THE LURE AND THE RESISTANCE: ON PAUL DE MAN'S CONCEPT OF RESISTANCE TO THEORY

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Abstract:

Literary theory gains its significance both as a continuity and as a radical rupture from the New Critical perceptions and methodology. It springs precisely from the contradiction between the theory and practice of new criticism itself. The advent of structuralism created a linguistic awareness into the production, dissemination and reception of texts. Deconstruction operates by disrupting the totalizing gestures of both literary texts and text that deal with literary criticism. Paul de Man's strategy involves a steady troping of all sorts of hermeneutic strategies employed in the text. The resistance encountered by theory is the result of a conflict between the figurality of language and the intention of grammatizing it which is the ultimate aim of theory. When grammar is extended to include the para- figural dimensions of text, the result is a rhetorical residue. According to de Man this phenomenon occurs because there are rhetorical elements in every text that resists total grammatization.

Introduction:

One of the enduring claims of New Criticism is the aesthetic quality of the theory as well as the rich critical discourse that it provides. It is the malleability of the critical discourse that makes New Criticism highly teachable. But this teachability is achieved at the cost of a radical disengagement of the work of art from the means and modes of its production. Michael Payne in his introduction to Terry Eagleton's book, *The Significance of Theory* explains this orientation of New Criticism in the following passage:

> Despite its powerful advantage of being immanently teachable, the New Criticism has proven to be intellectually and politically sterile to those who think that literature is not separable from life but participates instead in an unbreakable whole of what we know and do, as well as what we write. (2)

By denying significance to the complex relationships that exist between a text and its context New Criticism holds the text as a transcendental object. But in the hands of its most ardent practitioners, the New Critical reading has rediscovered the complexity of literature in the text itself. New Critical strategy has always obliterated New Critical theory when the strategy shows the text to be full of ambiguities, paradoxes and thereby least resembling the harmony of an organic entity. New Critical concepts like ambiguity, tension, and paradox deflate the status of the literary work as an entity in itself whereas the notion of the literary work as an entity in itself is one of the cardinal apriori assumptions of New Criticism. On the other hand, there are instances when New Criticism has celebrated the isolation of the text by proposing theoretical modes that conspicuously avoid complexities. For example, M.H. Abrams in his essay "Orientation of Critical Theories," which is the first chapter of *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*, writes about a criterion that could be adopted for choosing an adequate theoretical strategy from the great diversity of literary theories. After observing that the diversity of aesthetic theories distorts and diverges the evolution of a critical point of view, he writes:

> Our first need, then, is to find a frame of reference simple enough to be readily manageable, yet flexible enough so that, without undue violence to any set of statements about art, it will translate as many sets as possible onto a single plane of discourse. (Lodge, 3)

Abrams is trying to evolve a meta-theory which would substantiate as well as incorporate any kind of first-order theory that has a logical as well as adaptable structure. If he succeeds in his attempt, then the product would be a canonized instrument for textual interpretation. Canonized because, the two of the proposed properties, manageability and flexibility, would deny the possibility for a dialectical interaction between first-order theory and a probable meta theory. The totalizing gesture incorporated into any meta- theory undergoes a productive interrogation only when it is challenged by

an antithetical first-order theory. The concepts of manageability and flexibility, when integrated. into a theoretical endeavour would synchronize an otherwise discordant discourse. Abrams' scheme as it evolves in the passage is oriented more towards aesthetics than towards theory.

Attempts to safeguard the hermeneutic strategy from the seemingly detrimental intrusion of theory is a prominent feature of formalist criticism also. The following passage from an essay by Rene Wellek would serve as an example:

> We must return to the task of building a literary theory, a system of principles, a theory of values which will necessarily draw on the criticism of concrete works of art and will constantly invoke the assistance of literary history. But the three disciplines are and will remain distinct: history cannot absorb or replace theory, while theory should not even dream of absorbing history. (Lodge, 562)

Wellek's attempt is to cohabitate practical criticism, literary theory and literary history in such a manner, SO that they would not intrude into one another's arena and create complications as well as complexities. He envisages a peaceful coexistence of literary theory and literary history where each would not problematize the other category. As evidenced by the passage, Wellek is also not concerned about the ideological background of the strategies adopted for "criticism of concrete works of art."

However averse to the context of the work of art it may be, the intense textual adherence of New Criticism reverses its agenda and introduces into it the complexities that are usually not conceived in New Critical theory. As mentioned earlier the New Critical strategy, if followed astutely, reveals the inconsistencies in New Critical theory. As Allen Dunn points out, "New Criticism responds to the theoretical disruption which is inherent in literary studies, but it fails to become theory itself because it turns to cultural and ideological norms in order to deny the contradictions between its truth and method. (358-359)

The advent of structuralism created a linguistic awareness about the production of a text as well as about the production of commentary on a text. The main focus of structuralism was on the bricolage like function of commentary. Roland Barthes in his essay "Criticism as Language" detects the scope of a linguistic analysis of the text and of the commentary on the text:

> The object of criticism is very different; it deals not with "the world," but with the linguistic formulations made by others; it is a comment on a comment, a secondary language or meta-language (as the logicians would say), applied to a primary language (or to language-as-object). (Lodge, 649)

The passage reinforces the distinction between the primary text and secondary text. Primary text is given prominence because as the passage indicates it is the primary text that acts as the cause for the secondary text. The secondary text is twice removed from reality because it deals not with the world but with the linguistic formulations made by others. The most important feature of the advent of structuralism is that the structuralists perceived criticism as a formal and logical activity and not as an aesthetic activity. This is evident when Barthes concludes that, "In this respect too, then, criticism is an essentially formal activity, not in the aesthetic, but in the logical sense of the term" (Lodge, 650). In addition to the conferring of a logical as well as formal status on literary criticism, structuralism also eschews a mere semantic commentary and accepts the structural qualifications of signification. As Eugene Goodheart points out:

> In the New Criticism, theory remained in the background, as a tactful regulator of the activity of practical criticism. In structuralism, theory created the tasks and defined the procedures for practical criticism. And the most important difference was that structuralism changed or tried to change the goal of literary study from the interpretation of the meanings of literary works to the knowledge of the conditions of meaning. (5)

By deleting the aesthetic claims and pretensions of literary theory, structuralism submitted it to a formal logic which included various extra-literary disciplines as well. With the entry of structuralism literary theory was forced to account for its relationship to various other subjects like history, anthropology, psychology and linguistics.

Not defining theory and not facing the consequences of conceptual aberrations present in the definition of theory is also a way of dodging the problematics of theory. Hence theory has to be defined. It could be argued that theory involves an introspection and the insight that it provides has the potential to redefine as well as to transform the activity that has generated the theoretical endeavour. Let us examine a definition of theory offered by Terry Eagleton:

> Theory is just a human activity bending back upon itself, constrained into a new kind of self-reflexivity. And in absorbing this self-reflexivity, the activity itself will be transformed, as the production of literature is altered by the existence of literary criticism. (27)

Theory, as it is described in the above-mentioned passage, has the potential to destabilize as well as preserve social life. In terms of textual interpretation theory has the potential to destabilize as well as preserve the various claims forwarded by the text. Theory is also perceived by Eagleton as a historical event which reflects back upon history. Theory

can also be a mela-theoretical construct which reflects on theory itself. Thus, theory has to engage itself in a ceaseless dialectic with literary history as well as theory itself. Eagleton's stress is on the emancipatory aspect of theory. The passage cited endows theory with the advantage of self-reflexivity and thus attributes to it the ultimate capacity to define, analyse, and categorize the content of a work of art or of the subjectivity involved in it. This happens because self- reflexivity or introspective insight is considered to be the highest virtue of a philosophical discourse. If the argument that sustains emancipatory theory is furthered, then it would be possible to rely on theory to produce the ultimate meta-theory that would have universal applicability.

The question of the reliability of theory can be approached from two different angles. As Christopher Norris points out, at one extreme is the view point offered by Gadamerian hermeneutics which points out that "each and every act of understanding is embedded in a context of cultural meanings and presuppositions which can never be exhausted by rational explanation" (1). This point of view rejects the possibility of evolving a theoretical framework that would stay independent of the cultural conditioning and would be able to scrutinize the cultural context. Interpretation of the text would become an entry into the hermeneutic circle offered by the cultural context that has engendered the text. Theory is denied the status of an ideal vantage-point. At the other extreme of the position adopted by Hans-Georg Gadamer is the concept of the "ideal speech situation" propounded by Jurgen Habermas. According to Christopher Norris the concept implies that "Thought can indeed transcend its rootedness in cultural tradition and attain a stand point of rational self-understanding from which to criticise "commonsense" ideas" (2).

The scope of deconstruction can be ascertained only in the background of a pervasive cultural context which has the potential to drown any critical narrative that is caught in the web of ideology. With respect to the domain of literary theory, ideology often appears in the guise of a meta- narrative or grand theory. The problematics of reading generated by deconstruction has the potential to disrupt any totalizing gesture on the part of literary criticism.

According to Jacques Derrida, "What is called or calls itself "deconstruction" also contains, lodged in some moment of its process, an auto-interpretive figure which will always be difficult to subsume under a meta- discourse or general narrative. (Memoires 13). It is the auto-interpretive figure of deconstruction that tends to be disruptive when faced with the claims of a grand narrative. Such a disruption is the only act by which one can distinguish the ideological pattern at play within the text. By resorting to a rhetorical as well as figural reading of texts deconstruction infects the grammatical authority posed by ideology. In the following passage Christopher Norris points out how deconstruction deals with the ruptures in ideology as they manifest through a text:

Philosopy has tended to bypass the problems of coming to terms with its own textual or rhetorical constitution. Literary theory (at least since the advent of deconstruction) has made these problems its peculiar concern, and in this sense has moved into regions of enquiry closed off to "philosophy" as such. (11)

A deconstructive reading does not take place according the grammatical norms of philosophy or logic. It seeks out the semantic as well as structural impasses in a text with the intention of evolving an inconsistent conceptual bearing in the text. As a critical strategy deconstruction looks for breaks, slippages and contradictions which would reveal the dominant ideology that a text partakes. By empowering itself with a rhetorical instead of a semantic strategy deconstruction can recognize the power structure of a text.

The deconstructive strategy evolved by Paul de Man involves a steady troping of the hermeneutic strategy employed in different modes of literary criticism. He reveals the aesthetic orientation of various critical theories and thus paves way for the blurring of the boundary between text and commentary. In his close reading of texts his strategy resembles that of the new critics but the mode of close reading employed by de Man upsets the established new critical premises. Gregory S. Jay examines the main point of difference between the New Critical method and de Man's critical strategy in the following passage:

For the New Critics; literary ontology centred itself in those "ambiguities" or "paradoxes" that Cleanth Brooks named as constituting literary Language as such. De Man tropes "paradox" with "aporia," a term for textual impasses which resist the unifying hermeneutics of formalism, aestheticism, ideology, and onto-theology. (Jay,124)

The method adopted by de Man for troping the established canons of literary theory with aporia is not the method of theorizing about theory but a method which consists of close textual exegesis. De Man does not bring into his reading the conceptual problematics of ontology, metaphysics, anthropology or psychology as the starting point of theory. De Man's reading involves an inversion of the traditional pairs of grammar/rhetoric, literal/figural, reading/ misreading and blindness/insight. The rhetorical mode of a text tropes its grammatical pattern so as to introduce the element of undecidability in the process of signification. The conservative stability of grammaticality is toppled by the play of rhetoric. The literal mode of signification or the truth-claim of language is given up for a semantically disruptive figurality which is recognized by de Man as the essential truth regarding language. Every reading is conceived as a misreading which would unravel the gaps in the ideology of the text and what was conceived as instances of insight are recognized hitherto as being the blind-spots that generate a discourse. Blindness is viewed in terms of a linguistic predicament which

is inevitable when a reading has to confront the figurality of language. What a strong misreading ultimately reveals is the absence or "lack" as the core of linguistic activity. As Juliet Flower MacCannel observes, "If de Man could have been said to have any "value of values" it lay exclusively in a principle of contradiction, non-ground of the lack of identity" (MacCannel, 63).

Paul de Man's essay "The Resistance to Theory" deals with the disruptive power of theory as well as with the rhetoric of resistance that is inbuilt in any theoretical narrative. De Man's view is that different approaches to literature achieve their totalizing power by means. of "an apriori conception of what is "literary" by starting out from the premises of the system rather than from the literary thing itself if such a "thing" indeed exists" (5). Paradoxically enough the common element that unites these diverse theoretical approaches is their shared resistance to theory. The term theory in de Man's use of it distinguishes itself from the other approaches to literature by its adherence. to linguistic considerations. De Man writes:

> Literary theory can be said to come into being when the approach to literary texts is no longer based on non-linguistic, that is to say historical and aesthetic, considerations or, to put it somewhat less crudely, when the object of discussion is no longer the   meaning or the value but the modalities of production and of reception of meaning and of value prior to their establishment- the implication being that this establishment is problematic enough to require an autonomous discipline of critical investigation to consider its possibility and its status. (7)

As evident from the passage cited de Man eschews historical and aesthetic considerations that tempt theory to exist non-problematically. A historical interpretation of a work of art considers its meaning in a specific historical context and an aesthetic interpretation is concerned with the value of the work of art as a thing of beauty. But the foundation of the two considerations which are the concepts of meaning and value are by themselves highly complex and deserves deep examination. The text has to be interpreted not for meaning and value that it is believed to exude but at the precise juncture of the modality of production of meaning as well as value. It is the modalities. of production of value and meaning that should be attributed priority in a critical endeavour. Historicist criticism would blur the status of the literary entity by positing on it a pre-figural mode of understanding. The historicist project thus comes to share a basically aesthetic orientation and thus fails to fulfil the rigor of a linguistic analysis.

The essay "The Resistance to Theory" also analyses the concept of "literariness" which is traditionally used to distinguish the language of literature from everyday use of language. De Man feels that the concept of literariness has been constantly misappropriated by attributing aesthetic qualities to it. The traditional definition of literariness is based on the establishment of an existential relationship between the signifier and the signified. But according to de Man, literariness is the product of the rhetoricity of language and not of its aesthetic orientation. It is the tropological nature of signification that creates a semblance of a responsible pronouncement on the world. De Man writes:

> It is a rhetorical rather than aesthetic function of language, an identifiable trope (paranomasis) that operates on the level of the signifier and contains no responsible pronouncement on the nature of the world despite its powerful potential to create the opposite illusion. (10)

Literariness is thus the knowledge about the unreliability of linguistic utterance that can be only negatively perceived in literature. It is also the knowledge, again transmitted negatively, of the seductive power of aesthetics. The mimetic definition of literariness is also a trope which has the potential to create the illusion that literature contains a reliable pronouncement on the world. To conclude, literature is a reliable source of information not about the external world but about its own mode of signification. Theory is significant when it explores the modalities of the production of this negative knowledge. The possibility of the perception of ideological aberration lies in the application of linguistic theory to the language of literature. Such an application of theory frees the discourse on literature from naive oppositions between fiction and reality.

After having outlined the orientation of theory de Man points out the various aspects of a theoretical discourse that has a potential to evoke a resistance to theory itself. He writes:

> It upsets rooted ideologies by revealing the mechanics of their workings; it goes against   a   powerful philosophical tradition of which aesthetics is a prominent   part; it upsets the established canon of literary works and blurs the borderlines between literary and non-literary discourse. By implication, it may also reveal the links between ideologies and philosophy. (11)

Theory has the capacity to reveal the containment strategy adopted by the literary text. In doing so it evokes a resistance from its own discourse which is guided by the dominant ideology. Further, theory intrudes into the claims of aesthetics by revealing the underlying figurality of language. It also has the potential to reveal the role of ideology in the grammaticality of a logical or philosophical discourse.

The causes that activate a resistance, mentioned so far are partly historical and partly based on a crude misunderstanding of the function of language. Above such causes de Man perceives a linguistic cause that instigates a resistance towards theory. This resistance is the result of a conflict between the figurality of language and the intention of grammatizing it which is the ultimate aim of theory. When grammar is extended to include the para- figural dimensions of text, the result is a rhetorical residue. According to de Man this phenomenon occurs because there are rhetorical elements in every text that resists total grammatization. De Man writes:

> The argument can be made, however, that no grammatical decoding, however refined, could claim to reach the determining figural dimensions of text. There are elements in all texts that are a by no means ungrammatical, but whose semantic function is not grammatically definable, neither in themselves nor in context. (15-16)

Resistance to theory is definable in this context as a built- in constituent of theoretical discourse itself. Resistance to theory is a resistance to reading as well.

The resistance offered to theory can occur either as a crude misunderstanding of the role of theory or as the ultimate predicament that structures as well as delimits a theoretical discourse. Examples for both these instances can be found in the new critical practice of close reading. We have started from the instances of crude resistance to theory by taking examples from New Criticism to conclude with de Man that "Nothing can overcome the resistance theory since theory is itself the resistance" (19).

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