

Shall We Burn our Goddess “Theory” ?

—Jean Perrot



I will write this communication in English, and I hope my Francophone Canadian colleagues will pardon me. For I will sometimes have to quote from texts, which were first written in English, but are only accessible in Danish or Spanish, and I can't translate from these tongues. But I will also take the liberty of not always giving my references from English translations of French books: this scholarly obligation is the pragmatic manifestation and the pressure of a first unifying “theory”—a theory is a systematic view on things or matters, intrinsically linked with or implied by some specific critical approach—which I would ascribe to a dominant code I am quite happy to “burn” for once. After all, why should I have my “shadow” personal English library at home or why should I be obliged to verify and download information, which my English-speaking readers in a give-and-take way can acquire, if they wish to check my words?

Theories are Pitfalls

And so, shall we burn “Theory,” as the young Frenchmen from the cities recently burned their neighbours’ and friends’ cars, thus destroying their working tools and making harder a fateful life in uncouth surroundings? Burning, because our Minister of Home Affairs had threatened to “clean” the “difficult” areas with a “kärcher pressure washer.” As he chose water for a weapon, they went in with fire in not quite an unexpected game, as we will see later. Burning, that is, symbolically sacrificing what they considered as ostentatory signs of a market that excludes them and keeps them marginalized, just as children’s literature critics often stand stranded on the borders of recognized academic pantheons. Would I here be considering theory as some kind of goods or tool, which is indispensable for the fulfilling of the job that legitimates us, as Jack Zipes, using Bourdieu’s theory, once reminded us at some memorable ChLA

conference?

Burning, as Herbert Kohl wondered in *Should we Burn Babar?* whether it would not be apposite to suppress the icon of French children's literature for the sake of "political correctness"? Totally committed to the "race, class, and gender theory," which, as Perry Nodelman reminds us in his last *CCL/LCJ* editorial, has been "privileged by cultural studies" (Nodelman 13), Kohl based his argument on an insistent and erroneous application of postcolonial theories, of short-sighted Freudian psychoanalysis and of critical self-unawareness, and condemned the book as "a token for what is objectionable in children's literature, namely the colonialism, the implied racism and sexism of the tale" (17). A condemnation that showed his utter blindness to D. W. Winnicott's "transitional space" of *Play and Reality* and to the "symbolic exchange" ruling children's societies, better than any adult code, either "bourgeois" or "Marxist." Which urged me to explain and plead against him in "The French Avant-Garde Revisited or Why We Shouldn't Burn Mickey Mouse": as we know, children's culture is primordially grounded in play and games, as Jerome Bruner long ago showed in *Child's Talk: Learning to Use Language*.¹ The lack of understanding of the child's psychological bent and his neglect of any historical perspective led Kohl to fall within the net of a more comprehensive view of the literary work he was examining. In most

cases then, "theory" forcefully reveals the limited scope of our approach and the "blind spot" of our critical perspective. And here my friend reader is just thinking how she (or he) will catch me at the corner of the wood and whether I will try to escape the general lot of us, poor researchers in our game of "hide and seek." May I just give her a small clue in reminding her that I once wrote a paper playing with "gender studies" critical writing: "Written from the International Androgynous. A Plea for Our Common Hide (and Seek?)."

Theories are Dead-ends

Again, with the similar logic that makes pitfalls of our own theories, shall I, as a Professor of Comparative Literature, express my fear of the "Death of a Discipline"? I would then be following in the steps of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who, belonging to my professional tribe, and with her desire to save a "dying discipline," "proposes the planet to overwrite the globe," that is to get out of the "Euro.U.S" dominant code, which imposes a system of violent exchanges, and "destroys the force of literature," transforming it into a "cultural good." She seems to share here Zygmunt Bauman's views of *Globalization: The Human consequences*. Quite provocatively she also shows how cultural studies were "established to secure U.S. power in the Cold War" (Spivak 3) and were "related to the 500 percent increase in Asian

immigration" in the wake of the 1965 Lyndon Johnson Act. She reminds us of the fact that U.S. Comparative Literature "founded on inter-European hospitality" has been destabilized, and that "the effort, recalling the initial Birmingham model of Cultural Studies, is to put some black on the Union Jack, or to put a spin on Jesse Jackson's slogan, to paint the red, white and blue in the colors of the rainbow" (8-9).

Yet Spivak is in favour of a really convivial and egalitarian mode of communication relying on Derrida's 1997 *Politics of Friendship* (71-72), and she has been an ardent defender of the feminine cause. To counter the abstract force of "the gridwork of electronic capital," she advocates the necessity of "learning to read": "to read is to learn to disfigure the undecidable figure into responsible literality" (72). Thus expert readers from emergent countries will fence themselves against the wiles of imposed ideologies. More significantly, she chooses as an ideal model of communication, the "ruralism" of the "Cuban activist intellectual José Martí who lived in New York from 1881 to 1895" (92). But here conscious of a possible drift into a "primitivist romanticization of the rural" (93), and dreaming of an illustration of the "planetarity" as "perhaps best imagined from the pre-capitalist cultures of the planet" (101), she assumes that the critic's duty is to "associate with constructive counter-globalization networks of people's alliances in what is now

called the Global South" supported by the creation of "barefoot schools" (35). A generous dream, not free from some measure of unavowed Marxism, and still considering literature from a moral or political angle!

But now one is tempted to ask: "Why turn the tables and replace North by South?" Will not this, as Karen Sands-O'Connor writing on African-American children's literature noticed, come to "provincialising the scholarship in this area?" (42). Such a step means, of course, transgressing the principle of universality, which lies at the root of any sense of true international community. And it is a South, which, moreover, she seems to know from some distance, "exotically": more from her memories than from any actual regular experience, as is suggested by a few remarks she makes incidentally. I will accept her starting point, that "[w]hatever our view of what we do, we are made by the forces of people moving about the world" (3), and that we have thus to "exchange with the Earth," for "[t]he Earth is a paranational image that can substitute for international and can perhaps provide, today, a displaced site for the imagination of planetarity" (95). But I can't avoid noticing the significant posture and position she adopts in the very act of writing. The third chapter of her essay called "Planetarity" is, in particular, explicit on this point: it is an illustration of the ambiguous way the contemporary comparatist can at once, in her own

way, try to escape a “primitive romanticization of the rural” (93), practise the “crossing of borders” (5), and have a close knowledge of what she calls the Earth. In one page or instance, Spivak writes: “I am writing these words in Hong Kong. I come here as often as I can and go on to the other Chinas, to get a sense of the immensely changeful and vast scenario of the evolving Asia-Pacific” (84). This is quite impressive and more so the following quotation:

My plane is flying now over the land between Baghdad, Beirut, Haifa, and Tripoli, into Turkey, and Romania. I am making a clandestine entry into “Europe.” Yet the land looks the same—hilly sand. I know the cartographic markers because of the TV in the arm of my seat. Planetarity cannot deny globalisation. But, in search of a springboard for planetarity, I am looking not at Marti’s invocation of the rural, but at the last figure of land that seems to undergird it. The view of the earth from the window brings this home to me. (93)

One could not express more clearly the sense of extraterritoriality experienced from the abstract quality of this deduction. One could not more obviously fall under the grid propounded by Zygmunt Bauman in his works *Liquid Modernity*, and *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds*. According to

this sociologist of Leeds and Warsaw universities,

Freed from their local obligations and easily travelling through cyber networks, the knowing elite wonder why other people do not follow their example [...] Hybridity is a claim to autonomy. (89, translation mine).²

For Bauman, hybridity covers the dissolution of all traditionally accepted political or social frames (the State, morals, feelings like love, etc.); these, giving way to the pressure of liberalism and of the market, and become “fluid,” inconsistent. And for him the new remoteness of global systemic structures, the “fluid” state of the immediate setting of life, politics, and human togetherness call for a rethinking of the concepts used to narrate human individual experience. In his opinion,

The image of a hybrid culture is the ideological varnish daubed by the cosmopolitan elites on obtained or proclaimed extraterritoriality. It amounts essentially to a dearly and much cherished liberty [...] and to free circulation in a world bound by barriers of any kind and delineated by territorially limited sovereignties (89, translation mine).³

When the new rule of the game in our global

society is the sole affirmation of one's individuality, it seems difficult not to see that Spivak's "theory," as evolved from her plane high in the clouds here again falls short of the real world. If we stand by the five "concepts" resorted to by Bauman, "emancipation, individuality, time/space, work and community, " we have a feeling that her systemic view is in danger of only watching at boundaries, institutions, and that it cannot claim to reach that "possibility of community," of "shared human experience" sought for by Terry Eagleton in the article cited by Perry Nodelman (9–10). We will add, however, that, in complete agreement with Jacques Derrida, whose work Spivak has promoted in the U.S.A., she pleads for "close reading" in her "barefoot classes" and for what she calls "the patient commitment to linguistic and ethical Othering" (35). Her book offers several instances of fine "readings" of literature, in which the subtlety of allusions, the erudite references to the contemporary theorists of post-modernity and the originality of the rhetoric at play are fully convincing, but it mentions no precise method for achieving this. There seems to be a complete break between her resolute political engagement and the almost hermetic brilliance of her style. But with the transference of issues of the literary to those of the political, she comes to a final contradiction: while she plans to "train local teachers of children in two aboriginal pockets of western West Bengal" (35), she never mentions any children's book

in her pamphlet.

Theories Make Us "See": The Playing Child Comes to the Rescue

And so how can one get out of the dead end of elite solipsism? Couldn't there be in every country a reader whose recognition involved the sort of "pre-capitalist" universalism that Spivak is expecting for her discipline? Is not the "symbolic exchange" in children's communication the form once assumed by generosity and friendship in "primitive societies? Has not the necessity of coming to real children and of giving them the proper books become obvious at a time when the Convention for the Rights of Children has been signed by almost all countries in 1989? This, at least, is what I claimed, when in *Jeux et enjeux du livre d'enfance et de jeunesse* I heralded the child as a "modern Primitive" (67) whose animism and imagination are mainly ruled by what Claude Lévi-Strauss in *The Raw and the Cooked* calls "the sensory codes" (160). I was then, of course, still fully under the charm of the structuralist's credo, and I don't see why I should ever forsake this method, one of the ways of investigating most clearly the specificity of texts that appeal to children's literary tastes. Naturally, we all know, with Jacques Derrida's *L'écriture et la différence*, that meaning is not constructed from the inter-relationship of minimal units of the signifier, but from « *le rapport des traces entre elles à fleur de texte* »

and by a game consisting of « *substitutions infinies dans la clôture d'un ensemble fini* » (Derrida 423). This does not prevent one from using the discarded method, and my theory is precisely to “mix” theories, when they have, in some measure, made me “see,” as Le Verrier’s mathematical calculations allowed him to “see” the Neptune planet before it appeared in the sky.

Seen through a complex grid and sifter, children’s books share the specific imaginary field of play and games activities, and their half-hallucinated culture offers the “natural” ground and link for any true understanding between different nations. In the eyes of children, before they have fully imbibed the dominant social rules and prejudices (and these develop with language expertise), there exists, besides the symbolic exchange ruling their close world, no religious, economic or cultural “centre” of power. Children partly assess the “undecidability” of the texts that are given to them, and they come into particular agreement with some writers who have the gift of sharing their concerns and “constructive” ways of turning the world into words (Rudd 31). This aspect of things has still to be investigated closely.

If such a possibility exists, will it bring back some hope and life to “a dying discipline” or create a new one? Again, I hold that the second outcome is possible when one considers literature as an extension of play activities (Picard), whose effect

rests on specific cultural rules and on the wielding of particular structures of the human mind and language, as I claimed in *Jeux et enjeux du livre d'enfance et de jeunesse*. From such a scholarly perspective, can we say that the birth of a new and complex discipline—which we would call “Ludistics”—bringing together comparative literature, children’s literature, narratology, anthropology, psychoanalysis and genetics, the communication sciences, is the prospect that lies in wait for scholars of the global world?

Literature and the “Ludic Imagination”: “Burning” at the Core!

As Perry Nodelman long ago underlined in *The Pleasures of Children’s Literature*, following in the steps of Roland Barthes’s *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973), one should not neglect the particularities of children’s books and the importance of images in them, which offers a new type of literary pleasure.⁴ A pleasure that has to be shared between adults, and children to be fully appreciated: through such sharing only can the full status of the child as real reader be recognized. The enjoyment of adults in this context may be itself mere make-believe, but it does become genuine through the illusion—“illusion” coming from the Latin “in ludo,” “being in the game”—entertained in a special affective family or school or group compact, which, like the description of family

exchanges at Christmas by François-André Isambert in *Le sens du sacré: Fêtes et religion populaire*, is based on a “double-bind”, that seems indispensable for the success of any literary symbolic exchange.

In this context, mainly following the work of Winnicott’s *Play and Reality*, my claim is that the production of make-believe must be understood functionally: images and those of dreams in particular have a “filling role” and are intended to reinstate an authority figure. Bourguignon’s studies of infants smiling in their sleep, for example, show that the dream system of the mind has a single aim of hallucinatory accomplishment of desire. This satisfaction cannot be reduced to that of orality, as food may be sacrificed to contact. The smile of the infant has also been considered one of the motor equivalents of attachment behaviour (Bowlby). It is significant that it corresponds to one of the first manifestations of the dreaming Self, master of the imagination and interpersonal area. It is above all the filling of an emptiness, the sign and form of a hallucinatory relationship: in fact, I have argued that this is the first symbolic exchange in an essay entitled “The Logic of Play and Games.” This logic also rules symbolic cultural and literary exchanges and stands at the heart of children’s literature. Let us say a word about it.

My article was the result of a six-year research project, undertaken with ten children from between

five and eleven (from the last kindergarten year to the last class of primary school) but also with pupils of grammar school, or “collège” in French, and with more than 100 adults, students, teachers, and other professionals. It consisted in reading a contemporary tale to the tested group, in stopping the reading at a turning point of the action, and in asking people to conclude the story, either by a game or by the supposed ending of the tale: the article analyzes the produced narratives and games. It was founded on a conception of reading as a form of “playing” in what I call the “ludic imagination,” that is, in the spirit of the Palo Alto school of sociology, as a cultural act grounded not in the action of a single personality, be it young or adult, but in a “double-body psychology” and in a Gregory Bateson “double bind” relationship of the child with the dominant adult within the “symbolical exchanges” ruling everyday life. In this view, children are understood, not as voiceless subjects, but as active creators of fiction in schools, and also in everyday life. When these exchanges are situated on the positive side of the family homeostasis (its mental and affective balance), “surprises” come from the parents who are the naturally dominant part of the group: they are presented in the shape of “gifts” (food and other necessities). They are an expression of love, but have also the result of curbing the children’s *païdia* (turbulence). The main ritualistic period for this is Christmas time, when Santa Claus

assumes the popular version of the religious ritual of Christ's sacrifice for mankind and gives every child the toys or sweets he or she has symbolically merited in the course of the year. This celebration has become the greatest yearly worldwide marketing feast through the consumption of goods and food, and happiness then principally lies in the feeling of home and in the possession of objects. Homeostasis is made possible because of the effusive relationships of the family members, and it is promoted by the symbolical oral satisfaction imparted by the gifts acting as substitutes of the good mother's love. This constitutes the main Christmastide item of children's literature.

Yet plying children with "surprises" leads to satiety, if not surfeit and boredom. Then family homeostasis is disrupted by the children themselves, who pull away from the rules currently received by the group and start mischief-making. This explains why carnival comes as a time of relief in the rituals of many religions and cultural codes. When boredom gets stronger, clashes between the members of the group bring about outbursts of anger or hatred (or revolution) and the dislocation of relationships leads people outside their homes. That is why fireworks are fired in the streets to celebrate the 14th of July, our National Day, or any major cultural advent introducing a significant cultural break. This is why, in several of the stories written by children of fourteen or fifteen years of age and coming from "difficult"

areas, the main characters described their leisure time as a rough game, which consisted in burning different objects (and even flies!!!) in the corridors of the basements of their cities! Fire and fire crackers or even bombs always came up with the manifestation of the greatest pressure and stress.

The purpose of toys and games (or any other "surprise", such as fairytale and magic) is partly to alleviate the social tension and to master the turbulence of children and to ensure the cultural balance regulating the reciprocal dependence of adults and children. But it is important to go to the other pole and consider the case of the children who question the "Law of the Father" and resort to violence to express their freedom. Humour, mischief, and grim humour stand as tolerated forms of violence meant to contest or to ascertain the values of any culture at stake, as a close examination of J.R.R Tolkien's *Father Christmas Letters* will show: Santa Claus and the Polar bear stand there as the two polar characters of Tolkien's imaginary kingdom, the first providing the usual surprises and the second one playing the part of the rowdy urchin and of the Lord of Misrule. For the fellow's best prank occurs when, he, like some naughty child, goes to Santa Claus's cellar, "the cracker-hole," where thousands of boxes of fire crackers are kept, and, letting the candle fall into them, provokes the most magnificent fireworks reminding one of Bakhtin's uncrowning of the

Carnival King.

The child leaving his family, after this necessary break, is free to start his own life adventure and to go through the whole initiation process, which has been described by Bruno Bettelheim using Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* as a starting point as a model of human development in *The Uses of Enchantment*. This reminder is meant to stress the fact that we should keep in mind all the theories that have proved effective in highlighting literary or cultural texts: we may well be "beyond" formalism and structuralism, but we still have to keep them at our command. The same will be said in France for the psychoanalytical approach of Didier Anzieu's *Le corps de l'œuvre* and for the anthropological vision of Gilbert Durand in his *Structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire*, which conjoins Russian reflexology, structuralism, Jungian psychoanalysis, Gaston Bachelard's imagology, and Leroy-Gourhan's analysis of man's technology. And playing with "theory" is a way of making it lighter.

Baroque Aesthetics as a Distinctive Feature of Successful Books for Children

But criticism is never complete without an artistic approach linking literature to art and to the historical conditions of its emergence: if Bruno Bettelheim's book met great success in therapy and with storytellers, its method did not call for any specific

comment on the style of the tales and of children's literature. A last look at these will bring out a feature, which, in my opinion, best characterizes successful children's literature : the dominance of Baroque art, which, as I showed in *Art baroque, art d'enfance*, and in a recent paper in a Spanish review affects not only the seventeenth century, but, under its postmodern resurgences, many contemporary works written for children; Baroque aesthetics even distinguish the art of J.K Rowling in her Harry Potter series, with its sorcerers, witches and pageants! Baroque culture inspired by the Counter Reformation meant to curb a certain permissiveness of manners which was close to that of adolescent turbulence, at the time when children's literature "came of age" in France. Thus the special flavour imparted to Charles Perrault's *Contes de Ma Mère l'Oye* by "le merveilleux" (the fantasy of the supernatural or of fairies) partly resulted from a transposition of the technical devices (with metamorphoses, machines, and living statues) of baroque operas at the king's court (specially those of the king's musician, Lully). It was indeed at the absolutist monarch's court (most significantly at Louis XIV's, but in Spain or other courts, as well) that the "civilizing process" described by the German thinker Norbert Elias in *Über den Prozess der Zivilization* was achieved. Elias showed how the noblemen's native impulses were repressed and how manners were rationalized and systematized to bring some

measure of order into a rather rowdy and unruly society. The “society of manners” was also directed to the child and propagated in France by the teachings of Fénelon, the prelate, appointed tutor to the Duke of Burgundy, grandson of Louis XIV, who wrote fantastic stories for his student meant to shepherd the child, just as the boorishness and rowdiness of noblemen were abated by their status of courtiers. “A serious game” for the moralist La Bruyère, as Elias noted, (241) but which seems of greater necessity than ever for our car-burning kids!

Post-postmodern Playing with Theories: The Critic as “Ludist”

And so, my aim as a critic, as a “ludist,” has been to point out the fact that children’s books when most successfully received by the young audiences seem to be those which follow or transform, or even better, play with this general pattern of the “logic of play and games.” Criticism ruled by the same “principle” as the books for children it deals with,

stands closer to the young reader’s partialities, which it shares in a new “politics of friendship” open to the world’s republic of children at large. Whether such a scholarly analysis is still comparative literature or ludistics, or whatever, does not really matter. What I wish to stress is the double move, which my theory finally implies: for the strictly literary scholars, a move from literature to games and to the child’s cultural and psychological specificities, and for technicians of children’s culture a consideration of the literary particularities that have to be taken into account to highlight the stylistic oddity of the child, the oddity of the Other.

Oh! By the way, many young people who burnt cars in our cities seem now to recant and, led by a group of rappers and show business artists of North-African and African origins, have created a powerful “committee” to urge young people to vote, moving from violence to some consciousness of what citizenship means. But there is much to be done to come to utopian peacefulness.

Notes

¹ See my quotation in French of this in Perrot (1999).

² “Libérées de leurs liens locaux et voyageant facilement à travers les réseaux de cyberconnexions, les élites savants se demandent pourquoi les autres ne suivent pas leur exemple [...] L’hybridation est une déclaration d’autonomie...”

³ “L’image d’une “culture hybride” est le vernis idéologique passé par les cosmopolites élites sur l’extraterritorialité obtenue

ou proclamée. Il s’agit essentiellement d’une liberté, durement gagnée et choyée, de violations de propriétés et de libre sortie dans un monde entrecroisé de barrières et découpé en souverainetés territorialement délimitées.”

⁴ I am quoting here from a paper I wrote and which has been published in Danish under the title “Bønelitteraturen som al litteraturkritiks fremtid”

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