that suit the interests of the dominant class is irresistible'. (J. Fiske, 'Culture, Ideology, Interpellation', Rivkin and Ryan, p. 311)

Derrida's *archi-ecriture*.[3] Hence another, more likely strategy (my one until recently) may be to take advantage of Harold Bloom's claim that every reading is a misreading and deliberately misread post-modernist theory: that is, single out those ideas and insights that seem compatible with one's own sense of why literature matters, while ignoring what is alien or openly hostile to it. But when I began to plan a postgraduate course in the XX century criticism, I felt that this approach was no longer tenable: it involved not only evasion, but a falsification of the history of modern criticism. Rather than attributing an imaginary continuity and interpenetration to ideas that were clearly discontinuous and even mutually exclusive, I decided finally that the only right approach was first to acknowledge the rupture - on which, after all, modern theories depend for their self-definition- and then subject at least some of the, in my opinion, disingenuous, confused and confusing reasons commonly offered to justify it to as rigorous a scrutiny as I and my students were capable of.

The one requiring close examination was the cheerful and self-complaisant claim, coming from a variety of firmly established contemporary theories, that a radical break with the humanist tradition is absolutely necessary in order to formulate a truly liberating critique of culture and ensure revolutionary change. Raman Selden's *Practising Theory and Reading Literature* is a fairly representative example of uncritical acceptance of such a dubious proposition. The book, the author says, is 'written from the perspective sympathetic to the materialist position, open to Marxist, feminist and poststructuralist currents'. Unlike F.R. Leavis and the New Critics who 'often complied with Imperialist and Romantic views of culture', these modern theories have effected 'a true break with the romantic inheritance.' They are 'anti-romantic, anti-humanist and anti-empiricist' in that 'they reject the privileging of emotion, the belief in the unity and identity of human subjectivity, and the blind faith in observation and experience as the only source of true knowledge.'...They all 'seek to engage in a major critique of human culture. These theories share a commitment to unravelling the entire project of Western bourgeois humanism and to questioning notions such as the autonomy of the individual, the unity and stability of the normal self and the universality of essential human values.'[4]
One should note immediately that the word 'humanist' is used indiscriminately by Selden to denote both the Enlightenment, liberal humanism, whose reductive, rationalist conception of the self, literature and reality represent a betrayal of true humanism and indeed can be related to bourgeois capitalism and Imperialism, *and* the reaction against

[3] The terms *differance* - a pun fusing the meanings of difference and defering or postponement- and *archi-ecriture* or proto-writing are practically synonimous. They refer to principles preceding all language, whether written or spoken. They do not describe static structural laws that determine meanings but temporal dynamic processes which render all meaning unstable and indeterminate. This is what Derrida understands by 'structurality' of structure or the freeplay of language. (See Derrida's 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences', *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, ed. D. Lodge, Longman, 1988. See also the editors Introduction to post-structuralism 'The Class of 1968 - Post-Structuralism *par lui-meme',* especially pp.333-343 in Rivkin and Ryan's anthology. Liberating as these commentators make post-structuralism and especially Derrida's deconstruction sound, these theories do not, in fact, offer a satisfactory alternative to Althusser's or Lacan's subject: it is true that Derrida's freeplay, denying as it does any stable foundation to all language, thought and knowledge, may be used to de-center and collapse verious structures of power or ideological discourses; yet, while releasing the subject from the grip of false, estranging, congealing identities, it also precludes any possibility of true self-knowledge, self-presence, or creative development. If not subjected to ideology, the individual nevertheless remains a subject to universally decentring and alienating language.
[4] Raman Selden, *Practising Theory and Reading Literature: An Introduction*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989, pp. 4-6.

this betrayed humanism recorded in the romantic and modernist literature and literary criticism associated with them. A similarly reductive interpretation is applied elsewhere to Prothagoras' formula 'man is the measure of all things' - usually invoked as the origin of the most reactionary ideas: anthropocentrism, racism, logocentrism, machismo etc. It is usually taken to mean 'Man *rather than any other species* is the measure of all things'. It is an ambiguous statement, however, and can also mean 'Man *rather than God* is the measure of all things'. But then again, who or what is man? A white, European, civilised male, or a human being, black or white, civilised or primitive, male or female ? And what is 'man's distinguishing quality assumed to be: the exclusively intellectual, cerebral, analytical and divisive mind, or the mind including the imaginative, instinctual, intuitive, merging kind of awareness, what Jung called the anima? Appropriated by the new humanism, as well as in the Greek tradition, Prothagoras's sentence, may suggest, in fact, two very different things, the birth of two very different kinds of free 'man': one, liberated from artificial restraints imposed from outside and above, recognises, like Blake, that all 'deities reside in the human breast' and that 'everything that lives is holy'; the other, like Marlowe's Faustus, 'swollen with the cunning of self-conceit', wants 'to get a deity' out of his brains, and, for that purpose sells his soul to the devil; that is, together with God, this archetypal European renounces all natural restraint, too, that sense of kinship with and hence obligation to forms of life other than his own, whether human or animal, which, as Conrad knew, is experienced from within as the very substance of the soul. Four centuries later he is reincarnated in the enlightened Mr Kurtz, whose sacrileges in the Belgian Congo prefigure Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Vietnam - and Yugoslavia.[5]

Indeed, as the quotation from Marlowe indicates, no sooner had the Renaissance man shed the fetters of ecclesiastical despotism than the anxious question - freedom for what? - began to trouble the most sensitive and acute minds. Marlowe's Tambourlaine, and Barabas are Machiavelian manipulators, and, no less than his Faustus, egotistic megalomaniacs exemplifying the misuse of freedom for the sake of some king of destructive power - political power, power of weapons and of money, power over nature and, underlying them all, the deadly power of knowledge divorced from love - and anticipating the three forms of massive unfreedom the modern humanity is suffering from: racial subjugation, economic oppression and psychological repression. It was in fact the Marlowian hero, ruthlessly pursuing infinite power, infinite wealth and infinite pleasure, only to find out in the end that the renunciation of his soul has turned his world

[5] The difference between these two conceptions of man and these two attitudes to the world was dramatised in the pagan Greece in, for instance, the figures of Dionyssus and Apollo. It was Nietzsche who first discovered, in the separation between the two and the exclusive commitment to the Apollinian individuating priciple, the choice of the wrong, impoverishing, reductive kind of humanism, and sought in a Dionyssian art springing from the overfullness of life the kind of wholeness that post-modern critics now deny on principle and have to ignore in Nietzsche when they want to enlist him for their anti-humanist cause. One of the most beautiful contemporary poetic restatements of Nietzsches's critique of western history is Sheamus Heaney's 'Hercules and Antheus': Sky-born and royal, his intelligence a prong of light, Hercules lifts Antheus in the air, beyond the reach of his life-renewing mother-earth, and lets him fall into a dream of loss and origin, the tradition which Antheus bequeaths to poets- elegists. Immanent in the tradition Hercules engenders, on the other hand, is Western Imperialism: the dispossession and the death of Byrthnoth and Sitting Bull, the disinheritance, too, of Heaney's own people, the Irish. No wonder that attempts are being made to translate Heaney's essentially romantic and modernist thematics of reminiscence and nostalgia (which the poet himself describes, quoting Wordsworth, as an endeavour 'to enshrine the spirit of the past for future restoration') into a merely formalist experiment in post-modernist 'cinematism'. See, for example Section 5:' Ana-' in Thomas Docherty's *Alterities: Criticism, History, Representation*, Clendon Press, 1996, pp. 112-126.

into hell, that prompted Eliot to describe humanism as that new philosophy which, while seemingly raising man to divine stature, actually reduced him to a monster, with great ingenuity, but no soul.

In Blake's works, however, one can see more clearly than in the works of any other Romantic that the philosophy Eliot denounces is just one of the two possibilities inherent in the proposition that man is the measure of all things. For Blake, Descartes' rationalism, Locke's empiricism, Newton's science, with their correlatives in utilitarianism and capitalism, were all the offspring of the archetypal Urizenic reason, just another kind of 'mind-forged manacles' - no better than Nobodaddy - from whose grip the fallen, divided man, unloved and unloving, was once again to be released and restored to love and wholeness. His ideas point back, in fact, to that original humanist project of which the rationalist liberal bourgeois humanism, bound to explode, by the logic of Jung's enantiodromia, into fascism, was only a tragic aberration. In the works of the Renaissance philosophers, Giordano Bruno, above all, but also Pico dela Mirandola, Marsellio Fichino, or Leon Ebreo, it is easy to recognise Blake's views of man and the meaning of his freedom. Independent of any pre-determining proto-type, man, for Mirandolla, as for the French existentialsts, is born free to create himself. Preceded by no timeless essence, he fashions, by a series of choices, his own particular essence, his most complete humanity. Man's reason was one of his glories to the Renaissance humanists, but for neither of them did the fulfilment, the realisation of man's full potential involve the disruption of nature's marvellous harmonies by the arrogantly assertive intellect. On the contrary, man's liberation from the strictures of Judeo-Christian tradition - (in which, by the way, he was always assigned, by virtue of his god-like reason, an infinitely superior position to all other creatures) - meant the chance to recover his broken relation with the living cosmos. In so far as the Promethean fire was the symbol of separating, self-sufficient, possibly usurping intellect, Fichino felt, (as if anticipating the degeneration of Beconian objective impersonal scientific mind into the coldly calculating reason of utilitarian humanism), that the Prometheus in man had to be balanced by Orpheus, the divine musician and the lover. That love is a force capable of healing the split between man and nature, or body and mind, is an argument found also in Leon Ebreo's *Dialogui D'Amore*. Man, he says, becomes man not only by reason but also by love. Or rather, there are two kinds of reason, ordinary reason or what might be called common sense, and special or uncommon reason. The first helps man to live honestly, paying attention to and harmonising his interests with the interests of others, but it does not understand the laws of love. The uncommon reason does: it knows that there are always two elements in love - the lover and the beloved, and that the lover is incomplete and defective until he becomes whole by surrendering all his interests to what he loves. The one who lives solely by the principle of honesty is like a tree with beautiful green leaves, but no fruit; the one only who lives by love is creative.

The distinction between these two traditions - between, to sum them up briefly, the humanist tradition originating in the Greek Apollo and Hercules and leading, through such mythic and historical figures as Faustus, Machiavelly, Bacon, Descartes, Locke, Newton, Bentham, to Kurtz, Hitler and the present day world-controllers; and, on the other hand, the tradition rooted in Dionyssus or Antheus, recovered by the Italian humanist thinkers, recreated in Shakespeare, Blake, and Nietzsche, and inspiring the works of the modernists from Yeats, Conrad, Lawrence and Joyce to D.M. Thomas, S. Heaney or J.M. Coetzee - is crucial, I think, to any valid critique of western humanism.

The proponents of anti-humanism, as a rule, do not bother to make it. On the contrary, by resorting to a series of illegitimate simplifications or conflation, all the more insidious for being usually tacitly assumed, rather than argued - by exploiting for instance the connotations of the word liberal to insinuate a close proximity between the liberal *laisser faire* economy and the romantic programme of liberation; by reducing Blakean 'total man', the one in whom Urizen and Los would be harmonised in ceaseless unfolding creative wholeness, to the Cartesian 'thinking I'- the unitary, conscious, ego of Enlightenment; or, again, by associating the romantic belief in the healing power of spontaneous emotional awareness, their desire, as Coleridge termed it, to keep alive the 'heart' in 'the head', with the sentimental privileging of feeling of the late Victorian poetry, which Leavis himself described as 'more dead than bad'; or, conversely, but equally absurdly, by identifying the modernists' rediscovery, in the pagan mythology, of the value of bodily intelligence which Lawrence called 'blood knowledge' with the murderous irrationality of the Nazi pure blood fantasy; or by confusing the belief in the authenticity and authority of personal experience projected in the rebellious solitariness of the romantic or modernist hero with the passive compliance of bourgeois privacy, in other words, by blurring the line that separates imaginative detachment from impotent guilty escapism - it is by such distortions that modern critics justify their indiscriminate, wholesale dumping of the humanist heritage. Together with this heritage, the critics and teachers, too, who, like Leavis[6] - or Lionel Trilling, Edmund Wilson, Northrop Fry, Harold Bloom- could discriminate between what was true and what was false in it, who loved Blake and the modernists and put up a lifelong mental fight to keep their memory alive, are now ousted from the leading European and American universities, accusations piled upon them ranging from the one concerning their insufficiently theorised, intuitive approach and the associated vagueness of terminology to the attack upon their alleged cultural elitism and reactionary politics. But if Leavis's commitment to romantic individualism, inseparable from his tireless endeavour to ensure the continuity of resistance to the essentially totalitarian, depersonalising values of the technological-Benthamite civilisation and particularly to the growing menace of the American ethos[7],

[6] For Leavis's distinction between 'Victorian humanist enlightenment, which, like what in general is in our time called humanism, may fairly be called hubristic' and the humanist tradition as exemplified by Blake, Dickens and Lawrence, see 'Introductory: *Life* Is A Necessary Word' in his *Nor Shall My Sword: Discourses on Pluralism, Compassion and Social Hope*, Chatto &Windus, 1972. Indeed, as the titles suggests, the whole book is relevant to the argument of this essay: Leavis discusses practically all major issues raised by poststructuralism - the dynamic nature of the self and of art, the concept of life as vital game as opposed to the metaphysics of mastery, the legitimate and illegitimate kinds of teleology, the meaning of tradition and the nature of social change that would ensure its creative renewal- and does it, despite the alleged vagueness of his humanist terminology, in the way that enables the reader to see through the many obfuscations of current criticism what the options lying open before us really are.

[7] It is highly edifying, from the perspective of various democratic pressures now exerted upon our country to adopt the American ethos - whether in politics, business or art- to read what in 1967 Leavis's replied to those who dismissed as 'provincial' his resistance to the American influence in English education: 'Better then to be provincial then cosmopolitan, for to be cosmopolitan in these matters is to be at home nowhere, and he who is at home nowhere can make little of any literature - the more he knows, the larger his ignorance...It is an American ethos that prescribes these cosmopolitan cures for our provinciality, and the idea that being provincial is what we suffer from is itself American. I ought to add at once that the intrinsic movement of civilisation in this country has in any case been taking us towards an American consummation, so that actual American influence finds a ready and profound response'. Instead of looking for a 'sense of purpose' in America, which, for all its wealth and power is in a no more satisfying spiritual condition than England, the English university, Leavis concludes, should fight to preserve 'what is essential in its cultural heritage - the heritage that is only kept alive

was a sheer mystification, concealing his secret collusion with the Establishment, how is one to describe the critics who replaced him? What is one to make of the literary and cultural criticism which denies the individual any power to intervene in historical processes, which demonstrates relentlessly the ways culture entraps and expropriates the self, translating the individual into a subject, but marginalises equally tirelessly, almost perversely, the kind of literature whose theme was the reverse process - that of the transformation of the subject back into the individual - and yet declares its purpose to be social and political liberation? Perhaps, instead of defending Leavis from too many, often contradictory objections, one should begin to demystify his demystifiers: perhaps, rather than take them at their word, one should begin to ask what or whom they serve behind their confident democratic and revolutionary postures?

That this Grail question might supply the best criterion for distinguishing between and evaluating any two theories was confirmed for me by a passage from 'Nietzsche Contra Wagner', which I happened to be reading at the time:

> Every art, every philosophy may be considered a remedy and aid in the service of either growing or declining life: it always presupposes suffering and sufferers: but there are two kinds of sufferers; first those who suffer from *overfullness* of life and want a Dionyssian art as well as a tragic insight - and those who suffer from the *impoverishment* of life and demand of art and philosophy, calm, stillness, smooth sees, or on the other hand, frenzy, convulsion and anaesthesia. Revenge against life itself - the most voluptuous kind of frenzy for those so impoverished...Regarding artists of all kinds, I now avail myself of this main distinction: is it *hatred* against life or the *excess* of life which has become creative....[8]

I do not want to deny that Leavis had his flaws as a critic. But I certainly do not want to forget that for him the poet was a poet because he was endowed with an excess of vitality; that poetry was in the service of life; and that 'life' - incidentally, one of those vague terms that served to discredit Leavis - was 'a necessary word'; whereas in the theories of those who have repudiated Leavisite or moral criticism, founding this repudiation, again confusingly, on Nietzsche's philosophy, I seem to detect precisely the kind of distrust of and aversion to literature and to life, the demand for emotional and ethical anaesthesia that, here and elsewhere, was the main object of Nietzsche's scorn. I say 'confusingly' because, although Leavis's moral criticism may seem to be on the opposite pole from Nietzsche's famous dictum that art, and not morality, is man's essential metaphysical activity, they have, in fact, much more in common than the post-modern thinkers, who are only too happy to seize upon Nietzsche's denunciation of the Christian and bourgeois ethics as a pretext for denying any ethical purpose to art, would allow us to see. The difference in terminology must not blind us to the fact that Nietszche's anti-moral and Leavis's moral conception of art reached equally beyond the conventionally understood good and evil and pointed to the essentially same, and supremely ethical, goal: the liberation of human creativity.

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by creative renewal (which means change) ...and get it shared as widely as possible with the third realm (which the technologico-Benthamite world despises and ignores)' in order to see what 'a living cultural tradition may do for humanity'. (*English Literature in Our Time and the University*, Chatto&Windus, 1969, pp.180-184.)

[8] *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. W. Kaufmann, Penguin, 1985, pp. 669-671.

Creativity, however, is one of the words conspicuously absent from contemporary literary debate. Or, like moral choice, freedom, identity, responsibility, maturity, it is invoked only to be denied as so many humanist illusions. What one finds instead is, 'the revenge' as Colin Falck writes, using terms strikingly similar to Nietzsche's 'of the uncreative sensibility upon the creative'. [9] This is true not only of the calmly scientific, structuralist x-ray penetration through the rich and unpredictable variety of life and literature to their underlying bone-structure, the method that Ransom described as the reduction of the world's body to its skeleton and associated with the predatory platonic impulse typical of Western man, but also of post-structuralism, which, having deconstructed all rigidly determined, false and repressive signs that were the corner-stones of western logocentism, proceeded to smash the foundation, too, on which any alternative positive concept of meaning, truth or identity might be built and ended by having no other purpose beyond the rapturous surrender to the anarchy of the plural, the indeterminate, the undecidable: we are asked to abandon, once and for all, our search for what Yeats called 'some fiction of integrity' and accept, or rather enjoy, what to Blake, or Yeats or Eliot was wholly unacceptable: that we can never be more than 'a bundle of incoherent fragments', or, to use the properly post-structural idiom, that we can never be at one with ourselves, never present to ourselves, but remain for ever dispersed along a chain of ceaselessly dancing empty signifiers. I will leave my opinion of the full implication of Derrida's freeplay for the end of this essay, and at this point only suggest that in addition to Schiller to whom Colin Falck insists we must look back in order to 'rescue the concept of play from its present post-structuralist trivialisation' [10]- Emerson's as well as Leavis's dynamic idea of life as vital game, to whose variety the creative person surrenders without ever losing himself, but in his unfolding 'livingness', as Leavis says of Blake, always 'belongs to himself', is also a true alternative to Derrida's depersonalised and meaningless dynamism.

Falck is, fortunately, not the only author who shares my scepticism about the current anti-humanist outlook. Of course, the wittiest and pithiest remarks come from the artists themselves. In an interview to Arijana Bozovic, the notoriously taciturn J. M. Coetzee said laconically that he would much rather subject Derrida to the criteria of Dostoievsky than Dostoievsky to Derrida's criteria[11]. The shortest way with post-modernism is certainly Heiner Muller's. Asked for his opinion about what might constitute the true post modern drama and theatre, he replied: 'The only post-modernist I know of was August Stram, who was a modernist and worked in a post-office'.[12] As to an exhaustive treatment of the subject, the best explanation I have so far come across of why modernism should never be superseded, why indeed it is immoral to become a *post*-modernist is to be found in Ljiljana Bogoeva -Sedlar's study of the romantic and modernist tradition in American literature *Options of the Modern: Emerson, Melville, Stevens*. 'My book about Emerson, Melville and Stevens', the author says, 'is a vote cast for endemic Romanticism, that is - for the type of genuine individual and the highly independent, imaginative, questing mind

[9] C. Falck, *Myth, Truth and Literature: Towards A True Post-Modernism*, Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. xii.
[10] Ibid., p. xiii.
[11] 'Recitost cutanja', Mostovi, Godina XXVIII, April-Jul, 97., Sveska II, br. 110, Beograd, p. 359.
[12] Heiner Muller, *Hamlet Machine and Other Texts for the Stage*, ed. Carl Weber, Performing Arts Journal Publication, New York, 1974, p. 37.

through which Romanticism persists and is perpetuated.'[13] Her worry that it might cease to do so lead her, nine years after the completion of the book, to add a foreword and an afterward in which Emerson, Mellville and Stevens are re-considered in the context of post-modernism: to apply the criteria of these modernists to the post-modern literary criticism and what it promotes as art is, as she amply demonstrates, to re-affirm the tradition they exemplify and, instead of succumbing to anti-humanism, to reach out for a superior kind of humanism, unbetrayed and uncompromised.

It is encouraging, too, to discover that even those who describe themselves as borderline post-modernists, conceding the value of some of its insights, nevertheless finding it on the whole too emotionally impoverished and impoverishing to effect any liberating social changes or serve inner growth, though rare, are not lacking. It did not escape James W. Earl for example, that the post-modern critic's proclaimed revolutionary purpose is at odds with his lack of faith in literature and in the world, still more with his reluctance, when he talks about them, to use yet another crucial word, denoting a supreme form of creativity and mapping, as I indicated, from Fichino through Shakespeare and Blake to Lawrence and Joyce, the trajectory of true humanism - the word 'love':

> The [post-modern] critic has simply lost faith in the world, of course, and with it, faith in the power of language and literature to reveal and redeem it. Now language seems emptied of both intention and reference; it reveals nothing but itself; since everything is a text, literature is nothing very ; and what world could there be outside the text, if we as well as the world are constructed entirely by language?
>
> Without a little faith, of course, poems are, indeed, only so many cynical, threatening gestures - especially religious and love poems...As for love it is now possible to interpret Chaucer - even Troilus and Creseyde - without reference to the concept. This is literary criticism in the age of AIDS: do not trust anyone, do not believe their honeyed words, protect yourself.
>
> So donning a rubbery, impenetrable prophylaxis of jargon, the critic earnestly repudiates both the 'transcendental signified' and the 'transcendental signifier' (oddly interchangeable bits for the world and the self), proclaiming social good from within a sealed world of ideas.[14]

The philosopher Richard Rorty is a borderline case in a different sense. His general remarks about literature place him in the tradition of Lionel Trilling, or Edmund Wilson, yet he often fails to apply them consistently in his own reading of both literature and criticism.[15] Thus in 'The Pragmatist's Progress', his contribution to Eco's *Interpretation and Over-interpretation*, Rorty correctly observes that the common effect of various modern critical methods is to deprive literature of its transforming power. There is a great difference, he writes,

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[13] *Options of the Modern: Emerson, Melville, Stevens*, Tibet, Nis, 30-31.

[14] James W. Earl, Introduction to *Thinking About Beowulf*, Stanford, 1994.

[15] He declared, for example, that it is literature, and not philosophy that provides images and stories which reveal to us the truth about our nature and our world, and that what we need are cultural critics without narrow specialisation, like Lionel Trilling; yet in a lecture given in Belgrade, he singled out Updike as the greatest American writer.

> between knowing what you want to get out of a person or thing or text in advance and hoping [on the other hand] that the person or thing or text will help you want something different - that he or she or it will help you to change your purposes, and thus to change your life. This distinction, I think, helps us highlight the difference between methodical and inspired reading.[16]

The 'unmethodical' or inspired criticism is the result of an encounter with some aspect of a work of art 'which has made a difference to the critic's conception of who she is, what she is good for, what she wants to do with herself...' This is not a matter of respect for the text, Rorty insists. Rather, he says, 'love' and 'hate' are better words, 'For a great love or a great loathing is the sort of thing that changes us by changing our purposes, changing the uses to which we shall put people and things and texts we encounter later'.

This statement I would readily endorse. But, when as an example of 'methodical' criticism he refers to an anthology of readings on Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, containing samples of psycho-analytic, reader response, feminist, new historicism, and deconstructionist interpretations and detects in them nothing worse than indifference, I become dubious. I will quote this last passage because to invoke Conrad's Kurtz once again, even at the risk of repeating myself, together with the current misrepresentations of his significance, may be the best way to draw this essay to a sort of conclusion. None of the readers, Rorty says,

> have been enraptured or destabilised by *The Heart of Darkness*. I got no sense that the book had made a big difference to them, that they cared much about Kurtz, or Marlow, or the woman with helmeted head and tawny cheeks...These people, and the book, had no more changed these readers' purposes than the specimen under the microscope changes the purpose of the histologist.[17]

To anyone even slightly acquainted with recent criticism it is indeed easy to imagine the indifference, or apparent indifference of, say, a deconstructive critic, who refuses to perpetrate the sin of 'mastery' or 'closure' by attributing any definite *ethical* meaning to Conrad's text, and reduces it instead to a set of unresolvable paradoxes and aporias. Yet one also knows that the other, less subtle, re-interpretations of *Heart of Darkness* - new historicist, political or feminist - involve vehement attacks on what they describe as the book's racism, imperialism, anti-feminism[18]. That the meaning of Marlow's adventure in The Congo should be so systematically obscured or so grossly distorted (and that the leading American philosopher should overlook these distortions) seems profoundly

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[16] Interpretation and Overinterpretation: Umberto Eco with Richard Rorty, Johnatan Culler, Christine Brooke-Rose, ed., Stefan Colini, Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 106.

[17] Ibid., 107.

[18] See *An Introduction to Literature*, eds. S. Barnet, M. Berman, W. Burto and W. E. Cain, Longman, 1997. Part Five, Section 28 : 'Critical Perspectives on Conrad' pp. 1488-1506. includes Chinua Achebe's 1975 lecture, published as 'An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness,* ' where he argues that the book is racist and badly written; Gerald Graff's grateful response to Achebe's illuminating contribution to the understanding and teaching of literature in 'Teaching the Politics of *Heart of Darkness'*(1992); the extract from Edward W. Said's *Culture and Imperialism,* (1993) entitled 'The Imperial Attitude', where the author notes how Conrad uses his character Marlow to present the worldview - dominant, allpervasive, controlling - of imperialism; Elaine Showalter's 'The Double Worlds of Men and Women', (1990) where she accuses Conrad of of denying women a point of view in his story.

symptomatic, suggesting analogies that, to me at least, indicate the answer to the question who or what contemporary anti-humanist criticism is serving. Behind Kurtz's moral fall, let us remember once again, there stood the intellectual hubris and a centuries long denial of the soul. Originally the inner core, the inborn strength that manifests itself as conscience and inhibits any unpermissible aspiration, the western soul had gradually and imperceptibly gone mad. It was the European experiment in Africa that revealed its real condition, and only to the few perceptive artists such as Conrad. Instead of checking the greedy ambition of Kurtz's perfectly lucid intelligence - 'the grand plans' so withering to Marlow's own faith in the colonial mission - his deranged soul actually colludes with them by inventing unspeakable rites and indulging in monstrous passions. What redeems Kurtz, only moments before his death, is the assumption of his abysmal guilt - 'the horror, the horror.'

To the hero of 'The Vietnam project', one of J. M. Coetzee's two novellas sharing the single intention to understand the kind of consciousness that engenders imperialism and published under the common title *Dusklands* - itself reminiscent of *Conrad's Heart of Darkness* - this redemption is no longer available. Unlike Conrad's Kurtz, Coetzee's Eugene Dawn remains firmly convinced that guilt is an atavistic feeling, not only preventing American success in Vietnam, but standing in the way of the world's freedom, order and progress. Himself sick and secretly suffering, he attributes his inwardly bleeding 'dolorous wound' to the vestiges of that archaic, dark self to which the anarchy of blood and courage, as well as guilt, belong, of which the rebellious Vietnamese are only an external projection, and whose final eradication is the true American destiny.

Like Coetzee's novel, the anthropology of Claude Levi- Strauss could also be described as a homage to 'primitive' man, especially the North American Indian. The 'savage' or mythological mind - the equivalent of Coetzee's 'dark self' - was, according to Strauss, infinitely more creative than the 'civilised' logical mind. Although for structuring their knowledge of reality and their relationship to it they both depend on the universal principle of binary oppositions, the mythological mind has never been guilty of that violent hierachisation, characteristic of European logocentrism, whereby nature is defined as the absolute other of culture. Instead, the myths of primitive tribes established a set of analogies mediating between human society and natural environment in such a way as to preserve a relationship of intimacy, reciprocity and mutual respect. Strauss' investigation of these vanishing oral cultures is inseparable from his condemnation of, and a sense of guilt for himself belonging to, the civilisation which destroyed them. His remorse and nostalgia are not an impotent regressive longing for the impossible return to the archaic past of natural innocence, but a projective, Shakespearean, hope that by a 'reintegration of culture in nature and finally of life within the whole of its psychochemical conditions'[19] the present direction of our history might be averted and the final doom avoided.

It is precisely this humanist ethic that constitutes the chief target of Derrida's deconstructive reading of Levi-Strauss in his seminal 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences'. If 'Strauss is concerned with the possibility of play in human life', Derrida writes, if he has, 'no better than any other, brought to light the repetition of play and the play of repetition', one also, and regrettably, perceives in his work

[19] C. Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, The University of Chicago Press, 1969, p. 8.

> a sort of ethic of presence, an ethic of nostalgia for origins, an ethic of archaic and natural innocence, of a purity of presence. and self-presence in speech - an ethic, nostalgia, and even remorse, which he often presents as the motivation of the ethnological project when he moves toward the archaic societies which are exemplary societies in his eyes.[20]

For, Derrida, obviously, to speak in terms of origin and goal, whatever meaning is ascribed to these concepts, or in terms of the individual as immediately present to himself, having his centre either in his reason or in his soul, is not to criticise, but simply repeat the dubious ethic of western logocentrism. To look back to some illusory original wholeness of culture, or of the self, as a model for the future, as Strauss does, (as Shakespeare and Blake did) is futile and disabling. Worse: to assume the burden of guilt for the genocide of the indigenous populations all over the world only serves to disguise one's own ethnocentrism- the kind of hypocrisy of which, according to Derrida, Levi-Strauss is a deplorable example. As an alternative, then, to Strauss's 'thematic of broken immediateness', this 'negative, saddened, nostalgic, guilty, Rousseauistic', interpretation of man and history, Derrida offers his own interpretation which 'does not seek in ethnography an inspiration for new humanism' but 'passes beyond man and humanism'; which 'determines noncenter otherwise than the loss of centre', and represents 'a joyous, 'Nietzschean affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin'.[21]

That in spite of Derrida's repudiation of the concepts of origin and goal, his freeplay may still serve some purpose is suggested by his own rhapsodic conclusion: redeeming, as it does, the crimes of the past, forgiving in advance those he may be guilty of in the future, decentring him from within, it may indeed help modern man accept more easily, with less resistance, with a greater blindness than ever before a birth of some 'as yet unnameable...formless, mute, infant, and terrifying form of monstrosity'.[22]

One should perhaps compare this to Herman Kahn's comment Coetzee chose to quote as the motto for his *Dusklands*. Behind the cool reasonableness of Kahn's voice, so unlike Derrida's euphoric tone, I nevertheless detect a similar intention - that of rendering ethics irrelevant to interpretation, whether of facts or fiction:

> Obviously it is difficult not to sympathise with those European and American audiences who, when shown films of fighter-bomber pilots visibly exhilarated by successful napalm bombing runs on Vietcong targets, react with horror and disgust. Yet, it is unreasonable to expect the U. S. Government to obtain pilots who are so appalled by the damage they may be doing that they cannot carry out their mission or become excessively depressed or guilt-ridden.

This voice, of a man free from any doubts, mentioning the guilt that may be still lingering in others only in order to dispel it, resembles irresistibly the voices we could hear on the Radio Free Europe in the period of the NATO democratic bombing of Yugoslavia: the same 'objective', 'unbiased' 'civilised' assessment of the relative efficacy

[20] J. Derrida, 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences', in Lodge's *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, Longman, 1988, p. 121.
[21] Ibid., p. 121-122.
[22] Ibid., p. 122.

of the techniques used in the perpetration of what even any residual moral awareness would recognise as monstrous crime. The only difference, in fact, from Herman Kahn's comment is that on the Radio Free Europe guilt was not even mentioned - a measure, perhaps, of the progress in freedom achieved since the Vietnam war?

Probably. For, according to 'the school of resentment', as H. Bloom calls feminist, deconstructive and new historicist critics, it seems that the old 'universal' values rather than the new global order constitute the greatest threat for humankind: it is the canon we should be defended from rather than the bombs. Hence their prompt and generous intervention on the behalf of the deceived reader should finally enable him to see that Shakespeare was a misogynist, and a royalist; that Donne was a pornographic voyeur; the romantics like Keats and Wordsworth were the supporters of bourgeois capitalism - Blake is usually passed over in silence; that Conrad was an imperialist and anti-feminist; Lawrence a virulent sexist, fascist, and racist; and Leavis and Strauss were hypocrites.

Should we resent these 'resenters' and continue to seek in art the meaning of true freedom? Or should we believe them, and guarding ourselves against the manipulations of 'great literature', appeal to the presidents of the power states for our liberation? Whether Derrida'a or Althusser's or Lacan's books may not, indeed, belong to the same global rescue operation as Clinton's, Blair's and Chirac's bombs is a good question to ask before making this crucial choice. And the awareness of what is at stake in this choice will certainly provide the teacher of English Literature with a perspective, or better, with a centre round which to organise a postgraduate course on so many decentering theories.

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"POLITIKA POST-MODERNIZMA: ČEMU SLUŽI ANTI-HUMANISTIČKA KNJIŽEVNA TEORIJA?'

Lena Petrović

Rad počinje autorovim zapažanjem da su vodeće književne teorije i škole kritike pretvorile tekuću debatu o umetnosti i kulturi u nepristupačni haos. Namerno prizvedena ili nehotice reprodukovana, ova terminološka konfuzija najčešće veoma uspešno štiti anti-humanističke pretpostavke zajedničke većini postmodernih teorija, čineći ih nedostupnim kritičkom preispitivanju. Autor, medjutim, skreće pažnju na niz nelegitimnih postupaka kojima savremeni teoretičari i analitičari kulture opravdavaju svoje neselektivno, radikalno odbacivanje celokupne humanističke tradicije da bi doveli u pitanje njihove proklamovane revolucionarne ciljeve. Romantizam i modernizam, kao i kritika koja ih je podržavala, bili su, kako to njihovi postmoderni razobličitelji tvrde, u suštini vidovi jednog istog reduktivnog humanizma, a njihova koncepcija dinamične, ali celovite i kreativne ličnosti, sposobne da se odupre depersonalizovanim vrednostima tehnološko-bentamskog društva, puka mistifikacija, kamuflaža koja prikriva tajnu zaveru sa kapitalističkim establišmentom. Ako je to tako, kako, pita autor, treba razumeti kritiku i teoriju koja ih je zamenila? Čemu ili kome stvarno može da služi kritika koja osporava pojedincu moć da posreduje u istoriji, neumorno demonstrira načine na koje kultura determiniše identitet, prevodeći pojedinca u 'subjektnu poziciju', a istovremeno, i isto tako neumorno, marginalizuje literaturu čija je tema obrnut proces - proces probražaja puke funkcije diskursa u autentičnu ličnost - a ipak proklamuje oslobadjanje i revolucionalnu promenu kao svoju krajnju svrhu? Odgovor se može naslutiti u fundamentalnoj saglasnosti, koja, uprkos retoričkim razlikama, vlada izmedju diskursa postmoderne književne teorije i političkog diskursa koji utire put novom totalitarizmu. Svesrdna nastojanja postmoderne kritike da, diskreditujući Šekspira, romantičare i moderniste, zaštiti čitaoca od manipulacija 'velike umetnosti' i oslobodi ga zastarelih humanističkih zabluda samo je jedan od načina da se ukloni i poslednja prepreka na tom putu.