



On Being Theoretical
—Anna Jackson

In “What Are We After?”, Perry Nodelman breaks the question of what it means to be “after theory” down into three further questions, the first of which seems to me crucial and also seems to me to be fudged in the article. This is the question of precisely what theory it is that we have moved beyond. I think we do need to identify which theory or theories we might have moved beyond, or might, alternatively, want to retain. Instead, Nodelman implies all we have is a choice between a theoretically informed approach to the discipline and the kind of unquestioning approach to the discipline that would go no further than describing Wordsworth as “doughty” and Keats as “delectable.”

The question of what “theory” it is that we are after is addressed by Nodelman, when he distinguishes between a broad concept of theory as “critical self-reflection” (as proposed by Eagleton) and a narrower concept of theory as the structuralist and post-

structuralist work by theorists influenced by the work of Saussure. But Nodelman engages in making such fine distinctions between definitions and periods of theorizing only to collapse them again into a concept of theory that at once encompasses all theorizing from structuralism to the theory of these current “post-theory” times, and at the same time dates all of this theorizing back to the structuralists and the various poststructuralist moves towards unifying structuralist concepts that has become identified as Theory.

So, Nodelman argues, “theory” shattered assumptions that “can never again, after theory, be taken for granted.” It is therefore impossible really to be post-theory, since, even in order to argue we are post-theory, critics of theory must “offer theoretical thinking to make their case” or, in other words, “do theory.” In attributing this situation to a shattering of assumptions by “theory,” Nodelman re-situates the divide not between theory and post-theory, but

between the new theoretically-alert era that theory ushered in and the “pre-theory” period that came before.

But was there ever a period that was “pre-theory” in the sense of not having to offer theoretical thinking to make a case? While pre-poststructuralist critics may not have felt the need to grapple with post-structuralist versions of the relationship between language and the world, or sign systems and the structure of the unconscious, nevertheless critical evaluations of literary works, the question of which texts are worth analysis, and negotiations about the terms in which such analysis might be conducted, have always involved theoretical arguments about the nature and practice of literary criticism.

The notion of a pre-theory period in which Wordsworth was considered “doughty” and Keats “delectable” gestures vaguely towards some period out of history in which those terms have some kind of neutral a-theoretical significance that reduces literary criticism to questions of personality and taste. In fact, issues surrounding the relationship between personality, the construction of a public persona, and the construction and promotion of literary style; as well as theories about the nature of taste, its construction, development, and social negotiation, were absolutely central questions in the literary theory of the period in which Wordsworth and Keats were writing. You just have to read Hazlitt

on Wordsworth, DeQuincey on Wordsworth, or on Alexander Pope and the nature of literature, Reynold’s *Discourses on Art*, or contemporary issues of the *Edinburgh Review* to become aware of the extensive theorizing going on about the personality and persona of the artist in relation to literary criticism; Kant’s “Critique of Judgement,” Burke’s essay on the sublime, and Hume on “The Standard of Taste” are just a few of the landmark works on aesthetic theory and the theory of taste from the period that still inform the work of aesthetic theorists today.

There can be no post-theory only in the same sense that no period was ever pre-theory. This, however, is not quite the same thing as what we might mean by being post-Theory. Specifying the theories to which we are referring makes a difference. There are, in fact, reasons for moving on from the Theory of poststructuralists such as Derrida and Lacan beyond the reason Geoffrey Bennington gives and Nodelman quotes, that is, the desire “not to think very hard.” I agree with Bennington that its moving out of fashion “says nothing about the ‘theoretical’ or philosophical issues raised by deconstruction.” But there are theorists, philosophers, linguists, and psychologists who *have* examined the issues raised by post-structuralist theorists, and who have given precise, informed, discipline-based reasons for why we might move on from particular theories and particular

concepts of how language works, for example.

It is not my intention to make a case against Theory or any particular theories here. What I do argue against is seeing a rejection of Theory, or the theories of the poststructuralist critics, as a rejection of theorizing, a reluctance to think very hard, a nostalgic return

to some imagined period in which literary scholars engaged in “unquestioning appreciations.” It seems unlikely that anyone goes into a career as a literary scholar, whether in the field of children’s literature or any other field, in order to avoid questions or hard thinking.

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