One Way, No Return: Let's See Where is Here

—Roderick McGillis

> "back in the mid-sixties of the last century, there was no theory." (Nodelman 7)

Way back then we, that is academics who thought about and sometimes wrote about literature, contemplated the beauty of the verbal icon. Poems did not have to mean; they just had to be. The literary object was a concrete universal, and to contemplate it with an intention to paraphrase it was heresy. We avoided heretical thought, and agreed to follow beauty even unto death. The poem was a beautiful face, still and unchanging, like that exquisite corpse Poe valued. And classrooms filled with students eager to contemplate, along with their professors, the unity and transcendent power of literature. But I don't need to go on waxing lyrical about beauty and unity and truth and the literary object because "theory happened" (Nodelman 7). And once theory happened, nothing would be the same again. That beautiful dead face refused to remain in repose. Things got active. "The most significant thing about theory . . . was that it made us uncertain" and "forced us to think" (7). Not that we had not in those earlier innocent days heard the call to live with doubts and uncertainties and not reach after fact and reason, but theory challenged us to reconsider easily held generalizations, and in the process of such reconsideration, we became "better scholars" (7). Doubts and uncertainties were to lead to rational and even enlightened thought. Evidence for the improvement in scholarship lies close to hand. In the past five years, twenty-eight refereed publications have appeared on Mary Elizabeth Braddon and four have appeared on the poet Tennyson. Theory "has done its work" (7). And having done its work, it has now ossified, become brittle. No longer has it the flexibility to challenge; instead, theory has become the reigning orthodoxy. Or it had become

the reigning orthodoxy until the academy wised up and moved beyond or after theory. In their race to the finish line, literary studies and cultural studies have left theory at the post.

And so we have a narrative: beginning with heady days of appreciation when literature was valued for itself, and developing into a middle when such valuing took a rigorous turn and the critic explained the unity of the great touchstone works, and once such explanations were thick on the ground, theory began to clear a path until, lo and behold, we had a great tradition, that is until the rising action came to a climax or crisis and we came to realize just what the tradition left out, and that literary development was ongoing, unending, and without closure. But stories, even stories without endings, need some organization and so we say we've developed from impressionistic beginnings to new critical acuity to the rigours of theory, and now we move beyond theory to some new position, some new approach to the subject we inhabit. Just what this new approach is remains unclear since we are just now making or defining this new approach. About the only thing that is clear to me is this: the story of the creation of "better scholars" is, like all stories, a fiction. Our story is, after all, just a story. And we will go on telling it and refashioning it and perhaps even refining it. And here is one attempt at refinement: theory has been part of the story from the beginning right through the middle and on to the endless ending. We cannot get beyond theory any more than we can get beyond formalism. Without theory, folks, is no progression. Looking closely at the object, even looking closely awry, is true friendship.

A scan of the canon of literary theory and criticism recently constructed by W. W. Norton & Company (2001) under the general editorship of Vincent Leitch will indicate how from the beginning Eurocentric culture has vacillated between poetics and philosophy in its theory and practice. From Plato and Aristotle right down to more recent versions of Plato and Aristotle in the likes of Althusser or Genette, discussions of the arts and literature have turned on the idealist/materialist divide, with some wanting to see literature as separate and coherent as a structure of words, even as it grows, while others insist on the rag-tag nature of literary production that responds to very material conditions. In the study of children's books, this vacillation used to be articulated by the division between "book" people and "child" people. In other words, the book people took literature seriously as a separate and distinct discourse, one available to the trained reader, whereas the child people insisted on literature's socializing function or at least turned an eye to the interaction between the book and its reader. Sometimes this division took on institutional dimension in the separate approaches to teaching children's books in English Departments

and Education Faculties. One group asked how books worked to create an aesthetic experience; the other group asked how books worked to give the reader a meaningful and useful experience.

We might say the distinction turned on a question of the moral dimension of reading. Another way of putting this is to say that the distinction is political. The continuing relevance of this divide is evident from the recent collection of essays edited by Karin Lesnik-Oberstein, *Children's Literature: New Approaches* (2004). The contributors to this volume uniformly attempt to demonstrate "that an analysis of narratives—critical or otherwise—and how these can be understood to mean, in and of itself [sic] can contribute better to thinking through one's own actions and meanings" (20). I am not certain I understand that sentence, but I do take the drift of this book to be toward a criticism that is stalwartly text centered. This is a book written by book people. If this volume is any indication, then we have not come all that far from the New Criticism, at least in the study of children's books.

The New Criticism held sway during the middle of the last century, but it did not do so without challenges. The impetus to make the study of literature a bona fide discipline was important for the New Criticism, but we did have approaches to literature that used non-literary "systems" in the analysis of literary texts: psychoanalysis, anthropology, theology, political science, philosophy, and the study of history and biography all found scholars willing and able to use their insights and methods in the study of literature. Bate, Bush, Bateson, Burke, Frye, Guerard, Watt, Leavis (alas), Trilling, Hirsch, Abrams, Perkins, and many others challenged even as they acknowledged the usefulness of the New Criticism. As for the New Critics themselves, the most influential were the most theoretical: Brooks, Tate, Wimsatt, Wellek, and Warren. Despite what the "after theory" tag might imply, theory has always had its place in the study of literature and the arts. I might hazard a guess and say that what happened along about 1966 was the flowering of a plant first sown at the time of the Enlightenment and its immediate backlash in the so-called Romantic Age. The failure of reason to account satisfactorily for the arts and human experience more generally coincides with the failure of the imagination to legitimate areas of experience challenged by reason. And so the long dialectic between essence and experience takes shape. In the study of literature, this dialectic headed toward a synthesis that privileged the work of literature as the repository of a truth beyond the reach of schools and systems of belief. In this view, the poet, and I draw upon Eliot here, is a medium or a catalyst, a "receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form

a new compound are present together" (1096). The poet is a test tube holding a mixture of past ideas and images and feeling, just waiting for the Bunsen burner of inspiration to form a new compound. Literature and science have something in common, whatever C. P. Snow might say. The development into the New Criticism was a development that rested on such notions as "distinterestedness," "defamiliarization," and "depersonalization." Literature was above the smoke and stir of this dim spot, a beacon shining truth and beauty to the appreciative reader. And the writer was a throwback to the inspired speaker Plato invokes in *Ion*.

While this tradition of the iconic power of literature was in the making, some readers continued to argue that literature did not constitute a separate structure of words alongside the structures of social, political, or economic arrangement. Marx, Darwin, and Freud most spectacularly indicated that human beings created their world in response to material stimuli. Literature, like any other human activity, existed in response to forces that were historical, changing, and grittily beyond the control, but not beyond the influence, of the individual. The coalescence of secular teleological thinking and formalist approaches to the art object resulted in structuralism and its aftermath in poststructuralism. To put this another way, just as the New Criticism appeared to convince most teachers of the effectiveness and rightness of a view that decided to take literature seriously as a self-contained structure of disinterested ideas beautifully expressed, some readers began to see how such a view of literature perpetuated a conservative, closed system. And here I come back to politics.

If we study the history of literary-theoretical thinking in the academy, then the 1966 Johns Hopkins conference on the Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man did not mark a sea change in literary and theoretical studies. What it did do was to mark the shift from a conservative approach to literature to a more radical approach. In other words, the leftist politics of the 1960s entered literary studies. Frankly, this shift to the left is apparent as early as Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) or Bloom's *Shelley's Mythmaking* (1959). By the 1970s, the names of Marx and Freud were well ingrained in studies of literature, signalled in North America by their appearance earlier in works by Herbert Marcuse and Norman O. Brown. Whether we call this turn the turn to High Theory or continental theory or poststructural theory, the main thing was a turn to the left. This turn is perhaps most obvious in a theorist such as Althusser who combines Marxism with psychoanalysis, especially of a Lacanian inflection.

And so what we sometimes now refer to as High Theory was distinguished more often than not by its attention to language (or discourse), and the

connection of language to matters of power, human rights, and freedoms. High Theory goes along with the advent of second-wave feminism, queer theory, and more recently ecotheory, and disability theory. Children's literature came along in the wake of High Theory as part of the whole struggle for recognition and rights. To put this another way, the leftist agenda of much High Theory was democratizing in its efforts. In the matter of reading, the hegemony of Tennyson was broken and Elizabeth Braddon was given her due. In children's literature studies, the proliferation of both undergraduate and graduate courses in literatures for the young was also a sign of theory's challenge to closed, canonical, thinking—children's literature as an academic subject taught in literature departments and in faculties of education came along even though the children's literature community set out to create its own canon. Consistency, remember, is a hobgoblin.

We can see the fruits of the High Theory struggle in a book such as Kenneth Kidd's *Making American Boys* (2004). This study considers a range of children's literature from fairy tales to so-called feral tales by such writers as Rudyard Kipling, Mark Twain, Booth Tarkington, Edgar Rice Burroughs, and Roy Rockwood. This brief list of writers indicates Kidd's interest in both canonical and non-canonical works. More to the point, Kidd discusses various works of children's literature alongside works by Sigmund Freud and a range of books that deal with boyhood and masculinity, including *Boyology or Boy Analysis* (1916), *Iron John* (1990), and *Real Boys* (1998). Implicit in what Kidd writes is the theoretical proposition that books for the young are as invested with political import as books by writers for adults and by writers as culturally luminous as Freud. Children's literature exists within an embracing political and cultural space, a space that contains subjects and encourages them to accept a range of orthodoxies: in Kidd's exploration, the reigning orthodoxy has to do with a vision of gender and family, a vision that fits comfortably with a certain vision of the republic. Shall I say a Republican vision?

My point about *Making American Boys* is that Kidd integrates smoothly children's literature, adult literature, and works of theory. This is a book that intelligently incorporates the work of theory into an understanding of a century and more of the social and cultural fashioning of "boys." It speaks across disciplines, and it takes seriously the usefulness and importance of books for young readers. It also folds the study of pertinent films into its discussion. If the age of High Theory is over, then its political work has not been in vain. *Making American Boys* also has its political edge, one that confronts directly the reactionary and nostalgic vision of gender in the views of Newt Gingrich, as well as the two Presidents Bush. We might say that Kidd's book is an example of

theory in action. And I might also hazard the thought that theory resolutely refuses nostalgia. To be engaged in looking at something is to be active in the ongoing pursuit of the future. Let me call up something I have written elsewhere.

> Theory exists in relation to practice; it does not exist as a separate activity related to mental activity, but unrelated to what we do in our material lives as human beings. To theorize is to contemplate the spectacle on the world's stage, and to do so in order to make us better players on that stage. All the world's a stage and even the players must watch the show now and then as they wait for their next cue. To put this simply, I draw on Terry Eagleton who reminds us that the rise of theory in the academy followed in the wake of the student revolts and political struggles of the late 1960s and early 1970s. These revolts and struggles changed the universities' and especially the Humanities Faculties' quiet assumptions concerning value and engagement; they also revealed the ways in which universities and humane studies were complicit with 'military violence and industrial exploitation' (26). Eagleton goes on to say:
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> > The humanities had lost their innocence: they could no longer pretend to be untainted by power. If they wanted to stay in business, it was now vital that they paused to reflect on their own purposes and assumptions. It is this critical self-reflection which we know as theory. Theory of this kind comes about when we are forced into a new self-consciousness about what we are doing." (27) (McGillis 89)

Theory, or at least the theory we speak of when we refer to High Theory, heralded a loss of innocence. The advent of what we think of as "theory" in the humanities saw an exposure of the blindness of liberal humanism to its own self-centeredness. What we now see referred to as "neo-liberalism" came under fire in a political awareness of the need for social justice and collective rights. Then came 1989 and a series of shocks in the 1990s culminating in 9/11. Suddenly we had the Patriot Act and other moves to the right and to social stability, coupled with an intensifying of individualism and self-reliance. Theory began to seem detached from the stuff of getting and spending and securing the good life. The world many North Americans want is a world without theory, and theorists are in danger of becoming as unwanted in the Republic as poets once were. But of course, like poets, they won't go away.

And this perhaps is what happened. If we compare, say, E. P. Thompson with Louis Althusser, then we might get some idea of what happened to High Theory. Althusser famously defines ideology as similar to the unconscious, in that it functions

beyond our knowledge and trans-historically. Like the unconscious, ideology is available only as a structure; "it is irreducible to the individual forms in which it is lived" (26). But, because ideology is a structure existing as a system beyond individual instances of its working, "*it can be the object of an objective study*" (26). We can study it, but can we alter it? This might be the question. For E. P. Thompson, Althusser's idea of ideology is just that: an idea. It remains removed from the actual experience of individuals, and therefore in some way inviolate. For Althusser, the individual enters into ideology without fully knowing that she or he is entering into it. Thompson, on the other hand, insists that individuals have a part in the shaping of ideology (236). We are back to the old division between those who see human beings as subjects of some superstructure, and those who see human beings as capable of building and changing the structures in which they live. What is important for the story of theory is that Althusser won the day, or at least he and other High Theorists managed to focus a discipline on theory for theory's sake. Or so we might argue.

If I am right, then we had the odd circumstance of a leftist theory that presented itself without praxis, so to speak. The theory was without practical influence. The left became strapped in theoretical splendour, but no one outside the splendor's reach cared. Or so it could appear to some readers. The perceived relativism of High Theory was a way the right took to object to theory's challenge to entrenched (*i.e.,* conservative) thinking. But the very challenge to entrenched thinking itself became entrenched. Nodelman refers to "theory as institutionalized orthodoxy" (7). Maybe we can say that doing theory became the politically correct thing to do in literature departments, as well as in several other departments. After 9/11, however, things changed. Nodelman cites Harry Harootunian to the effect that the events of 9/11 have "permitted a wholesale rejection of theory" (6). I have sensed that, since September of 2001, we have seen a return to formalism in literary studies, or at least in the study of children's literature. A review of journal articles since that time will, I suspect, give evidence of a return to closer reading than we have seen for a while. We see fewer references to the likes of Derrida, Lyotard, Barthes, Adorno, Habermas and company, but this does not mean that we see no references to such theorists. My sense is that fewer critics of children's literature are now willing to tackle head-on the leftist work of High Theory. But again, this does not mean we do not have studies of children's literature that have important political implications and interventions such as Kidd's work or another recent book, Katharine Capshaw Smith's *Children's Literature of the Harlem Renaissance* (2004).

High Theory itself is well presented in a book such

as Karen Coats's *Looking Glasses and Neverlands* (2004) which also has an agenda we might term political. Coats's study of literature for children and young adults undertakes a major organization of this literature from a psychoanalytic perspective. She provides both the specialist reader and the common, but interested, reader, with a comprehensive review of both the Lacanian paradigm and literature for the young. This is a stunning achievement. Coates manages not only to clarify difficult and nearly intractable concepts, but also to place her psychoanalytic readings in cultural, historical, and contemporary contexts. Her insights connect books for the young with our contemporary struggles with abjection. Current concerns with violence among the young and a disconnection between young people and political urgencies are not answered in Coats's study, but they are contemplated, considered, and cunningly worked. Coats's range of reference is impressive. She considers books from the canon such as *Alice Through the Looking Glass* and *Peter Pan* as well as contemporary texts such as the Weetzie Bat books and the Goosebumps series. If we set Coats's study alongside the recent book, *Giant Despair Meets Hopeful: Kristevan Readings in Adolescent Fiction* (2000) by Martha Westwater, we can see clearly that Coats has written a book of crucial and clear importance. Her work intersects with such contemporary theoretical approaches as postcolonialsim, critical race theory, queer theory, and disability studies.

But we are supposed to have left High Theory behind or we are "after" it in some way. I like to think that being after theory does not simply mean that the profession heaves a collective sigh of relief and then looks back nostalgically at those simple pre-theory days that we can now retrieve with the confidence that we can go home again. We might have some of this. We might have a desire to find surety after the ostensibly relativistic decades of *différance*, misrecognition, and *mise en abyme*. But I like to think of that "after" in "after theory" as froward, something like "after the fox." If I can invoke a nostalgic Wayne Booth from the *Critical Inquiry* symposium, "The Future of Criticism," I will say that after theory has something to do with a changing of discourse. What Booth refers to as the "polysyllabic endocrinological crapifications" of High Theory are becoming less prevalent these days. And this is a sign of the profession expanding its embrace beyond a coterie of insiders. This is a sign of a democratizing force that fits with the leftist leanings of High Theory in its best moments.

Before we think theory's work is done, we should also remind ourselves of the globalization/glocalization implications of what we do. Children's literature carries both national and international significance (as does literature generally). Books for

the young now frequently cross national borders either in their original language with small changes or in translation, and what this means goes beyond a sharing of cultural expression among countries. To take just one example, the Harry Potter series now appears in many languages in countries as dispersed as Thailand, Japan, China, and Mexico. Just how the appearance of these books intersects with the global community deserves consideration, and any such consideration will take us into theory. How does a country—I won't say nation state—such as Canada receive these books and why? Can Canada maintain its sense of itself through its literature when it absorbs cultural material from outside? How does a reading in this country of books such as the Harry Potter books reflect a Canadian perspective? Do those books mean something different in this country than they mean in China or South Africa? These are, at least to me, interesting questions and they bring us face to face with theory—theory of translation, theory of the nation state, theory of ideology, theory of the reading effect, and so on. Only nostalgia for that which never was, the innocent time of reading as a form of semiotic bathing, can wish to avoid theory.

And so where is here? Here is, as ever, now here/nowhere. We are moving forward and this is inevitable. Studies of children's literature and culture have multiplied greatly since the advent of High Theory. Reputable and academic presses publish expanding series of children's literature studies (Routledge, Palgrave, Scarecrow, for example), Yet, as Nodelman indicates, "texts for children continue to occupy the margins of critical and theoretical discussion" (16). The good news is that the margins are a more comfortable place to be after theory. In fact, I am not sure I would want to be anywhere else. As long as children's literature remains on the margins, it will have work to do, it will have a struggle to engage in, it will have a vantage point distant from orthodoxy and assimilation, and it will continue to require theorizing. The familiar rhetorical shift here is to the bad news, but I am not sure we have any bad news. Sure, we do have voices redolent of nostalgia, and we do have voices calling for the certainties of formalism. But so what? We have always had a plurality of voices, and what Nodelman terms a "dynamic and interactive pluralism" (15) is something we should welcome. He calls for "passion," and I like this call. If we are in the business of hailing or interpellating our students, then we should be calling for them to be passionate about what they do. I cannot but embrace the notion that what we do is more than simply prepare for a smooth transition in our students from youthful learners to eager consumers, more than simply assist in market practice by selling books. What we do is, and I cite Nodelman, to profess the passionate desire "to want to and to try to change the world" (15).

I ought to stop here, on the rhetorical flourish

of changing the world. But I feel the necessity of returning to the matter of theory's work. Like cleaning the house, this work is never done. Or it is never done as long as we have the courage to challenge orthodoxies even in times of fear and intimidation. To theorize is to look steadily and resolutely at a subject, but with compassion as well as disinterest, with sensitivity to the interactions of the gaze. Looks can puzzle, comfort, disturb, and hurt. We want the look that liberates.

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