Return to the Political

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THE CENTURY IS YOUNG, BUT THE DAYS WHEN WE MAY STILL INDULGE IN THE PORTENTOUS LANGUAGE OF MANIFESTOS ARE NUMBERED. NOSTALGIA will soon set in (bliss was it in that millennial dawn to be alive, but to be a literary theorist was very heaven). If I wish to formulate, with programmatic hubris, my slogan for the century, I must rush into print. Here it is: I believe that the task for twenty-first-century literary criticism is a return to the political.

In The Future of Theory, published in 2002 in a series called Blackwell Manifestos, Jean-Michel Rabaté set out with considerable critical acumen the ten current projects of literary theory and what he perceived as its six “important agendas” (a dialogue between Lacanian and Levinian ethics in the context of posthumanism; Alain Badiou’s critique of historicism and reassessment of Gilles Deleuze’s philosophy; readings of Nietzsche and Heidegger in the context of bioethics; a Derridian rethinking of technology as science and art; Jean-Luc Nancy’s and Giorgio Agamben’s insights into historical communities in the wake of Maurice Blanchot and Georges Bataille; and a confrontation between Eastern and Western logos [148–49]). In the last seven years, literary criticism may or may not have followed those paths, but what strikes me is both the importance of ethics (which gets pride of place) and the almost disappearance of politics, which, expelled through the front door, seeks to reenter, in disguise, through the windows offered by Badiou, Nancy, and Agamben. Gone are the days of committed literature and critique engagée, whether in the optimistic shape of Bertolt Brecht or Georg Lukács or in the pessimistic form of Theodor Adorno. What is striking is the complete, and almost explicit, disappearance of any reference to Marxism, which is also signally absent from the ten current projects, with the possible exception of a Benjaminian “Arcades project.”

This is no surprise. Literary criticism is not immune to the wider context. Marx died with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the waning of communism, and with his death the surfeit of politics that had grievously affected the previous generation was cured. It was not the first...
time, however, that Marx died and was resurrected, and the historical conjuncture of 2010 is not the same as that of 1999, or 2002 for that matter. The year 1999 marked the apex of what I have called the “Habermas conjuncture” (59–62), a mixture of postcommunism and post-Nazism, involving a conversion to Kantian republicanism and an ironic philosophy of language based on the cooperation implicit in interlocution. Twenty years, three imperialist wars, and a world recession later, that conjuncture is now behind us, and we have to wake up from the sweet dreams of a globalization of the rights of man thanks to the exportation of representative democracy through humanitarian interference. The humanitarian mask hiding blatant imperialist aggression and the massacre of the world by an aggressive form of capitalism has fallen, the George W. Bush parenthesis is finished, and we must recover from the hangover a surfeit of ethics has given us. The ideological tenets of neoliberalism (generalized contractualism; the primacy of ethics, especially from the point of view of the victim; individualism, methodological and ethical; and the restriction of politics to identity politics) no longer form the inevitable structure of a pensée unique. The time has come once again to realize that politics, in its collective and agonistic aspects, is the form our being together as a society takes, that literature cannot help being concerned with it, and that literary criticism must take these facts into account.

To take a single example, diasporic criticism, justly identified by Rabaté as one of the ten current projects of literary theory, can no longer be content—as it still is even in its most advanced forms, as in the work of Françoise Kral—with dealing with what Arjun Appadurai, its favorite theorist, calls “the diaspora of hope” (6), the literary form of which is the identity problems and linguistic tribulations of petit bourgeois immigrants who have reached the imperialist center by buying a plane ticket (from Salman Rushdie to Jhumpa Lahiri, from Gish Jen to Monica Ali). The real problem is to give a voice to a much larger diaspora, the diaspora of despair, those thousands of voiceless immigrants who often die trying to cross the Mexican border or to reach Europe on fast-sinking boats—the diaspora of the sans papiers, for whom identity trouble and linguistic difficulties are the least of their problems.

Much as I admire the Brechtian stance, I am not advocating a return to the old form of political criticism. I am calling, with programmatic hubris, for a new one. Traces of a new paradigm can be found in the moments when contemporary French philosophers take literature into account not as a minor aesthetic diversion but as a field of knowledge central to their philosophical concerns. Let me indicate briefly four possible paths.

Alain Badiou’s systematic philosophy identifies four fields in which events occur and procedures of truth are established: politics, art, science, and love. The task of philosophy is not to produce truths but to “compossibilize”—to think together—the truths that emerge in those fields (65). This activity establishes a link between literature, whose task is to evoke the traces of a vanished event (Mallarmé), the denial of a present event (Rimbaud), and the waiting for an event that is to come (Beckett), and politics, by which Badiou means the politics of fidelity to the emergence of the revolutionary historical event and, in day-to-day militancy (since historical events are few and far between), indefatigable advocacy of the rights of the sans papiers.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s Kafka develops the concept of “minor literature.” Such a literature deterritorializes the major dialect, and everything in it is directly political (there is no individual story or history) and collective (there is no individualism, methodological or ethical). Reading Kafka’s work against the grain of our usual understandings and literary common sense, Deleuze and Guattari show that it possesses those
characteristics. Again, the politics here evoked has nothing to do with the politics of identity.

Jacques Rancière’s radical concept of democracy is well known (it goes as far as suggesting that leaders be appointed by the drawing of lots), as is his distinction between police and the political (Politics). What interests me here is his concept of literature as democracy in language: a democracy of subject matter (with the aesthetic revolution that gave birth to literature, one can write about everything: one of Rancière’s most engaging traits is his admiration for Wordsworth), of genre (one is not constrained by the classical genres), and of language (any word or phrase may be used in a work of literature). Literature has three “modes of expression” that are linked to the three forms of democracy: the equality of subjects (everybody may be a writer of a work of literature or a hero in one), of objects in the world (everything may become the object of a literary text), and of states of affairs (every experience or mood, every intensity of feeling may be captured by literature [Politique]). Here the link between politics, in the form of radical democracy, and literature becomes constitutive.

Guillaume Le Blanc is a philosopher who aims to develop a definition of a decent life and a critique of précarité, or precarious living—a state that is part of daily political life in France in these neoliberal times (Vies). The critique of précarité is based on the concept of an ordinary life, of a life that is normal, subjected to norms, but in which the subject is free to play creatively with the norms. They are negotiated by means of style: style is the form that the counterinterpellation of the norms by the interpellated subject takes, an expression of the subject’s freedom within but also against the norms. In this theory, poetry is a heightened form of style (though style goes far beyond literature). Poetry subverts the norms insofar as they are embedded in language and allows the subject to play with them. In a telling formula, Le Blanc calls poetry “a window opening on the norms,” a way of seeing them as what they are, as not inescapably constraining but full of loopholes, through which the subject can escape and find freedom (Maladies 75). This goes beyond a Romantic theory of poetry insofar as it introduces politics (a concept of justice, of normal life, and a critique of the indecency of precarious life) into the theory of literature.

Encouraged by those four critical projects, I shall, reverting to the language of manifestos, offer a modest proposal for a return to the political in the form of five propositions.

Proposition 1 (a banal and general start). Literature is the art of language. Language is not only the material but also the object of literature. The eternal task of literary criticism is to make sure that the texts placed under the rubric of literature are texts of which language is the material and the object—texts that are written, in the strong sense of the word. Philip Pullman practices the art of language, not so J. K. Rowling.

Proposition 2. There are two ways of considering language, insofar as it is embodied in natural languages: as a system in the Saussurean sense of langue (from which we can derive a formalist concept of literature) and as a conception of the world.

Proposition 3. That language is a conception of the world is the central tenet of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci’s philosophy of language (Lecercle 156–58; Tösel 195–221). A natural language thus defined is the site of the sedimentation of common sense, of the construction of a good sense (the distinction between good and common sense is a characteristic feature of Gramsci’s concept of language), of the full prise de conscience in which the work of the concept consists. Those concepts can be correlated in the following manner: common sense, good sense, philosophical criticism; cliché and archetype, myth and slogan, concept; feeling, understanding, knowledge. The task of literature, a political task, is to help the masses emerge from their
sedimented common sense, a matter of feeling, into the good sense of the myths that will move them to action, an action based on an understanding of the situation, with the help of the knowledge provided by science and philosophical concepts.

Proposition 4. Literature can achieve that political task because it captures the three time periods involved in the political and also in the linguistic conjuncture: the past of history and common sense sedimented in language; the present of the emerging hegemony of the future dominant class, as well as the present of emerging language; and the utopian future of language and society.

Proposition 5. I am proposing not a return to the old Marxist concept of literature as a reflection of the historical, political, and linguistic conjunctures but an active concept of literature as an intervention in them.

Gone are the days of committed criticism, gone also the days of formalist criticism (structuralism is behind us). The limitations of poststructuralist and postmodernist criticism are now obvious. The time has come indeed for a return to the political.

WORKS CITED


