



Editorial:

What Are We After?

Children's Literature Studies and Literary Theory Now

—Perry Nodelman

According to Christopher Norris, "It happens regularly at conferences nowadays, this idea that time has passed, that 'theory' has had its day, that we need to move on, and then you get everyone discussing it again and the same issues coming up" (Payne 115-16). It happened again this past June at the Children's Literature Association conference here at the home of *CCL/LCJ* in Winnipeg. In the plenary sessions held at the end of each day of the conference to encourage dialogue amongst participants about their responses to the sessions they'd been attending, the possibility that we are past theory in literary studies and academic work generally quickly became a focus of attention. These conversations intrigued me, in part because in last issue's editorial I'd already committed myself to moving on next to a consideration of "where we've been and where we are and where we're going in the criticism of Canadian children's literature" (15). The energetic discussions at the conference persuaded me that I couldn't talk about any of that without first

considering the broader issue of theory's presumed demise. With a head full of questions, I embarked on an exploration of library catalogues and databases in search of enlightenment. Who has been saying that we are after theory, and why are they saying it? Are they right? And if so, what might it mean about our work as researchers on literature generally and on texts for children specifically? In other words: what are we after?

In homage to the allusive manner of deconstructive writing, I imagine that question as implying at least three different things. First, what theory have we moved beyond? Second, what have we ourselves become in this period after theory? As scholars of literature and cultural studies generally, as scholars of texts for children specifically, who are we now? And third, since being after something can mean not just to be beyond it but also to be in search of it, what is it that we seek as scholars in the process of our pursuit of theory?

Many Posts and Afters

First, here's what I discovered about the move beyond theory. For a lot of people not especially involved in academic discourse, the news of theory's demise arrived in April, 2003, when the newspaper that knows the official truth about everything, the *New York Times*, reported it:

The era of big theory is over. The grand paradigms that swept through humanities departments in the 20th century—psychoanalysis, structuralism, Marxism, deconstruction, post-colonialism—have lost favor or been abandoned. (Eakin, "The Latest Theory")

But the death of theory the *Times* announced in 2003¹ had been rumoured (or, sometimes, declared or denied) amongst academics for quite some time before.

The *Times* 2003 declaration of "big" theory's end appeared in an report on a symposium on "The Future of Criticism" held by the editors of the journal *Critical Inquiry* to mark its thirtieth anniversary, for which the editor, W.J.T. Mitchell, had asked participants to consider a variety of issues, including this key one: "It has been suggested that the great era of theory is now behind us and that we have now entered a period of timidity, backfilling, and (at best) empirical accumulation. True?" Indeed, the

Chronicle of Higher Education had reported the end of the theory era a whole decade earlier, in an article called "Scholars Mark the Beginning of the Age of 'Post-Theory,'" which quotes the feminist theorist Jane Gallop as saying, "I spend a lot of time trying to figure out where I am today, when people say we're beyond theory" (Winkler 9). Since then, there has been at least one major collection of essays called *Beyond Poststructuralism* (edited by Wendell Harris), and there have been a large number of texts whose titles specifically declare that we are after theory: Michael Payne and John Schad's 2003 collection of interviews of prominent theorists *life.after.theory* (there is no explanation of the peculiar orthography), Mark Greif's similarly titled 2004 article "Life After Theory," Thomas Docherty's 1996 book *After Theory*, Valentine Cunningham's 2001 article "After Theory," and perhaps most notoriously, Terry Eagleton's book *After Theory*, published the same year as the *Critical Inquiry* symposium—the undoubted *annus horribilis* of the theory world. A little more tentatively, a 2000 collection edited by Judith Butler, John Guillory, and Kendall Thomas asked merely *What's Left of Theory?* But a year earlier than that, another collection edited by Martin McQuillan, Graeme Macdonald, Robin Purves, and Stephen Thompson declared us to be decidedly *Post Theory*, as did a 1996 collection of articles on film criticism edited by David Bordwell and Noël Carroll also called *Post-Theory* (although

in this case, the theory being moved beyond was a somewhat different body of work from that usually considered by the literary scholars).

By now, in fact, “Post Theory” is not merely the void theory leaves in its wake, but as the 1993 *Chronicle* article suggested, an “age”—even a separate discipline in its own right. Jonathan Culler even offers a definition of “post-theory” as a subject in itself: “the theoretical discussions animated by the questions of the death of theory” (277). And in a recent (and rather creepy) development, those discussions, begun as a critique of the institutionalization of theory, have been themselves institutionalized. This past spring, Columbia University Press published *Theory’s Empire: An Anthology of Dissent*, a collection of articles edited by Daphne Patai and Wilfrido Corral. “Written by nearly fifty prominent scholars,” the press proudly announces on its website, “the essays in *Theory’s Empire* question the ideas, catchphrases, and excesses that have let Theory congeal into a predictable orthodoxy.” In a website discussion of this text, Mark Bauerlein, himself one of the contributors, claims:

Only when an anti-or counter-Theory expression found a medium with sufficient institutional heft would the lock of Theory upon the humanities begin to loosen. This is, of course, a heavy burden to place upon *Theory’s Empire*. The purpose of

the anthology, however, is not to replace existing collections but to complement and contrast with them.

In other words, the collection is to act as a textbook for the now apparently necessary grad school courses in the not-theory-but-nevertheless theoretically-post-theory that comes after theory.²

Despite the consensus that we are after theory, there’s surprisingly little agreement about just what theory was before it was over. In some of the texts I’ve listed above, theory is a blanket term for anything literary scholars have been doing for the past few decades that is in any way different from what their predecessors supposedly used to do, back in some imaginary golden age when nobody thought too much about hard ideas foolishly borrowed from philosophers and other difficult thinkers and everyone just enjoyed literature and wrote about what they liked about it in language non-specialists could understand. And so for some people, as Greif nostalgically suggests, the end of theory “is grounds for a lot of optimism, especially for readers outside the academy.” For such readers, says Greif, “The new topics on humanities agendas come back to themes many believe are the responsibility of academics to investigate.” For others, however, theory has more specific meanings. Some understand it as referring to all the varieties of theoretical discourse that

literary scholars draw on as a way of grounding their thinking about texts. Some see it more specifically as the thinking about texts that emerges from a consideration of the implications of their textuality: Frederick Jameson says, "I believe that theory begins to supplant philosophy (and other disciplines as well) at the moment it is realized that thought is linguistic or material and that concepts cannot exist independently of their linguistic expression." For Eagleton, somewhat similarly, theory began when scholars "paused to reflect on their own purposes and assumptions. It is this critical self-reflection that we know as theory" (17).

For many of the commentators I list above, however, that's much too broad a definition. They would understand theory specifically as the body of work by French thinkers influenced by the thought of the linguist Saussure: structuralists like Claude Lévi-Strauss and Roland Barthes, poststructuralists like Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault. In her 1993 *Chronicle* article, for instance, Karen Winkler lists as representatives of the new "post-Theory" scholarship texts by Stephen Greenblatt, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Judith Butler; and in 1996, Docherty bases the better world after theory in the thought of Baudrillard and Lyotard. By now, I suspect, most commentators would identify

Greenblatt, Spivak, Butler, Baudrillard, and Lyotard as producers of the theory we are nevertheless still in the process of coming after. McQuillan and his *Post Theory* co-editors may be right to suggest that theory is always (always already, as theorists are so fond of saying) in the process of being over: "Theory itself is only too happy to witness the passing of Theory. Nothing stimulates the production of Theory like the proclamation of its own death. . ." (ix).

Whatever theory is or was, there are many explanations for its demise. As

John Schad suggests in *life.after.theory*:

Some . . . have argued that theory has been discredited; some that it has simply grown old and outdated; some that it has completed its task, that theory has now vanished into new, and better critical practice; others that it is impossible to talk of the end of a body of thought that itself does so much to problematize notions of historical linearity. In addition, there are those who point out that the word "after" can mean not only "following in time" but also "in pursuit of"; or even "in imitation of." (x)

In what follows, I'll look more closely at some of these explanations for theory's end, as a way, I hope,



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of opening up a discussion of their implications for children's literature and childhood studies scholarship. Why do people think we are after theory? And what, then, should we who study texts for children and their effects on their various audiences be doing about it?

Why We Are After

Whatever reasons people offer for theory ending, their discussions of those reasons are always marked by their own delight or dismay about it, always driven by their own agendas—for what literature is or should be, for what literary study or scholarship generally is or should be, for what universities and their financial backers do or should be doing, for how the government and the world generally should be run. Proclaiming that theory is past is primarily a way of making a statement about what hopes we have for the future of what we theorize about, whether it be literature or culture or government or the economy. Doing that is a political move, as much about who or what should have power as is the theory it claims to move beyond.

For some people, of course, that was the trouble with theory in the first place. As inheritors of Marx, most of the French thinkers who produced theory did so with a political impetus, ringing changes on Marxist ideas as a way of helping to shake things up and bring on the revolution. Not surprisingly, then, many strands of the thinking that makes up theory

tend to work to undermine the way things are. They focus on taking nothing for granted, on questioning the possibility that texts can have one clearly intended meaning; or that they can be read without reference to the specific ideologies of the cultures they emerge from; or that individuals in a democracy can act freely without reference to the pressures of ideology; or that there is a knowable world outside language to which language refers. Theory questions the validity of "common sense," the possibility that there is anything absolutely certain or unquestionably true or inherently valuable. Above all, theory questions the right of those with the authority to make real and true what they declare to be real or true—rich people, institutionally certified experts and judges, patriarchal heterosexual white men generally.

Not surprisingly, then, theory has been under attack from the beginning by those with a vested interest in the way things already are, and some of the declarations of the end of theory represent either wish-fulfillment fantasies on the part of reactionary forces or laments by people on the left about how reactionary forces have done theory in. As Harry Harootian says in his position paper for the *Critical Inquiry* symposium,

One of the many uses (and thus abuses) of 9/11 has been that it has permitted a wholesale rejection of theory, which was already underway before

the big push, and widespread denunciation of cultural studies and multiculturalism as symptoms of loosening standards and the corrosive curse of unchecked relativism.

Beyond Poststructuralism, the collection edited by Wendell Harris, represents the academic version of that rejection. The title of one of its sections nicely sums up the agenda and the overall tone of this book: “The Disabling Confusions of Literary Theory.” In his “Introduction,” Harris sums up the situation as he and his fellow contributors see it:

While Barthes, Derrida, de Man, Culler, Miller, Foucault, Rorty, etc. no longer dominate lists of “Works Cited,” so much as they once did, poststructuralist beliefs remain very much in circulation: it is widely if uncritically assumed that one must eschew the consideration of authorial intention; that meanings are undecidable; that there is no justification for seeking unity in a text; that all hierarchies of value are reversible; that history is no more than an open contest among competing narrative constructions; and that the very nature of language makes the falsifiability of statements about experience impossible. It need hardly be said that such assumptions set strong limits to the kinds of investigations, interpretations, and critical arguments regarded as acceptable. (xi)

It’s intriguing that Harris should see the narrowing of focus down to the specific meanings authors intend and to the implications of fixed ideas of value and unquestionable narratives of history as a *widening* of interpretive possibilities.³ I’d tend instead to agree with what Payne calls Derrida’s “insistence . . . that deconstruction is a ‘Yes’—an affirmation of the multiplicity of meanings” (56).

Nevertheless, the problem Harris identifies is one perceived by a variety of commentators at all points on the political spectrum: that we are (or should try to be) after theory because theory has resulted in too many scholars doing the same kinds of things too many times—that theory has become far too predictable, that it suffers from what McQuillan and his co-editors call “the sclerosis of theoretical writing, the hardening of Theory’s lexical and syntactical arteries” (xii). McQuillan *et al* also speak of “Theory as sausage machine, pouring texts in at one end, producing ‘new’ readings at the other. Nothing could be less ‘radical’ or more depoliticising than the closing-off of questioning in an endless repetition of predetermined textual exegesis” (x). Similarly, Eagleton says that his *After Theory* “argues against what I take to be a current orthodoxy” (ix), and Toril Moi echoes Eagleton’s language in her *life.after.theory* interview as she says,

There is an awful lot of derivative and second-rate

work out there. “Theory” today is the orthodoxy, the dogma that’s taught to every student. If you want to be a really radical student today, one that annoys professors terribly, you can start claiming that words have meanings. (166)

Frank Kermode, remembering the intellectual excitement of the early days of theory as a challenge to the orthodox, claims that he himself indulges in exactly that sort of being radical: “Later, of course, the theoretical approach (we call it that very vaguely) to the study of literature was institutionalized; so in fact, in order to stay outside institutionalization, you have to take a position, a rather uneasy one like my present one, which is to oppose” (Payne 57).

I can best understand the implications of theory as institutionalized orthodoxy by thinking back over my own career as an academic. When I was a graduate student, back in the mid-sixties of the last century, there was no theory. There was no need for theory. Everyone knew what literature was and which texts mattered. Everyone knew how to study those texts—what kind of reading to do. Amongst my teachers and fellow students in the graduate program at Yale, in the profession of literary studies at large as it was represented to us by our professors and by the academic journals we read, there was unspoken agreement—unspoken because it was so complete that speech about it wasn’t necessary. I won’t bore you

with the details of this now long-departed consensus, then called New Criticism—it simply doesn’t matter anymore.

It doesn’t matter anymore because theory happened. It dispersed the consensus. It challenged the shared assumptions that sustained it and, in doing so, made us aware that they were assumptions—thoughtlessly accepted generalizations we now had to become aware of and to consider as we’d never had to do before. The most significant thing about theory, then, was that it made us uncertain. In questioning all of our basic assumptions it forced us to think. It made us better scholars.

Fast forward to 2005. Theory has done its work, at least well enough to engender sizable amounts of agreement to its basic concerns and tendencies. Everyone knows what literature is and which texts matter—not the same texts as back in the sixties, but there’s no doubt that certain texts matter more than others. For example, the *MLA International Bibliography of Literary Criticism* currently lists 28 refereed pieces published since 2000 on the work of Mary Elizabeth Braddon, a writer of popular “sensation fiction” I was hardly aware of as a grad student in Victorian literature, and just four on Alfred, Lord Tennyson, whom we knew back then was one of the small pantheon of major writers most worthy of and therefore most often getting critical attention (writers who were usually of European descent,

usually heterosexual males, usually not widely read by the less educated and/or less socially prominent in their own time or since, and who were more often poets rather than novelists). Everyone now knows how to read texts like those by Braddon—a kind of reading that focuses on matters of gender, race, class, and sexuality in ways that have, at least so far, made Tennyson seem much less interesting. In the profession of literary studies now, there's enough agreement about these matters that people tend not to speak about them. It isn't necessary. There's nothing uncertain about it.

There is also, a lot of commentators suggest, nothing political about it. In his instructions for participants in the *Critical Inquiry* symposium, W.J.T. Mitchell suggests the possibility “that theory now has backed off from its earlier sociopolitical engagements and its sense of revolutionary possibility.” And in his statement for the symposium, Harry Harootunian offers some institutional reasons for the backing-off:

the apparent collapse of theory and the distrust of cultural studies was already prefigured by endorsements that sought to place it within the system and make it a part of normal professionalization that had, and would have, no relationship to the world outside of the academy. In this regard, theory was transmuted into a functional prerequisite of professionalization.

The functionalism that had once dominated the social sciences had metastasized and spread into the humanities, notably in the field of literary studies. . . . Theory, thus, as it has played out in cultural studies and served to further professional proficiency in interpreting the world within the borders of the academy, has been removed from any possibility of changing it.

As part of the equipment necessary for success and power in the academy, in other words, theory became valuable cultural capital in the very system of established privilege it was intended to oppose. It was then leached of its radical potential.

For some commentators that's a good thing. The *Times* article about the *Critical Inquiry* symposium focused almost exclusively on the doubt its participants expressed about the political value of theory, gleefully quoting, for instance, Stanley Fish's declaration, “I wish to deny the effectiveness of intellectual work. And especially, I always wish to counsel people against the decision to go into the academy because they hope to be effective beyond it.” The widespread public discussion that followed shared the *Times's* happiness about this. Theory had always claimed it wanted to change the world, a lot of people said, and since it has clearly failed to do that, thank goodness, we can now happily forget about theory altogether and just get on with admiring

the texts our betters tell us to admire (or perhaps just the ones we have the right to enjoy and understand ourselves in any thoughtlessly untheoretical way we choose, thank you) and accepting things as they are. Some of the participants in the ChLA plenary sessions expressed views of this sort.

But as Terry Eagleton says of his *After Theory*, “Those to whom the title of this book suggests that ‘theory’ is now over, and that we can all relievedly return to an age of pre-theoretical innocence, are in for a disappointment. There can be no going back to an age when it was enough to pronounce Keats delectable or Milton a doughty spirit” (1). One thing theory taught us is that pronouncements of Keats’s delectability are themselves theoretical—based in assumptions about literature and literary response that can never again, after theory, be taken for granted. Being after theory means that only the ignorant or the willfully closed-minded will operate as if theory has never been. If we want to be anti-theoretical, we have to offer valid arguments against what we know to have been and therefore need to know.

Eagleton shares Fish’s conviction that “cultural theory . . . has been unable to argue convincingly against those who see nothing wrong with shackling

or ill-treating others” (149). But for him, this means that academics should become more political, not less—move beyond the current orthodoxy by returning theory to its political roots; it’s intriguing how commentators on all sides of the political spectrum share the view that the world after theory will be a blessed return to what once was. The roots of theory are, of course, in Marxism; and Eagleton is an unregenerate Marxist. He therefore offers a history of the evolution of theory from Marxism as a gradual dilution of revolutionary implications, describing how “much Western Marxism ended up as a somewhat gentrified version of its militant revolutionary forebears, academicist, disillusioned, and politically toothless” (31). He adds,

“This, too, it passed on to its successors in cultural studies, for whom such thinkers as Antonio Gramsci came to mean theories of subjectivity rather than workers’ revolution” (31). As a result, theory, which “began as an attempt to find a way around Marxism without quite leaving it behind . . . ended up by doing exactly that” (35). Indeed, Eagleton concludes, “. . . what had started life as an underground movement among dockers and factory workers had turned into a mildly interesting way of analysing *Wuthering Heights*” (44).



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Eagleton is especially persuasive about how postmodernism, rather than being the revolutionarily anarchic way of thinking and being it purports itself to be, actually mirrors and supports current versions of capitalism—the “neo-liberal” libertarian ones currently powerful in the U.S. and elsewhere that focus on the sanctity of individual freedom, especially the freedom of individuals to buy whatever they want whenever they want it:

Both postmodernists and neo-liberals are suspicious of public norms, inherent values, given hierarchies, authoritative standards, consensual codes and traditional practices. It is just that neo-liberals admit that they reject all this in the name of the market. (29)

Docherty's *After Theory* nicely represents the kind of postmodernist position Eagleton describes here. He begins by agreeing with Eagleton that “the successful institutionalisation of theory, of modernism and Marxism, has stymied the radical pretensions of their movements and philosophies” (i). But he views that result as inherent in Marxism itself, understood as a structural component of the capitalist system it purports to oppose, and therefore, “always a revolt which is operational within the system of capital itself.” As Docherty sees it, “Capital needs Marxism, which helps regenerate it all the more strongly the more

that Marxism itself becomes institutionalised (248, 250). Docherty proposes, instead, a “postmarxism” that will “‘wake’ theory and Marxism to a proper vigilance against their own inherent tendency to conservatism” (1). This postmarxism resists all grand narratives, including that of Marxism itself, and consists of a refusal to accept any limitation to how texts might be read or what they might come to mean—what future meanings of them we can allow ourselves to imagine that in their very imagining will disrupt the current institutionalized hegemony and thus actually create the different future they imagine: “. . . there can be no law of interpretation for the hermeneut who wants to take her poetry from the future. A genuinely chrono-political criticism must be, above all, transgressive of law, criminal, able to forge a future through the interpretive parodying of historical narrative, document, text” (72).

The trouble with this grandiose vision of eternal transgression is simply that, in bypassing law, it disallows the possibility of community. The always-being-invented future it envisages seems to contain no one but the individual postmarxist interpreter, so eternally engaged in engendering “alterity,” something other than what he or she or anyone else already is or knows, that there’s no room to notice anyone else right now. For Docherty:

this postmodern . . . promises the possibility

of a hearing otherwise, of a mode of hearing/ understanding which involves the orientation towards alterity rather than the constant modernist reduction of all alterity to the ideology of the non-historical Same, in a principle of identity which leads only to nationalism, racism, or imperialism. (225)

But in rejecting such sameness, he closes off the possibility of shared human experience. As Eagleton says, “Theorists who were either too young or too obtuse to recall that nationalism had been in its time an astonishingly effective anti-colonial force could find in it nothing but a beknighted chauvinism or ethnic supremacism” (10).

Eagleton’s own vision of life after theory requires a revisiting specifically of the things he says it has moved past and thus ignored:

It has been shamefaced about morality and metaphysics, embarrassed about love, biology, religion and revolution, largely silent about evil, reticent about death and suffering, dogmatic about essences, universals and foundations, and superficial about truth, objectivity and disinterestedness. (101–02)

It needs, then, to explore what might be evil, or true, or actually universal about the human condition: “It

cannot afford simply to keep recounting the same narratives of class, race, and gender, indispensable as those topics are. It needs to chance its arm, break out of a rather stifling orthodoxy and explore new topics, not least those of which it has been unreasonably shy” (222).

Eagleton is not alone in his wish for a return to the political. In his contribution to the *Critical Inquiry* symposium, Frederic Jameson sticks to his own well-established Marxist guns: “I want to . . . defend the position that literary criticism is or should be a theoretical kind of symptomatology. Literary forms (and cultural forms in general) are the most concrete symptoms we have of what is at work in that absent thing called the social.” And in her *Critical Inquiry* statement, Catherine Stimpson says,

The moral and political act to which *Critical Inquiry* [and presumably, I’m guessing, all literary scholarship] must return again and again is cruelty—from the cruelty of indifference to that of the most agonizing torture. . . . The presence or absence of cruelty measures the morality and politics of a person, a state, a corporation.

These last few statements imply that we can best move forward by *refusing* to be after theory—by taking it seriously and at its word, by insisting on and thus revitalizing the political impetus it began with. As

Geoffrey Bennington points out in his contribution to the McQuillan collection, the fact that a lot of people think theory is over offers no challenge to the ideas it consists of:

. . . deconstruction is now often invoked as a movement which is no longer fashionable, which has had its moment, which is on the wane, which is finished. Sociologically or culturally speaking, this may be true . . . but even if it is, this says nothing about the “theoretical” or philosophical issues raised by deconstruction. Deconstruction (or any other “theoretical” movement) does not depend on the number of people who believe in it or practise it or profess it. “Post-theory” can easily become an excuse not to think very hard, a sidestep from thinking into a simple, slightly phantasmic cultural monitoring or reporting service. . . . (104-05)

Instead, the contributors to *Post Theory* recommend ongoing hard thinking along the lines established by mainstream deconstruction, thinking that would avoid sclerosis by always being conscious of the ways in which it has not yet arrived (and never will, if it sticks to its guns, manage to arrive) at its presumed goal of reaching conclusions and establishing certainties:

Post-Theory is then not just a theory which is not

present but is potentially so, rather it is a theory (an experience of thought) which cannot be fully activated even potentially. Post-Theory is a state of thinking which discovers itself in a constant state of deferral, a position of reflexivity and an experience of questioning which constantly displaces itself in the negotiation with the aporia of theory.” (xv)

We are after theory not in the sense of being past it but in the sense of being eternally and always unsuccessfully (and therefore paradoxically, successfully) in pursuit of it.

One final variation on the idea that we are after theory suggests, not that theory is over or even ongoing, but that its focus has changed or should change, on the assumption that repositioning is less deadening than revitalizing. There are two main ways in which people envisage that happening.

The first is what Mitchell identifies in his *Critical Inquiry* questions as a “‘therapeutic turn’ to concerns with ethics, aesthetics, and care of the self, a turn of which Lacan is the major theoretical symptom.” Derrida’s later work, based not in Lacan but even more clearly than his earlier work in the ideas of the philosopher and Talmudic scholar Emmanuel Levinas about the unknowability of the Other and the ethical obligations that result from this unknowability, has attracted much attention. But according to Lauren Berlant,

the current literary critical embrace of ethics . . . whatever else it opens up, just sounds so comforting, so fundable, so theoretically palatable, and so politics-lite. Some of my best friends are ethicists (well, just one), don't get me wrong; it's not the field itself that concerns me but the impulse to recent individuality-with-consciousness at the center of critical thought.

Once more, being after theory represents a return to what came before—and in this case, once more, a return that Eagleton quite rightly identifies as yet another a rejection of community. As he says of Derrida's view that a genuine ethics transcends all given laws or rules or norms, "One can only hope that he is not on the jury when one's case comes up in court" (154).

The other main repositioning of theory is equally nostalgic for what once was and equally represents the wish to replace the political and the communal with the individual. It calls for a move past what some see as the sidestepping of literature by theory back to literature itself, and to a focus on reading texts more closely.

As Eagleton says: "That theory is incapable of close reading is one of its opponents' most recurrent gripes. It is now almost as received a wisdom as the belief that baldness is incurable or that Naomi Campbell lacks humility. In fact, it is almost entirely false" (92).

Indeed, it seems clear that what first brought Derrida, for instance, to the attention of literary scholars, not then much prone to pay attention to new work in philosophy, was that he grounded his philosophical thinking in exceedingly detailed readings of specific texts.

It is also clear, however, that the kinds of reading privileged by cultural studies approaches and their focus on matters of race, class and gender have a tendency to bypass the significance of the specific form and language of texts. "If I have an anxiety about English studies in the postmodern condition," says Catherine Belsey, "it is that we may have neglected the signifier. There is, perhaps, a tendency for current readings to go straight for the signified, to uncover the thematic content of the text, whether conscious or unconscious, and ignore the mode of address" (130-31).

Nor is current practice just a less close sort of reading. According to Jonathan Culler, "the attempt to theorize the distinctiveness of literary language or the distinctiveness of literature was central to theory in those early years, but it hasn't been the focus of theoretical activity for some time" (275). Indeed, it is very much *not* the focus. Frank Kermode suggests that ". . . we're getting so far away from the study of literary artefacts, shall we say, that they're in danger of being totally neglected" (Payne 117). Kermode adds, "I'm not afraid of theory, I'm afraid of meta-theory,

and meta-meta theory" (Payne 117). For Judith Butler and her co-editors of *What's Left of Theory?*, fears of this sort raise the specter of theory's end and give rise to the possibility that one answer to the question asked by their title is, literature itself:

Does the recent cry for a "return to literature" signal the surpassing of theory, the fact that literature remains after theory? Or would we find that, upon such a return, we would still have to ask: in what does the literary consist? What is our access to it? Upon what presuppositions about language does literature and its criticism draw? Does literature remain (the same) after theory? (x)

A lot of these commentators would say, No. It doesn't remain the same. Culler explains why by referring to David Simpson's view in *The Academic Postmodern* that "... literature, far from being ignored or relegated to the margins in the university, as conservative critics claim, has conquered" (289). It has done so because a focus on the constructedness of all sorts of phenomena studied by many different disciplines means the phenomena are read as if they were literature. Culler himself goes on to argue that "If the literary has triumphed . . . then perhaps it is time to reground the literary in literature. . ." (289-90). But he also suggests that doing so would *not* be a return to the kind of unquestioning appreciations

that some nostalgic anti-theorists would like work on literature to consist of: "It seems to me quite possible that a return to ground the literary in literature might have a critical edge, since one of the things we know about literary works is that they have the ability to resist or outplay what they are supposed to be saying" (290). Belsey goes further, suggesting that a return to the literary is warranted exactly for that reason. A new focus on "form, language, the signifier itself" (129) would most significantly give readers ways of being critical about "the literary"—the persuasive uses of style and shape and imagery—in all texts, not just the ones traditionally identified as literature.

Theory After Theory

My investigation of the texts I've been describing taught me a number of things. As a working academic, I'd certainly been hearing rumours of theory's demise for quite some time before I embarked on this project; but I was hardly aware of the complex intricacies or of the many different and even directly opposite views that comprise the discussion I've been describing. In the long run, I was struck less by the agreement of so many that theory is over than by the intensity, energy, and diversity of opinion submerged under that shared conviction. Reading all this discourse was a pleasurable experience exactly because its lack of consensus forced me to think things through

for myself. I've emerged with a better understanding of what matters to me as a scholar and, indeed, as a human being.

I had a similar response to the discussions in the plenary sessions at the Winnipeg Children's Literature Association conference. Many of the participants made it clear that they felt strongly about the issues being discussed, strongly about their agreements and disagreements with various theoretical positions and with each other. They made me think carefully about my own theories. And that leads me to a second important conclusion I've reached: the world after theory is not untheoretical.

The commentators I read agree we are after theory. But how do they know we are after theory? They all offer theoretical thinking to make their case—thinking deeply informed by the theory they are after. In other words: they do theory. What comes after theory is . . . theory. Re-thought theory, transformed theory, enriched or diminished theory, but theory nevertheless.

For that reason, furthermore, scholarship remains alive. For all the talk of sclerosis in the texts I read, those texts themselves are anything but sclerotic—and again and again, they offer ways of thinking about other texts and our experiences of them that are diverse, innovative, even surprising. My reading persuaded me that scholarship resists sclerosis exactly to the extent that different things matter to

different scholars and venues exist to express those differences—venues like the ChLA plenary sessions and the texts I decided to read in response to them.

Nor is the expression of difference enough. Unlike Richard Levin, who argues for “critical pluralism, the recognition of an irreducible plurality of valid critical approaches, which enable us to live together and talk to each other because we can understand and respect our different perspectives” (150), I emerged from my reading wanting to argue for what I'd experienced while reading: a more dynamic and interactive pluralism which allows scholars to be passionate about their differing passions, not just to talk to each other but to listen to each other also, to understand and consider the significance of their differences, to be intensely political in defence of their theories and the politics they imply—to want to and to try to change the world.

For anyone reading *CCL/LCJ*, that applies most specifically to the world of children's literature studies. As I've been suggesting, my first response to the discourse I read was to think about my work as a literary scholar generally. But what did it or might it teach me and others about children's literature and children's literature studies specifically?

To begin with the bad news: my reading confirmed and helped me to understand my sense of a certain amount of sclerosis in current children's literature scholarship. While I heard ideas and interpretations

that interested me at the ChLA conference, I can't say I was particularly surprised by most of them. Nor am I surprised these days by much of what I read in children's literature journals—even including this one. As a group, we children's literature scholars do tend to focus on the same relatively narrow range of concerns and discuss them in similar ways, just as many of the after-theory theorists claim scholars generally do. Furthermore, in light of the concern children's literature scholars frequently express about being looked down upon by the larger world of literary study, we might be even more determined than most to be respectable, to do the kind of acceptably sclerotic work that seems most like most of the other work being done.

There is yet more bad news. While I was able to extrapolate much of interest from the after-theory texts I read in terms of my work as a children's literature scholar, I found almost nothing directly concerned with that work. There was just one scholar who even mentioned any texts for children. That scholar was Terry Eagleton, who, in the midst of a project with the central purpose of attacking hierarchical social structures and uneven power relations, makes jokey ironic comments about texts for children, the humour of which depends on the supposedly dumbheaded simplicity of children's literature. "Those who can," he says, "think up feminism or structuralism; those who can't, apply such insights to *Moby Dick* or *The Cat*

in the Hat" (2); or again, "A novel with a moral is not likely to be morally interesting. 'Goldilocks' is not the most profound of fables" (144). The irony, of course, is that "Goldilocks," which has a house-breaking thief as its supposedly empathetic protagonist, is at least as morally ambiguous as *Moby Dick*—and surely as much deserving of critical attention.

It's a pity that texts for children continue to occupy the margins of critical and theoretical discussion, both for those interested in children's literature studies and those interested in theory generally. For the former, marginalization signals the continuing disempowerment not only of ourselves as scholars but also of the child audiences of the texts we study, of children generally. For the latter, ignoring the distinct nature of texts produced for children by adults prevents an awareness of the ways the texts might challenge the universality of many theorists' universalizing assumptions about what literature is and how it operates.

But that also suggests some good news: we in children's literature studies may know something—or at least be in a position to know something—that other scholars don't. Our marginal position might allow us to see and to speak in ways that might challenge and thus help to enliven whatever is sclerotic at the centre.

Or maybe it can't. Maybe you think I'm totally off base, about that or about any number of the opinions

I've been expressing here, and maybe you'd like to tell me and other people why.

Indeed, I expect you might. That was the other good news I gleaned from my explorations of the world after theory in relation to children's literature studies: as was clear at the ChLA sessions, we who concern ourselves with texts for children are not so sclerotic as to be unable to disagree with each other. We're likely to have many different opinions not only on the matters discussed in the discourse I explored but also about many other issues related to theory and its presumed aftermath that are specific to our field. There is much for us to discuss.

In order to help us all understand more about the current state of theory and its impact on literary and cultural studies generally and on children's literature studies in particular, the editors of *CCL/LCJ* hope to continue the discussion in forthcoming issues. We've invited a number of children's literature scholars in Canada and elsewhere to respond to this editorial, and I'd like to extend that invitation to anyone else who has read thus far and would be willing to join the conversation.

In addition to addressing your own concerns, we invite you to consider the following questions:

- Has scholarship arrived at a time after theory? If not, why not? If so, what does that mean about

where we are?

- Where should we be? What kind of goals should we have for our work as scholars? What kind of work should we be doing?
- Are children's literature studies in the same place as scholarship generally? Are we in this field after theory also? In the same way?
- If so, should we be, or not? If not, why not? What if anything makes the study of texts for children different from scholarship in literature and cultural studies generally?
- What's good or bad about children's literature scholarship now? What can we or should we be doing differently?
- Where are we in Canadian children's literature studies in relation to the wider field of children's literature scholarship? Where should we be?
- And what does any or all of this have to do with children and their experience of texts?

We're hoping for comments on any and all of these matters, as short as a paragraph or as long as you think (and we agree) you need. We plan to feature as many responses as we have space for in the next *CCL/LCJ*, and to continue the discussion after that, in the journal and on our website, for as long as it remains enlivening. We look forward to receiving your comments at <ccl@uwinnipeg.ca>.

Notes

¹ Eakins wrote another *Times* article a year later on the occasion of the death of Jacques Derrida actually called “The Theory of Everything, R.I.P.”). Further death imagery occurs in the title of Frank Lentricchia’s “Last Will and Testament of an Ex-Literary Critic,” in which a prominent theorist proclaims himself to be after theory.

² There’s an extensive discussion of *Theory’s Empire* on the website of *The Valve: A Literary Organ*, and another on the website

of the literary scholar Michael Bérubé. In both cases, go to the site and search for “*Theory’s Empire*.”

³ I need to point out that many of the contributors to this volume, published a decade ago, understand theory primarily as work influenced by Derrida and Foucault, and encourage a move away from that to considerations of texts in cultural and historical contexts—more or less the kind of work a theorist like Eagleton means when he speaks of theory.

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