

Theory today; or, how are we to read that?

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An issue of a journal for literary studies that asks after the future of the discipline, and does so by assessing from our contemporary vantage point (today) what seems the field's somewhat past glory (theory), almost unwittingly provokes us to hear in the background the question: "What's *the* use of theory today?" In the mere statement – or affirmative postulation, perhaps – of "theory today" we perceive the distant echo of the question mark, and in the question mark the implicit examination of the uses of theory today. Without wanting to spin this too far, we could even say that we cannot help but hear the challenge of yet another question – humming in the background, yet, especially today, discernable rather clearly: "What's the use of literary studies?", especially since that field seems to have entertained, in the past decades, a close relation with "theory". And indeed, in the face of budget cuts and an increasing dependence of academic work on extra-university or extra-academic funding, literary scholars are – much like scholars from other fields – confronted with this latter query. The "use" of it has become a way of demanding justification of academic work, a demand phrased, for example by *The Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO)*, in view of the societal spin-off of any – and hence also literary – scholarship. To this effect, the NWO has recently added to its funding applications a section that explicitly asks candidates to specify the possibilities to implement the results of a potential project, or their "expected cultural, societal, technological or economical relevance or impact" (www.nwo.nl). We could, of course, answer by saying that this

is simply the way it goes and that money makes the world go round. But as I hope to show here, admittedly much too briefly, before we hasten to give the easiest of answers (that is: this is simply how “it” goes, whatever “it” may be) the question is first of all (to stop and think and wonder) how we read these questions: What’s the use? Or see if we hear a question-mark after the statement “theory today” at all. As I would like to propose, this statement, and the questions it may ring with, pose first of all the challenge of reading – and depending on what we make of this challenge our responses will take this or that direction, but in any case a decisive one regarding the field of literary studies.

Let us begin by recalling a famous act of reading that might remind us of the challenges and pitfalls involved: Archie Bunker’s response to his wife, the example with which Paul de Man begins to illustrate the double, if not multiple, registers of language in the opening chapter to his *Allegories of Reading*. (1979) A common place during the times of “theory,” Archie Bunker, bigoted and reactionary family man and main character of the American sitcom *All in the Family*, might warrant citation today. This is how de Man uses the example: “[A]sked by his wife whether he wants to have his bowling shoes laced over or laced under, Archie Bunker answers with a question: ‘What’s the difference?’ Being a reader of sublime simplicity, his wife replies by patiently explaining the difference between lacing over and lacing under, what ever this may be, but provokes only ire.” (9) “What’s the difference,” de Man then patiently explains, “did not ask for difference but means instead ‘I don’t give a damn what the difference is.’” (ibidem) While Edith, Archie’s wife, reads the question literally and explains what she sees as the difference between lacing over and lacing under, Archie had meant his response by way of this rhetorical question in a figurative sense. He literally asks after the difference, while actually denying that there is any. As we know, de Man uses this example to expose the tension inherent in language between its grammatical and its rhetorical operations. Since (or rather if) we are familiar with Archie Bunker’s misogynist and reactionary roughneck attitudes, the joke consists in us getting the gist of his question, at the expense of Edith – exposing our own familiarity with reactionary gender relations along the way, something that de Man can also not completely resist by sneeringly making Edith a reader of sublime simplicity. But if we are not so familiar with the one uttering the statement, or are confronted with statements out of context, perhaps just a brief written utterance, the situation becomes more difficult, and, as de Man – one of the main protagonists during times of “theory” – rightly holds, we can hardly

ever be certain if we really get the gist of it, if we are really able to satisfactorily disentangle the two, or multiple, registers of language.

With this in mind, we can return to our initial question “What’s the use?” (of theory, or of literary studies (which is not quite the same thing, as we will see) today), and see what we can learn from Archie and de Man. In a similar way as Archie’s, this is a rhetorical question in the true sense, which de Man explains as follows:

The grammatical model of the question becomes rhetorical not when we have, on the one hand, a literal meaning and on the other hand a figural meaning, but when it is impossible to decide by grammatical or other linguistic devices which of the two meanings (that can be entirely incompatible) prevails. Rhetoric radically suspends logic and opens up vertiginous possibilities of referential aberration. (10)

Consequently, when confronted with the question “What’s the use?” we can take it literally, as inquiring sincerely into the use of literary studies, and our response might then consist of a list of its uses for life, society, the humanities or what ever else we might deem pertinent to address. At the same time, we can also take it figuratively, as stating in the garment of a question that in fact there is no use to it. This might then in turn incite us to concede the insinuation as true and give up the field (which might mean moving it into social sciences, or history, or philosophy), or, quite the opposite, refuse it as false and insist on literary studies’ indubitable necessity and legitimacy within the humanities, and of the humanities as a whole. As we can see, our readings of the question are all-decisive, and the question itself does not provide us with the grounds on which to respond. We will have to provide these by more complicated procedures than deciding either for its literalness and the possibility of a satisfactory reply by explaining the (societal) use, or for its figurativeness and implicit impertinence and to conclude that it merits no reply at all.

Seeing into the rhetoric of the question – “What’s the use?” – means first of all seeing into these dizzying challenges of not being entirely able to figure out what the question is asking. It seems that this is the situation, in which the field of literary studies finds itself today. As the debates around the future of comparative literature, conducted by Emily Apter, David Damrosch, Franco Moretti and others, but also Gayatri Spivak’s declaration of the death of this discipline demonstrate, the field is currently extremely preoccupied with reassessing its own presuppositions as a field, in the face of globalization, but also in response to the contemporary challenges to the humanities which ring

with just that question. Although the debate is right now in full swing and very nuanced in terms of its positions, most of the participants agree that what is needed is a reconsideration of the field's own blind spots, but also of the power of its own methodological tools. Not for all, but for many, these latter can be circumscribed as the insight into the rhetorical, that is into the invitation and necessity to *read*. We saw how difficult that can be. But with the assistance of de Man's example, we might start by saying that we want to avoid reading too literally – that is, like Edith, stop and try to sincerely answer the question “What's the use?” by defining the uses of literary studies – and at the same time want to avoid reading too figuratively – assuming that it must be an Archie Bunker who is asking it, implying that “there is no use” and then either consent or reject it as impertinent. It might be indispensable and more productive if we attempted to navigate both potential dimensions *and* simultaneously kept tying our shoes, so to speak, in order to keep walking. As Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson and Eleanor Rosch note “a path exists only in walking,” under the basic assumption that “as a first step we must face the issue of groundlessness.” (241) In our case that means, on the basis of the insight that the resolution of the question cannot be accomplished by finding its grounds either on the literal or the figurative side, to keep walking and draw the field a path while walking, as the mentioned debates on the future of comparative literature in fact do. Under these premises, literary studies will continue to orient itself in its own practices precisely by thinking about how it does what it does: reading and teaching literature. It is important to note that this cannot, that this *must* not mean business-as-usual, in the sense that our methods can remain unexamined (and uncritically continue the comparison of exclusively European national literatures), or that we could simply return to “theory” as we imagine it was done from the 1970s until the 1990s, pretty much like Richard Rorty imagines literary theory as a “subdiscipline” (63) that took shape in the 1970s in the wake of Foucault and Derrida. Nor should we attempt to delineate an object (“literature”) whose study would be proper to clear-cut administrative and disciplinary units (“departments”). Only when approached from these angles of disciplinary definition does it make sense to speak, as Rorty does, of a shift of the “center of gravity of comparative literature departments” from Auerbach to Spivak, or Girard to Bhabha, or rather: only from this angle does a shift of emphasis, including the uncertainty that “where that center will be in 2050 is anybody's guess” (63) seem scandalous. We should rather, following Apter and Spivak, think about – also and pressingly so in the face of the question “What's the use?” that

we cannot but hear – the *practice*, and less the worries of disciplinary delineation. By analysing our own methods, tools and practices, we might then productively inflect the question “What’s the use?” to “What is this practice?” – a surprising inflection also of the assertion of “theory” today. “What is this practice?” invites and demands us to assess and sieve the inventory of our methods and conceptual tools with which we go about the work of literary scholars and teachers of literature.

By way of example, let us just turn to one of these practices, perhaps the one most immediately pertinent, and the one that has been at issue so far in this text: reading. It is reading – of texts, but by implication also of cultural phenomena, rhetorical strategies, truth claims, discursive operations – that literature demands and that the field of literary studies practices and teaches. In her (partly ironic) declaration of the death of comparative literature, Spivak insists exactly on reading as the methodological axis along which to reorient the field. Far from doing away with comparative literature altogether (as a too hasty reading of her declaration of its “death” might conclude), she investigates its challenges and tasks in a globalized world and in view of the prevalent study of ‘other’ cultures in sociology- and anthropology-based Area Studies. What is at stake in the study of literature is, according to Spivak now more than ever, a sort of training in reading and, implied herein, a training in responding to otherness / others. By expanding comparative literature to a study of planetary literature – that is beyond the nationalism inherent in “comparative” and beyond the eurocentrism inherent in the field’s history – the

proper study of literature may give us entry to the performativity of cultures as instantiated in narrative. Here, we stand outside, but not as anthropologists; we stand rather as reader with imagination ready for the effort of othering, however imperfectly, as an end in itself. [...] This is preparation for a patient and provisional and forever deferred arrival into the performative of the other, in order not to transcode but to draw a response. [...] In order to reclaim the role of teaching literature as training the imagination [...] we may come close to the irreducible work of translation, not from language to language but from body to ethical semiosis [...] (Spivak 13)

Central to these exercises – training of the imagination, drawing of a response vis-à-vis the other, translating from bodily embeddedness to the ethical demands on such responses – is the teaching of reading, with its *conditio sine qua non*: perpetual readjustments and refinements during its open-ended process. It is this specific skill which, for

example, the master program *Literature and Cultural Criticism* at Utrecht University foregrounds: to teach reading, on the basis of which responses – critical, affirmative, interdisciplinary or otherwise – can be drawn. To study literature is to be trained in this specific skill of engaging with ideas, cultural phenomena and lines of reasoning, *while doing so always* with an eye and an ear for their rhetorical manoeuvres, performative effects, and medial conditions, a skill that has very practical and very concrete dimensions. For one, it involves a solid and versatile language proficiency. That is, on a first level, an actual proficiency in languages, which results from the close and enduring encounter with that which is at first foreign. It means learning to endure that experience, and on its basis learning to navigate this or that linguistic universe, its denotative and connotative dimensions, its cultural depths and poetic subtleties. For one-year study programs, these proficiencies have to be kept to a reasonable minimum, but as a basic *profession de foi* it means stressing the necessity to acquire *languages*, in the plural. On a second level, such proficiency also means seeing into the existence of the multiple layers and shades in any language and acquiring the competence to *read* a statement, a question or a cultural constellation on that basis, that is, to manoeuvre its different, even if mutually exclusive, significatory strata and affective potentials. This can be practiced, on a small scale, by the analysis of tropes, of figures of speech, which abound in any poetic and prosaic use of language. It will, however, become evident very fast to anyone analysing tropes that such analyses are unable to remain text-immanent and have to draw on a much larger historico-cultural repertoire, specific in each case.

The proverbially central one of these tropes, which Spivak (but before her Auerbach, and along with her Apter, Said, and many others) urges us to re-examine for its epistemological and methodological import on the teaching of literature, is the figure. Spivak accordingly suggests “that literary studies must take the ‘figure’ as its guide.” (71) The field would, thereby, (re)orient itself by addressing specific methodological and epistemological challenges, and would make itself a test-site for the processes and pitfalls that play a part in our understanding of texts, but also in our understanding of processes of (cultural) signification at large. Taken from this angle, “literature” functions as a privileged site where students can practice these processes and pitfalls, and where teachers can expose them and render them not only visible, but operable. How so, we may ask? Because, as Spivak continues – in line with a tradition of the employment and analysis of tropes central to poetics and rhetoric –

[t]he meaning of the figure is undecidable, and yet we must attempt to dis-figure it, read the logic of the metaphor. We know that the figure can and will be literalized in yet other ways. All around us is the clamor for the rational destruction of the figure, the demand for not clarity but immediate comprehensibility by the ideological average. This destroys the force of literature as a cultural good. Anyone who believes that a literary education should still be sponsored by universities must allow that one must learn to read. And to learn to read is to learn to dis-figure the undecidable figure into a responsible literality, again and again. [...] initiation into cultural explanation is a species of such a training in reading. (71-72)

Such training in reading – in drawing a responsible literality, on the basis of a skilled literacy, from an undecidable phenomenon – can start with the narrow cases of tropes, but, if carried to its higher powers, will amount to instances of reading the medial, ideological and narrative orchestration of the myths of our present. It means struggling with the undecidability of the figure – or the undecidability of certain questions, as we saw – *and* to draw a considerate response(ability) on that basis. That is, as Varela, Thompson and Rosch had been quoted before, to acknowledge that “*as a first step* we must face the issue of groundlessness,” (241, emphasis added) the fact that we cannot fall back on essential grounds, divinely ordained order, or pre-established laws to guide our analyses and actions, the fact that we are radically immanent in this world, on our own yet sharing this universe with human and non-human others, the fact that we are, as Spivak holds, planetary. The training in reading – only necessitated on the very grounds of groundlessness, otherwise no reading would be necessary, but only the discovery of the accurate code – can then enable us to respond on the basis of this, under these conditions. It can, by enabling us to see into the *fact* of the dramatization and discursive arrangement of things, also foster critical thinking about these arrangements in our present, about the rhetoric of the wars, the laws, the sciences, the arts, the unthought, the utopias of our present. As Avital Ronell’s “Support our tropes: Reading Desert Storm,” published in her *Finitude’s Score. Essays for the End of the Millennium* in 1994, shows, even (or perhaps especially) military operations demand our reading. Ronell does so explicitly, at that moment and from an American perspective, for the end of the last millennium. Reading Desert Storm, she traces the “phantasmatic control systems” due to which (or in spite of which) “[o]n the eve of German reunification, Goebbels’ phrase ‘new world order’ left out of his diaries to be recircuited through the ventriloquating syntax of George Bush.” (272) Ronell’s analysis of this recircuiting of forceful tropes and discursive

registers affirms that “[r]egardless of the real import of oil, there is no economy that is not also a libidinal economy, or that does not resignify symbolic deposits of national desire.” (282) In her contextual analysis of that specific war and its economic apologia, Ronell, as a professional reader, draws on her skill to read the deployment and recirculation of tropes, and shows how, in the case under scrutiny, they translated awfully fast into the deployment and recirculation of troops. Such a critical analysis is often what is called “theory” today, and it seems to take place in lofty heights of literary criticism. It is, however (and Ronell is a perfect example of it), a mode of critical analysis always based on and never surpassing the practical exercise of reading in all the senses we have seen, in view of the present times and in hope of a responsible response(ability).

Any sophisticated critical thought has to account for this very broadly understood “logic of the metaphor,” (Spivak 71) for the complex and treacherous relation of words and things, for a more adequate understanding of symbolic orders and semiotic-material productions of reality than blunt realism or positivism could provide. Given that the field we could call “Literature / literary studies / literary criticism” has the potential to provide that, it will, if we allow libidinal economies and phantasmatic relays to inform our “cultural explanation” and respons(abilities), not disappear into the social sciences. It might have to rearrange itself in other ways than within the boundaries of national languages (and by implication comparison), as is being tested already in new configurations such as UC Berkeley’s *Rhetoric Department* or Emily Apter’s claim for translation as new ontologico-practical terrain for the study of literature. It might have to rearrange itself in still unforeseen ways and its constellations might shift – but Literature / literary studies / literary criticism will not disappear. All the more so, because it never was “theory,” which we might feel capable of abandoning for more “concrete” or “applicable” endeavours and aims. As de Man never tired to note, reading, in its potentially unending labour, is the very resistance to theory, to the grand gesture of systematicity inherent in “theory.” (cf. de Man, *Resistance* 17f) Rather, reading is the concrete and laborious practice that tackles *and* always reopens textual (and cultural) constellations, (re)reads their parameters and while reading, traces our responses to them – and us – a path. In that sense, we can all calm down. There is no need to hysterically *overread* the questions that are currently posed to us as a discipline. But *read* them, we must, and respond, we must. We could respond, as a start, by explaining what we do: nothing more and nothing less than read. Students who are new to the field realize the challenges inherent in this seemingly simple practice. It is the field’s task to train them in it and

show them the potentials of it, the potentials – ultimately – of reading S.T. Coleridge through biopower and vice versa, of diffracting our discourses of Europeaness through J.M.G. Le Clézio's and H. Bouazza's narratives, of connecting sexuality in the 21st century with M. Houellebecq's literary analyses of it, to name just a few possible instances. Unless we agree to rid ourselves of all critical analysis of the orchestration of such discursive arrangements or statements, the command is to: Read that! Analyze that!

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SUMMARY

The article proposes to reconsider, with Paul De Man, Gayatri Ch. Spivak and Emily Apter, reading as one of the fundamental practices of literary studies. The questions after the status of theory today and implicitly after the uses of theory today need to be productively inflected toward a discussion and sharpening of our practices, and those are, first and foremost, those of reading. Students of literary studies are trained as readers, which means they learn to see into the multiple layers and shades of languages and narratives, and acquire the competence to *read* statements, questions or cultural constellations on that basis. On a small scale, this can be practiced by the analysis of tropes, which abound in any poetic and prosaic use of language. On the basis of such skilled literacy, literary studies can contribute to learning to draw, from an undecidable phenomenon such as a text, a respons-ability, which, if carried to its higher powers, can amount to reading the medial, ideological and narrative orchestration of the myths of our present.

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