

Surviving theory: Imagining literature

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Abstract

This paper intends to investigate the relationship between English literature as a “discipline” (read ‘disciplining’ of the imagination) and the rise of theory aka systematization of an area that was initially inscribed by a nomadic imagination traditional in its affiliation to something as profound and fleeting as feeling and inspiration. The practice of English as a literary language was gradually superseded by the overarching idea of literature as a political space charged with a new “hermeneutics of suspicion”. The critical/academic lobby has created for itself and for the reformed author an ivory tower (a panopticon of sorts) by which it partially controls and regulates not only literary appreciation but creative thought too. Attempts to systematize, contain and regularize imagination, experience and literary appreciation through limited political, statistical and scientific indices are symptomatic of street smart white intellect colonizing a dark and uncharted territory of literary talent.

The ‘rise of theory’ in the west and its consequences in the English speaking academia of the colonized nations in the East and elsewhere, have led native languages and literatures to take to these floating lighthouses of critical theory and methodology as well. Though these approaches make reading a titillating experience for some readers there is nonetheless a theoretical overkill especially in English literary studies in India. It seems now, that literature is second only to theory. University teachers/theories have been the most ardent devotees of the juggernaut of theory pulverizing the old trinity of Author, Art and Aesthetics corresponding to a very post-modern and blind acceptance of nothing and everything.

KEYWORDS:Literary Theory, hermeneutics, pedagogy, cultural studies, crisis in theory, intention, jargon, criticism.

The title of the paper should make it somewhat clear that one is fully aware of one’s minority status and more than prepared to reap the benefits of being under-represented. It was a pleasure to have undertaken this crusade against Theory and to have come across on the way, daunting forerunners who surprise , pleasantly of course, by way of their resistance to the Jabberwocky of Theory unleashed upon the world by the obviously White Queen of Esotericism. This paper intends to ramble on about as opposed to ‘investigating’ the relationship between English literature as a “discipline” (read ‘disciplining’ of the imagination) and the rise of theory aka systematization of an area that was initially inscribed by a nomadic imagination traditional in its affiliation to something as profound and fleeting as feeling and inspiration. Given the ascendancy of the sciences aka permanence through material and physical assaults on the mysteries of nature, English like many other communication complexes had to cave in to the demands of analytical knowledge systems like statistics, economics, politics (which I am tempted

to call the three witches of modernity having been snubbed by a formidable feminist¹ for using the word ‘bitches’ earlier, in an unguarded moment). I must confess at the very beginning of having succumbed to another temptation, namely, the urge to abuse the master in his own language. I shall therefore like Prospero’s Caliban and America’s Taliban freely use the arms and ammunition in Theory’s arsenal against itself.

The practice of English as a literary language was gradually superseded by the overarching idea of literature as a political system charged with a new “hermeneutics of suspicion”² to the extent that the joy of reading was now replaced by an egoistic clash between the reader and the author in which more than often it became fashionable for the author to “play dead” (read politically correct). Moreover, the reader was now motivated by an entirely phenomenal and obsessive desire to find recurring discursive patterns which could demystify and dwarf any novelty (read signs of life) that a living dead author could aspire to. Notwithstanding, the irritating persistence of the notion of literary genius being non conformist the Cap-it-all-ist managed to contain psychic and attitudinal anomalies by inventing the analytical strait jacket called “literary theory”. The idea was to sow seeds of division in what was earlier an organic whole comprising of the author and the reader by disallowing any access to meaning or sharing of ideas and idiosyncrasies except through the devious labyrinth of ‘ideology’ and ‘discourse’.

Referring to the “author’s intended meaning” and the “text’s meaning” Knapp and Michaels in their highly influential attack on Theory accuse theorists of splitting up a single term into a needless binary (Knapps 724). They further argue that “their identity (i.e. of intended and textual meaning) robs *intention* of any theoretical interest” thereby leaving theory with nothing to do (Knapps 731). It is understandable how theory pitches its attention on the question of ‘intention’ especially that of the author and tries to situate it in the various theoretical discourses available. Experience makes it clear that a text can mean different things to different people. However this is true irrespective of the presence or absence of literary theory. Knapp and Michaels are obviously oversimplifying in this instance though they seem to be right about theory in general when they point to the tendency of theory to split apart terms and generate new discourses which they can claim as their own specialized tools of intellectual inquiry.

In America which also happens to be one of the important centers of theoretical studies at present, the thrust is towards a difference oriented (rather than knowledge oriented) hair splitting research. Despite this obsessive focus, research funds and grants

¹ The said ‘formidable feminist’ shall remain unnamed. It was during a paper reading session that she took up arms against my phrase ‘bitches of Modernity’, having quickly formed the very sexist image of Modernity as the male in charge of the female ‘bitches’ namely Politics, Statistics and Economics. She was further “provoked” by my not singling out any particular theoretical school in favour of a general tirade against Theory with a capital ‘T’.

² An idea that can be traced back to the work of Paul Ricoeur. The earlier literary maxims of a “willing suspension of disbelief” and the suspended animation of creative writing (akin to a ‘hermeneutic of suspension’ or Keatsian ‘negative capability’) were increasingly challenged by the new ‘hermeneutic of suspicion’.

at American universities have been drying up and there is an increasing sense of failure and distrust in higher education. We in India seem to be looking up to an educational model that has already started showing signs of failure in practice. I will return to the theme of pedagogical trends in the Humanities and the role theory plays in that context later in this paper. Writing about “American theory” in the context of academics, Kaufmann counters Stephen Mailloux’s claim that theory tries to bring into academic literary studies some degree of rationality: “This claim should seem paradoxical, for the explosion of theory has made literature departments larger and more unwieldy and the field more fragmented” (520).

While the methodologists as well as the anti-methodologist theorists look for clarity and purity respectively in language and literature, literary creation shuns both. Even committed theorists like Paul de Man admit that there is “something bleakly ugly and abstract about lit. theory” when compared to a “much more attractive spontaneous encounter with literary works” (Fisher 50). The goal of theory is the goal of the “method” and its aspiration to the governance of the interpretive practice is obvious. Happily in agreement with Stanley Fish’s “point...that there is nothing left for theory to *do*” they *do* admit that theory is still around: “stripped of the methodological project either to ground or to undermine practice, theory continues to imagine a position outside it” (Knapp 738). Even Leitch in his unequivocally titled essay published almost a decade before cannot help musing: “Wouldn’t theory return like a ghost in unexpected forms” (Leitch 125)? We now know he was right. Once the favorite, it still is powerful in its many devious arguments and tempts the literati with its rhetorical twists and turns, its hydra headed Medusal charms and the sadistico-intellectual possibilities of analysis and the prosthetic violence it offers upon the body of literary praxis. As you might notice, even as one rails against it, it slithers through articulation and offers its addictive fruits.

The critical/academic lobby it seems has created for itself and for the author an ivory tower (a pan-opticon of sorts) by which it can control and regulate not only literary appreciation but creative thought too. “The lush efflorescence of theory”, writes Kaufman has continued despite “an expanding critique of academic fragmentation” (Kaufmann 519). Attempts to systematize, quantify and regularize imagination and experience through limited political, statistical and scientific indices are symptomatic of street smart white intellect colonizing a dark and uncharted territory of literary talent. True literature was, is and will always be above and beyond the jostling and scheming of political micro/macrococosms just as much as it distances itself from vested social, professional and political advancement. This is not to say that literature is insensitive to mounting tensions and crises that are its very site of origination and intervention. R.S. Crane in 1943 pointed out that “all the humanisms that have legitimized the study of humane letters from the Renaissance to the present have defined them-selves negatively, through an external threat” (Kaufmann 522).

The crisis in humanities is 'permanent' in the sense that the humanities concern matters of feeling, taste and opinion rather than the material conditions of Being alone. This crisis need not to be related to literary theory and especially so in terms of a homeostatic purpose where for instance theory keeps literature alive by keeping it in a state of constant crisis. Teaching theory is like bleaching native literatures of their

indigenous colour and texture with the strong and corrosive polemic of approaches that originated for a greater part in the West and is not very accommodating for instance to the apolitical thrust of most Eastern art. It was the drive towards scientific analysis and later a professionalism fuelled by rampant Capitalism that made literature departments "create professional standards to match those of their scientific (and economic) competitors". Conditions that developed originally in the departments of Science and Commerce led to what Kaufmann erroneously describes as "the *discipline's condition of possibility from the start*". He further sees Lit. theory and 'specialization' as going hand in hand in helping to create "more schools of thought... more specialists ... and new areas of concentration..." Like modern medicine, modern literature departments have entrusted the sick body of literature to analytical prosthesis where each specialist looks 'for' (rather than 'at') maladies that suit his or her particular taste and area of research. This metaphor of pathology for the study of literature is forwarded by theory to effectively "strengthen the position of literature departments" which are like specialized infirmaries where great 'works' become mere 'texts' that lie "etherized on a surgeon's (teacher's) table". Kaufmann himself betrays a sense of this pathological condition when he mentions the "recent and pernicious growth of specialization" as if specialization itself is the disease.. Leitch too at the end of his article on the "end"(read ends and endings) of theory refers to theory in its present avatar as a " new viral form responsive to its time and place ...an opportunist, changeling".

In his discussion of corporatization of academics and the "institutionalization of theory" in a "new orthodoxy" Leitch points to the role of "Theory Incorporated" in employment, research and publication:

...a holding company but a company with an eye toward the future. Fashion and market models have sprung to the fore from the anxious unconscious of late Capitalist times and theory appears a niche market with fashions coming and going. Graduate students, in particular, wonder and frequently ask, Who is in? Who is out? What are the latest trends? (Leitch 126)

He vilifies "theory brokers" and speculators in the "academic business" who aid "calculated investments and disinvestments (which) reify and commodify theory" [parenthesis mine] (Leitch 126). In this he nearly echoes Kaufmann who seems to have anticipated many of the later critiques of theory. It is difficult to imagine who is implicated by that charge if not us. Theoretical trends determine to a large extent the kind of books that get recognition and critical applause which then paves their way to the academy. This in turn sets off a chain of quasi-creative events in the shape of literary praxis. Students at the universities too, respond by being all too eager to "enter into a highly politicized and anti-literary academic culture" (Benton 78 quoted in Goodman on p.110) The rage of Diaspora writing in the past two decades owes its spectacular success to Post-colonial and post-modern theory so much so that it became almost a fiction writing formula. Other instances of such theory induced phenomena, to name a few are the mushrooming of departments such as South East Asian studies, Cultural studies, and Film Studies departments that seem to grant easier access to research funding and publication than home grown literature departments.

The incriminating economic implications of theory seem to be going far back beginning with Knapp and Michael's well known attack on theory in its hey days. W.J.T. Mitchell commenting on the same observes: "The challenge is not just to a way of thinking and writing but to a way of *making a living*". Knapp and Michael too hope that "If accepted...our arguments would indeed *eliminate the career option* of writing and teaching theory". Kaufmann begins his very useful essay by drawing attention to the "*biggest growth industry* in literary studies" and the "*lush efflorescence* of theory" (Kaufmann 519-20). There remains little doubt as to the fact that a large part of the hatred felt for theory was owing to its being a "financially thriving minority", one which grew steadily in influence and domination like the hapless Jews of the Holocaust going on to wrongfully occupy a nation which was never theirs besides controlling world politics and finance deviously. The comparison needs to be taken seriously given both Theory's and the Jew's (hypothetical or otherwise) ability to recreate/distort/concoct reality by recasting information along viciously political lines. Theory claims for itself from and despite literature the "promised land" (a territory it has promised unto itself); a centrality built on its own self referential surface with no looking beyond and no looking within. The theoretical project is a failure of the imagination, of the Image of a Nation (Zion), of literature and literariness. It is Israel versus Zion. The former hard won by political and ideological manipulation while the other a still dearer loss of faith and hope. Materialism/Idealism/Rhetoric versus Myth, Poetry and Fable.

Kaufmann's essay points to the "intellectual gang warfare" raging about on the "politicization of literary studies" occasioned by the questions of theory. Having asked the very important question - "How does literary theory wedded to radical politics expect to intervene in the power structures of the academy and the state"? (519) - he goes on to inform us that "theory itself has become reified" (521). At best, theory seems to be embroiled in a "politics of convenience" whereby it "maintains the divisions among the faculties while seeming to overcome it, attacks specialization while capitalizing on its privileges...indicating, through the future tense that it will be a long time before critique actualizes outside the academy" (524). Kaufmann in his final analysis seems to have quite clearly demonstrated the double dealing role of literary theory in academics and claiming that "theoretical intervention works for several masters..." including those that it sometimes "seeks to overcome". The necessity of "alliance politics" that Fredric Jameson spoke of way back in the early eighties in the context of the development of the American Left applies equally to the theoretical project which has seen the various schools of theory grow increasingly tolerant of each other and the umbrella term that clubs them all together i.e. 'Theory' with a capital 'T'. Leitch validates this after about two decades: "At the turn of the twenty first century, many branches of newer movements and schools have gathered together *more or less willingly*, under the capacious banner of cultural studies" (122).

The structuring of most literary curricula across the world is affected by these developments in one way or the other. The 'rise of theory' in the west and its consequences in the English speaking academia of the colonized nations in the East and elsewhere are more than evident, so much so, that literature departments even in native languages lapped up these half baked morsels of critical theory and methodology. Though one cannot deny the fact that many of these theoretical approaches to literature

do make reading a more rewarding experience for some readers one cannot at the same time fail to notice that there is a theoretical overkill especially in the English departments in India and abroad. It seems now that literature is second only to theory while in some places we are moving towards a near replacement of the former by the latter to the extent that the university teachers spend most of the time dwelling upon the theoretical approaches to a particular text. Lorien Goodman laments theory's lack of focus when she points out: "literary texts (are) cherry-picked to illustrate the (theoretical) approach. The intention (is) to cover the wide range of available approaches...on the theory itself rather than on its purpose, its dialectical relationship with literature" (111). It seems that the author being long dead it is now high time that the 'text' too should suffer the same fate. 'Anything but the text' and 'what's text got to do with it?' seem to be the new critical slogans of our times. Goodman, who teaches literary theory to undergraduates confesses: "Many readings appear excessive...overly reliant on dense vocabulary of jargon, and more enthralled by the theory itself than by the literary text being read".

Jargon based lectures drawing heavily from other 'disciplines' (especially philosophy, psychology and it could even be nuclear physics before we know it with upstart critics trying to woo an audience with/dapper theoretical and interdisciplinary parameters) are now the staple in most university settings. Though it is almost impossible to regress to a post lapsarian word of innocence and live again a life in apposition with nature (our true nature which is not language but imagination) it is nevertheless worth the trouble to revisit the past as if in a retelling of the myth of Perseus and Medusa where the threatening and muddled head of literary creation (read imagination) is severed from its equally monstrous and slithering/shifting base (read experience) by the keen blades of reflection generated by a medium as adamant as a theoretical approach.

Creativity, it seems, has abdicated to criticism in looking to the latter for the rites of passage (and survival) in a world riddled with hermeneutic paths on which the juggernauts of theory constantly crash and burn but never die out despite their rumored fall from grace. Encountering the frustrating opacity and amorphousness of theorists one recalls Jonathan Swift's jibe at the literary critics of his times wherein he claims to be most profound when he is least understood (Swift 20). In the class room theory serves largely as 'shock and awe' to begin with and by the time one reaches the threshold of disillusionment and frustration with regard to theory it has already percolated into the deepest recesses of one's academic and professional life even to the extent of being an addiction one wants to kick away.

Theory's "tendency to generate into dogma" is highlighted by Leroy Searle who commenting on the "mechanical" aspect of theory calls it "a toolbox of methods" (1253). The analogy of a 'toolbox' is apt and could be developed further. It is also significant in terms of reading theory as the means of dismantling literature in a bid to see what it is made of. The attempt is to be resisted in that what it seeks to 'dismantle' is more of an organism than a machine. There is a steady increase in the made for effect, mad hatter, cross-disciplinary positions vying rabidly for theo-critical novelty in what is only a semblance of literature with outdated organic components like story, plot, characterization, meaning and intention being replaced by a host of 'isms' and jargonated discourse serving as automated prosthetic limbs - more efficient perhaps but incapable of

innovation. The new breed of academicians and literary critics (the two terms are more or less interchangeable) have come to live increasingly practical, conventional and institutionalized lives despite their apparently unconventional and highly intellectual approaches to literature and life. Theory in the academic circles has also facilitated what one may playfully refer to as “bitching about literature” with every Tom Dick and Harry hold back and forth on a racist Conrad, a sexist Milton or even a surprisingly Victorian Dickens.

The pre-condition to be empowered by a theory is to be over-powered by that theory, in word or in deed. Living by a theory is very different from making a living by Theory. Most theories only serve (in real life experience) as facile resistance in the routine critical stand-offs of academic life. If the life blood of literature is the imagination then suspicion qualifies as that which sustains theory. Goodman voices the “prevailing sentiment...that theory somehow kills literature...as though a novel or a poem were a frog pinned down in a dissection tray” (110). A very contrary thesis could see theory as if by logic (not magic) transforming the teacher into a poet/author who never ‘actually’ writes poetry or fiction in his or her capacity as a teacher except of course ‘in theory’. Teaching then becomes “authoring a text or decoding a message”. In celebrating the greatness of “choosing ‘text’ over ‘work’”, Wellinsky mistakenly or sarcastically refers to Shakespeare's play (one is still tempted to call it that) *Romeo and Juliet* as “the great work”. This is hardly amusing as it still points to a central dictum of theory which is to watch all literature with suspicion if not derision so that ‘work’ is something that makes you slog while ‘text’ is only something that you can cut, copy, paste, quote or cite without any infringement of copyright. When Wellinsky says Shakespeare's “great work” he is of course only tickling poor old Shakespeare's ‘texticles’ in the light of the theory that all of the bard’s plays were authored by someone else.

Short of paying oneself the compliment of being the true author/poet of the text (the theorist/teacher has this queer knack for trivializing anything from an epic to a sentence in his favorite theory book to a tag called ‘text’) the teacher/theoroid does nothing really to not show that he is at least re-writing the poem in many different ways so as to make it mean a good many different things. This brings to one's mind the long forgotten image of the friendly biology lab hydra which is relevant here in visually representing what happens to the real poem (only ‘a poem’ to begin with) being flipped over in a series of daft interpretive moves to be split up into many poems floating in a student’s head like the fully bloomed tentacled flower of theoretical reproaches (approaches actually). One can now well appreciate what the title of Wellinsky's encomium to theory means when it declares “Teaching literature is teaching (only-) in Theory”. So if teaching literature according to Wellinsky is not really teaching then what is it? Of course he clarifies; it is “also a pointer”. It “uses theory to focus the students' minds, getting them to *attend to specific aspects* of the text...” The students of literature then learn from theory to focus on and be attentive to faults in literary practice while they “attend” to theory and theory alone. Theory then functions as Zizek proposes in his film *The Pervert’s Guide to Cinema* “not by giving us that which we desire, but by *teaching us how to desire*” (qtd. in Flisfeder 82)[italics mine].

Displacing a grand narrative of literature by a grand narrative of theory makes sense in an age which has seen a major shift from an earlier creative aesthetic as well as tool of enquiry namely the 'imagination' (a purely human faculty) to the more immediate and pervasive aesthetic of 'information' (now purely based in technology and artificial intelligence). Searle's critique of theory while emphasizing the "function of the imaginative" argues that: "Theory has drawn all its vitality from a commitment to the idea of justice, but assent to that idea only happens imaginatively" (1254). Simply put, writing about literature is theory. However, it is only pertinent to think what writing about literature does to literature. It makes literature overly 'un-self conscious'. This would become clearer if one imagines a creative writer/novelist/poet trying to deal with his³ version of reality with the super-abundant theories breathing down his neck in the guise of formidable thus worthy patriarchs instructing but never entertaining. That does have consequences for the imagination and the spontaneity of creation. In a way, theory functions (to borrow the feminist phrase) like the 'male gaze' sizing up literature wishing it to be this way or that way without ever being satisfied.

Bhabha speaks of theory as coming "out of the struggle, the anxiety, with the avenging angel within you. It's not an art of equanimity". He candidly describes Institutional/academic interdisciplinary as:

a way of *flaming or garlanding* a particular discipline with another discipline's insights or expertise in order to celebrate the capacious humanism of the humanities. Illustrating your historical theses with references to literature, and then aligning them with a sociological or psychological perspective, *casts an auratic glow around your work*.

Bhabha goes on to discourage the likely emergence of an "imperium of cultural studies", significantly lamenting a homogeneity which is deceptively "pluralistic". Wellinsky in the same vein seems to berate while he only conflates 'literary practice' with the word 'practice' as it figures in a rather trite proverbial usage mistaking it to mean 'repetition'. It is truly ironic that this meaning applies more readily to the theoretical app-roaches that seem to be chirping in chorus from within the hieroglyphics of jargon and terminology etched on to impressionable minds in a hand and an ink as indelible as the tablets of Hamurabi.

At the very end of his article, i.e. just before he starts playing the match maker between literature and theory, Wellinsky finally manages to (only) mention two core problems in the "struggle over theory in the field of literature and English teaching". He mentions "anti-intellectualism" and "academic careerism". I presume the former to be a charge against those who are not for theory while the latter I understand to incriminate those who wish to use theory as means of career advancement in academic departments that seem to be lapping up morsels of theory being tossed at them from abroad. I leave

³ The most unintentional use of the male pronoun is enough to provoke a feminist tirade against a male writer notwithstanding the encumbrance or hypocrisy masquerading as political correctness in most academic circles.

the latter charge to be answered by those who are onboard the theory express. The former charge I feel is easily answered saying that if being against theory is understood as being anti-intellectual then the charge itself rests on a very precarious and narrow understanding of the word 'intellectual'.

Leitch's "rhizomatous studies model" explains a lot of what has been and is still going wrong with the academic side of literary studies. The greater visibility of research and publication oriented effort has led to a widespread neglect of class room teaching which is leading to what he calls a "knowledge and research (versus teaching)" situation. Leitch's is a rather telling use of parenthesis. Lumina foundation's thought provoking documentary on higher education very aptly titled 'Declining by Degrees' shows instances of students who managed to get good grades despite having little or no interest in studies. When questioned about their typically un-academic attitudes and lifestyles and if they were "beating the system" one student responded by saying that he was simply "manipulating it" by "working with it". With the internet revolution to back them most students can manage with what a professors call "drifting through college" or "sleep-walking", "tread water" and "hang -out" style of undergraduate study. This perhaps is made easier than it ever was because of the contemporary pedagogy's great weakness for terminology, jargon, name dropping, and its theorizing tendencies instead of a solid understanding of fundamentals (which of course requires serious application and interest and definitely not the "do my own thing kind of thing"). One wonders if this really is higher education's "dirty little secret" as a teacher in the documentary calls it or if it is actually the great dividends drawn by pseudo-academics who are "teaching in theory" at the expense of practical class room teaching. Are we already so busy with "the niche marketization of all research areas now scrambling ...for a piece of the future" that we simply do not care. (*Declining by Degrees*)

Mexican novelist, Carlos Fuentes speaks of Soviet Socialism and Cold War Capitalism in terms that could comfortably (to great chagrin of the theorist) be applied to literature and theory in our times. Literary creation in its overt or covert resistance to theoretical colonization (another version of the white man's burden) has in fact brought about the latter's "socialization" or acceptance. This of course has been perceived as a "dynamic surge" of theoretical studies achieved more than often at the expense of literary creation itself. However, "relentless self-criticism" to which Fuentes attributes the success of the Capitalist enterprise can only be understood in the context of theory as the peculiar ability of theory to 'talk about itself' through various convergent and divergent social and cultural media (Fuentes 27). This particular aspect of modern responses to literature are to be seen as essentially different from responses to literature in the preceding centuries which relied on literary synthesis (even in cases of disapproval where disagreement with a literary work was more likely to be expressed creatively – thereby occasioning further literary creation) rather than catalytic, discursive and journalistic mediations into literary works. The ability of literature to ignore and inter theory is now at its lowest.

What theory really does for us is not a very complicated question. We in the academic circles know very well that research in any field more so in English studies is next to impossible without some kind of theoretical framework to pitch one's argument

from. A research paper without a theoretical component would seem 'naive' if not juvenile in a university setting. Theory in fact for the most comes to their rescue as embellishment, while for some it merely adds intellectual mass which could otherwise be lacking but rarely if not exceptionally does it serve as a background/platform for original ideas and thought. It follows thus from the above argument that Theory actually helps 'research' (though only superficially in most cases) and not 'teaching' which is of primary concern to all of us here today. Theory thus functions as a double bind for the student as much as it does for the creative writer in that it threatens as well as rewards, a quintessential stance of power which uses both the threat as well as the reward as modes of exclusion and inclusion.

The great German philosopher poet Wolfgang Goethe clearly saw through Theory's sham when he unequivocally dismissed all theory as "gray" and looked to the "green" tree of life for inspiration. For Goethe practice not only precedes, it also supersedes theory. What is it exactly that we do as students and teachers of English literature? What are our disciplinary aims and limits? What role does literary theory play in achieving these aims? Largely, we teach as we are taught. It is worthwhile here to ask if any of us who now teach literature ever read our first book on literary theory as a matter of choice or if our interest in literature underwent any sort of changes since the time we first did (in college for most of us)? What were our expectations from literature when we immersed ourselves 'naïvely' (we would say now) in story books and tales of fancy and adventure? When was it that we most enjoyed our reading experience? Answers to these questions might come with the realization that we used to either like a book or not like it for some reason or the other but it was after we tasted the fruit of theory growing so freely in this wasteland of knowledge that we learnt how doubt could be rehearsed, criticism (literally) become a way of life, ideologies get the better of ideas, literature become a 'discipline' and creativity become an apprentice to method and market. In the end, as one thinks sadly of the "ism-by-ism approaches supported by theory anthologies like the Norton particularly in undergraduate programs" one does feel inspired to re-write Bob Marley's hugely popular lyrics⁴: "we're sick and tired of your

⁴ Bob Marley's and Peter Tosh's chart buster song *Get Up Stand Up* was released in 1973 by the reggae band *The Wailers* in the album *Burnin'* as a part of his creative protest against the poverty and misery of Haitian life. The actual lyrics are as follows: We sick an' tired of-a your ism-skism game - Dyin' 'n' goin' to heaven in-a Jesus' name, lord. We know when we understand: Almighty god is a living man. You can fool some people sometimes, but you can't fool all the people all the time.

ism-schism game; die and go to Hell in Derrida's name...lol! Do we know when we understand or stand under those mighty words at your command?"

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