



Children's Literature Studies—"Post-Theory"

—Peter Hunt

Perhaps the most telling question in Perry's editorial is the final one: "what does any or all of this have to do with children and their experience of text?" The skeptical, and tempting, answer, "nothing," would only be true if we (the readers of *CCL/LCJ*) believed that adult intervention of one kind or another in the process of making literary meaning had no effect.

For "theory" has affected how a generation of "children's book practitioners" think, and it would be a tragedy if there was a "post-theory" atmosphere that abrogated this. But what theory actually did (like most great ideas) can be happily summed up in a paragraph. Fundamentally, as Perry says, it constitutes/ed challenge: we can (or should) no longer accept "common sense," or readings of history or literature or society without understanding the viewpoints that constitute them, or questioning our own viewpoints; we shouldn't accept "easy" or

"obvious" views of how children read or understand, and so on.

What could be simpler, or more liberating, or more difficult, or, now that it has been pointed out, more blindingly obvious? Thank you, theory. What in my generation, at university in the early 1960s seemed like authoritarian laws now seem jaw-droppingly inane. Thus F. R. Leavis (who he?) in 1935 in *Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture*.

It is upon a very small minority that the discerning appreciation of art and literature depends: it is... only a few who are capable of unprompted, first-hand judgement. They are still a small minority although a larger one, who are capable of endorsing such first-hand judgement by genuine personal experience (quoted in Hunt, 38).

Thank you, theory.

But, equally, we have a lot NOT to thank it for, and therein lie the seeds of a new yahooism. Theory got itself such a bad name, among mere human beings, that if we are not careful, “post-theory,” we might just regress to simple-minded authoritarianism, or just simple-mindedness.

And so one of the things that worries me about Perry’s discussion, impeccable though it is, is just how many of the readers of *CCL/LCJ* could actually give a damn about its subject-matter. I don’t know the demographics of the readership of *CCL/LCJ*, but I surmise that a good part of it lies outside university literature departments. If that is so, I wonder just how much of Perry’s discussion actually means anything to them, or how many readers of them will have the slightest idea what he’s talking about. That is not a patronizing statement: anyone with any sense, having struck, to begin with, the curious misappropriation of the word “theory”—which does not mean “thinking about” —let alone “subject” and the rest of the jargon, might wonder why on earth they should pay attention. For while changing the way many of us think for the good, academic theory has produced the most spectacular demonstration of pretentious and incompetent language use ever seen. So when Catherine Belsey (who she?) worries about English studies neglecting the signifier, she is actually worrying about a tiny, tiny coterie of egocentrics who are, perhaps to the eternal credit of

the British government (at least), relatively underpaid in comparison to anyone doing useful work (except possibly midwives).

I think it is essential to distinguish between the very simple, but often dazzling ideas of “theory” and the ghastly ossuary of writings on theory, a wilful jargonland of fuzzy thinkers and notorious solipsism; writing which to the most charitable observer is doctrinaire, obscurantist, generally illiterate, and, most of all, deliberately exclusive. The result, as John Harwood wrote in 1995, was and is “a situation in which many distinguished professional teachers of writing (which is, after all, what their students are examined on) are, in the eyes of everyone but themselves, among the worst professional writers in the business” (21).

It is not just the writing; it is the slavish attitude of mind of theorists as a breed, or herd, that is so risible and (consequently) destructive. Just look at those endless totemic figures, Derrida, Lacan and the rest; they, or at least their acolytes, seem more intent on playing with personalities and egos than with philosophy or ideas. And when Perry says that “Theory questions the validity of ‘common sense,’” he is right; but when he says that “theory questions...those with authority” he omits to say that the theoreticians have been far more intellectually fascist than the most reactionary of their predecessors —far more manipulative and power-crazed. If their

predecessors were stupid, then they have been, more culpably, consciously so. (Incidentally, it is highly ironic that the valorizing of France as the home of theory is in stark contrast to the reality of French universities, which are among the most intellectually conservative in the world (witness the absence of children's literature studies).)

It is, of course, dangerous to be self-righteous, and a good many people must have been caught between denouncing Derrida as an intellectual con man, while having the uneasy feeling that *anybody* making a living from pontificating on texts should maybe get a life, or a proper job.

But all that does not mean that the ideas of theorists have not been influential. They have, and we should be grateful; the fact that vast amounts of their writing are self-evidently laughable should not blind us (in the children's-literature-criticism trade) to their virtues (nor lead us to the assumption that our writings are necessarily better than theirs).

And we should beware. When the teaching of children's literature at tertiary level began in the UK, around 25 years ago, it was founded in theory. I would guess that until the mid-1990s virtually every MA thesis, or every undergraduate essay on children's literature began with, or was based on, a statement of the kind of theory that was driving it. Students were taught to see theory as a necessity; one had to understand why one was writing about a

text, and what assumptions and analytic techniques enabled one to do so. Theory was integrated into the critical process. But as "theory" has climbed into its solipsistic stratosphere, disguising what the great John Cleese described as "degrees in the bloody obvious" with the lunatic doctrine that "if you can say it simply it can't be important," it has come to be despised, and so the baby has been, to repeat a cliché, in danger of being thrown out with the bath water. Theory now sits in its corner, mumbling to itself, while its erstwhile beneficees charge off back to unreconstituted Leavisitism.

Theory made us think: and if we are "post-theory" (which, as Perry implies, sounds suspiciously like the academic industry desperately re-inventing itself), it would be nice to think that we cannot be. But I fear that, to judge from my recent experiences of undergraduate essays and postgraduate papers, we could easily be drifting back to the dark ages because of sheer ignorance.

Outside of the theory factory, those of us who deal with children and books can surely take what is valuable from theory, preserve it, and use it.

Which brings me to the one part of Perry's editorial which provoked me—when he discusses the advantages of children's literature studies being "marginalized."

Having said this often enough myself, it struck me—who, in fact, is "marginalized" and who is central?

Is that strange coterie of “*les grands simplificateurs*” up (or down) there in the great universities, selling a few hundred copies of intricate *longuers* to others of their ilk actually central? And are people engaging with children each day, engaging with real readers in real rooms, in real life, actually marginal? That is absurd. We—if I may be so bold as to characterize

the readers of *CCL/LCJ* and its sister journals—are the central ones, and the strange, spectral theorists are those who, so self-important that they cannot conceive of it, actually on the margins. Children’s literature has the potential to be (and often is) a revolutionary study, and theory should, indeed must, be part of that.

Works Cited

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