

Below is part two of the piece about Lyte, the literary theorist at Kronk University, Ontario, begun in our last issue. As it goes on, it becomes—I don't think anyone can deny—increasingly, though intermittently, obscure. The harder its author—who seems to be one of Lyte's students—struggles to explain his (or perhaps her) hatred of this perfectly ordinary, and professionally unexceptional man, the more entangled his expression becomes. This seems to me wholly understandable and at least partly forgivable. I should think that listening, irritably, to a lot of literary theory, knowing you've got to learn it, reproduce it and be marked on the result, is likely to have one or two queer effects. I don't much object to the entanglement and obscurities myself but, thinking that other readers might, I have asked the author to supply a new, plainer version. If he ever does, and it seems an improvement, I shall either follow or replace the present version with it. Ed.

Theory and Tradition II

It is a fact that at Ontario's provincial universities professors normally attend departmental meetings. More often than not, when I desire an audience with any professor of standing, the secretary will relay this message: "He is attending a departmental meeting."

What good is being served? Kronk's English professors attend meetings in the fluorescent-lit students lounge shuffled midst their offices. The door to one room in particular sports one of the few frames that could be said to be functional, and what's more its pane opens into the mystic congestion of A-Block. Every so often professors sit at a paper tablecloth, the coffee service at the head of the table pours, heraldry consists in the inspirational posters left and right: Garfield and Odie, representative Group of Seven lithographs, the past but still commercial shades of the Stratford and Shaw festivals, decorative borders, banners, *etcetera*. Some well-intentioned undergraduate may have chalked the motto "Grad School Rocks!" on the blackboard. When students stand at the door looking in on the progress of a meeting, faculty members rear a face, noting for an instant the damned permissiveness of that glass. It is, however, the largest and most convenient room for their purposes, doing double duty once in a while for a staff party—but it is hardly a functional lounge. More like a small conference room with varying settings and degrees of informality. English students head to the seventh floor of the library, drink coffee in the commons (exceedingly common); some still condescend to congregate under the "The Butt Stops Here" sign and drop ash into the few legal ash

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trays. In the so-called lounge a handful of recognizable students complain (informally) that there is not much to be done by way of conversation, or else they gossip, get picked up or left off. Other students discuss joining on-campus societies, the television, or the television-as-life. A journal is spasmodically brought to press. Few know how or why.

“How’s it going?” says Lyte. The hapless pupil carrying *The Great Tradition* confides, “It could be better.” “Could it? Could it?” he decries. He provides the means; they provide the ends (and are graded accordingly). What sort of participation should we encourage? Will it be worth the standard 10%? Yes, so long as the students kindly fill the fill-in-the-blank teacher evaluation.

Was it after leaving a particularly sobering meeting that Lyte wrote, “many departments are divided between”? He cites no sources so we are left to imagine his experience. How *do* the divisions of the sort he describes present themselves? Perhaps his quotation marks around “theory people” are proper. Perhaps he was called names. Did he muster up the colloquial equivalent of his article—“I’ll fix *you*”? He cites no sources so we can only imagine. Lyte seems (instead of betraying a source?) to pan the low-down of a few dozen acquaintances. “Never alone did Caesar sigh/ But with a general groan.” Perhaps he figures on the trends in capital E education, or the latest in capital P pedagogy. But it is not satisfying, this crock of ideological frameworks and palaver of theoretical views no more substantial than the grocery list of “good introductions” and “major movements” he appends to his article. This sort of publicizing is the same scaffold, represent/value, we noted earlier, but now, as a mode of power. Let us say that Lyte’s favorite phrase is also his idea, his germ: “*every position is a privileged position.*” It is Lyte’s privilege that he lobbies for a special interest. “A people is nature’s detour to arrive at six or seven great men—and then get around them,” says Nietzsche, in *Beyond Good and Evil*.

If we are confident that Lyte is representative of his next men, his “theory people”, then let us say that together they constitute a conflagration of incorporated liberals who will boast of a revolutionary mandate and persist in *celebrating their diversity* despite all accounts of their homogeneous and seditious work. This opinion is substantiated, in part, by way of Lyte’s website. Besides “The Continuing and New Mandates of English Studies” (undated), there are web pages “On The Uses of Studying Literature” (1996) and on “The difference between Literary Criticism, Literary Theory, and ‘theory itself’” (1998). The mandate document begins with what English departments “have long been charged with”. “By who?” we might ask, as Lyte slips into something more comfortable.

The mandate of English studies then was to chart the history of literature, to preserve and clarify works of the past, to continually reinterpret the literature of the past in terms of the knowledge, anxieties and understandings of the present, and to school young people in the wonders of

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the intricate and powerful uses of language and form
which canonical works embodied.

So, the privy of English studies was a gift, a *present*, and, listen, the cronies mandating its use, they should know enough to ensure everyone's taking a good long look at *charts* and *terms* if anyone is going to get a bit of relief This invention helps Lyte, his regulating body and his firm grasp, but where did Johnson, Arnold, Leavis and all of them slip off too? And why does Lyte seem so leery of "young people"? How do we grasp that "then was"? In a wreck, do we continue as a matter of course? Current anthologies are understood best as a kind of sieve but isn't it very important to know where English studies are *at*? Governments "school" young people, tending to emphasize the intricacies of power . . . ever had to use Calculus to throw a baseball? No wonder then that the English department seems to be stealing away psychology majors, will-be ad execs and the advertisements-for-myself crowd interested in drawing the sword from the stone so that they might grasp the intricacies of power and start *using*. The stamp of Lyte's prose is a get y'up many students willingly respond to.

What exactly is John Lyte "constantly reinterpreting" for? Possibly for that apparition, the Liberal Arts; but we are likely talking about an administration, or at least a few generations of one in Ontario, happening to flatter his spirit.

Whatever certainty is to be acquired in morality and the sciences of life; just the same degree of certainty have we in what relates to them in works of the imagination.
(Burke, 22)

No, it is not "reinterpretation", which needs no "constantly". It is reiteration. "This mandate remains," Lyte declares, preparing sanctimoniously to curb "the reign of formalist approaches" with the seven key amendments he justifies as alterations "in response to a number of social and cultural changes". After making some alterations and doing a little mending, the mandate suits him, and Lyte can bask in the "questions" to be "problematized" and even calculates a discreet list of appropriately peripheral inquiries, something by way of an approach: *consent*. To those who will with Socrates declare, "know thyself": he is back on his feet and selling you the bridge that spans "the hermeneutic gap between the world of the writer and the world of the reader." You might convince me that the *attitude* is his right, part of the post, but this mandate reads like a mock-up of the constitution (complete with a sacred Bill of Rights). And if this is not anything like listening to Leonard Cohen sing, "I've read the Bill of Rights/ and most of it was good," then it is hardly the "more complex, more socially-located, more historical, more engaged with problems of meaning and interpretation" that's supposed to hatch in Lyte's closing.

If "what is the use" is a question we can at least examine, given

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that professors are still expected to “elucidate” this “wonder” to students, let’s look next at, “On the Uses of Studying Literature”. The direction indicated by the first three paragraphs reads: “engage”, and then “use”, and then “avail”. A list of suggestions on how to work this out in Academe follows. Only the neophyte clutching Lyte’s self-help guarantee could mistake this for what literature is really *for*. The academic aspect of Lyte’s suggestions consists in their division into targets: theses one may easily master. All eight are pretty much self-explanatory; there is however, an interesting inversion in the uniquely bold-faced eighth, “**Looked at as privileging the position of the elite**”, where “the agenda of the privileged classes” becomes “the agenda of the culture” and creates “pseudo-problems” for which it finds “pseudo-solutions”. It is self-effacement. The professor incites his own tendencies (with a Machiavellian wink)—“It’s real social function,” he suggests, “is to keep us quiet, to create false consciousness.” It is *us* he means, and that mark which you think you have in Lyte’s theory class is a little less than worthless unless you can afford his retainer. Now THAT is representation and value for you.

Bon mot— “No criticism is innocent of theory.” This gem has been lifted from “The difference between Literary Criticism, Literary Theory, and ‘theory itself’”. Let those without sin cast the first stone, says the painted Jesus, feeling better now that he has been hoisted onto Judas’s frame. But it’s not make-up. Oh, no.

Theory Itself ... is always one step off, is not to hand for criticism, because it is attempting to assess the assumptions and implications of the demarked space ...

Let’s ignore the nonsense for now, but note Lyte’s prose as pathos, not realizing the words nor the order, a “Pop-o-matic Bubble” that allows the game to continue. “Step off” though, is interesting, insofar as it may be implicit/imperative. The Heavenly Demark *is* tough traffic these days, what with thieving illiterates blasting God (dead), the author (dead), Punk (dead, dead, dead), so why not step, and, oh—what’s the difference?

Our peculiarities have become insipid sameness; our eccentricity servile imagination; our wit, wisdom at second hand; our distinguishing characteristic the want of all character. We are become a nation of authors and readers, and even this distinction is confounded by the mediation of the reviewers. We all follow the same profession, which is criticism, each individual is every thing but himself, not one but all mankind’s epidome, and the gradations of vice and virtue, of sense and folly, of refinement and grossness of character, seem lost in a kind of intellectual *hermaphroditism*. (Hazlitt, “On Modern Comedy”, page 101)

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Perhaps Hazlitt can force our attention to the reality of the situation. But where Hazlitt says, “we all follow that same profession, which is criticism” let’s say that these days every criticism is taken for an opinion, and you are unlikely to find a person that can tell the difference, yes, between sense and folly, despite our greatest professionalism. If Canada isn’t yet a nation of authors and readers it isn’t from lack of trying. These days there are the sallies of the CBC—“Canada Reads”—as well as standard high school literacy tests and curricula endorsing, stupidly, *media* literacy. It is unlikely that anyone noticing the gibberish these triumphs exculpate could be very happy about talking about the state of literacy. Therefore (if we believe in this therefore) criticism may not be a tenable position: one could lose one’s privileges. And a literature made deaf to criticism flounders. When Lyte says, “Literary criticism is fundamentally the estimation of the value of a particular work on such grounds as . . .” he means to say criticism is just another way of playing the field. It *is* unfortunately the province of the naïve. “The word ‘criticism’ has ordinary-use negative connotations, and to an extent that is right: for literary criticism is part of the disciplining of discourse generally” One appeals despairingly to the sciences, which do not seem to be having the same problem with understanding their own discipline. “One patrols the boundaries” It is more than I can bear. What follows is Lyte’s concrete example of literary criticism.

In “The difference between Literary Criticism, Literary Theory, and ‘theory itself’”, Lyte has chosen to examine Edward Garnett and a negligible piece on Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*.

One can simply critique or approve Garnett’s literary criticism and feel that one has done one’s job, but only if one chooses to ignore (or simply fully agrees as not to perceive) the theoretical position(s) on which his reading is based.

What Lyte apparently wants is for us to start with theory, which helps us to understand that one (fully paid) person has done one person’s job. But Lyte simply paraphrases (apparently the literariness was of negligible value in his sole example!) and—in walks the law, guns blazing! Lyte bullets the results: a, b, c, it’s 1, 2, 3 and 4. The next two quotations are the mortal wounds.

Similarly, there is a politics in Garnett’s reading, and a position in relation to imperialism; in fact he claims, and claims it apparently as a strength, that there is no political motivation to the text. This leads us to the perception that Garnett does not read literature of colonization with suspicion, does not think in terms of the language of the Other, does not interrogate imperialist values – or gender values, for another. Reading *Heart of Darkness* in that manner requires of [sic] set of theoretical conceptions and assumptions Garnett did not have.

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What if we preserved the seeming misprint in that final line? “Reading *Heart of Darkness* in that manner requires of us ([for we are] a set of theoretical conceptions and assumptions) [what] Garnett did not have.” Does that work? Or we could just substitute “a” for “of” and make it all better. In any case, if this quotation is not a perfect example of *fully agreeing so as not to perceive* then what is it? Is it “**privileging and maintaining the power of the elite**”? Yes, that too. The question may be whether Lyte deserves to be counted among the elite, now we admit we’re saddled with one, or whether he’s got the position by hook or crook. I do not think the satisfaction he feels when he does the business better than the rest quite covers the territory I am referring to.

Only a certain audience would have read this, why Garnett chose to publish there rather than in the popular press, as well as the title of the publication [Academy and Literature], are themselves important statements about his understanding of what ‘literature’ is and ultimately about what its social functions in society are.

If this is not a perfect example of “mystifying the real construction of society and creating pseudo-problems and pseudo-solutions ... to create false consciousness,” what is? The questions Lyte poses aren’t even rhetorical, they aggravate. They supplant the work of an English Department. Who could object? This is not even theory in practice, unless it has been totally confounded with “its social function”... . Be forewarned, the party-goers of politics lead one to exposing his or her Or in Lyte’s terms: “we are contesting the valuations that criticism makes.” That is, make a contest out of all values. If you are betting on the sure thing, it’s *dominance, dominion*: Theory. The attitude is prejudice: theory is posited as criticism’s better, some sort of orientated Being. No thank-you, we say. Yet there is a public to consider. Lyte has no great public reputation. He has kept up with the times and helps others to do the same. He patronizes Canadian Studies and Pop-Culture, and writes self-effacing “amateur” deconstructionist readings, but for the most part he just introduces and summarizes. Isn’t it nice that this professor will let you know just what his take is on the subject of Bakhtin’s “carnevalesque”, Lacan’s *Ecrits*, Post-Modernism, or Post-Colonialism? I mean he really tries to make it easier for you. For this his website is bound to be popular—and if you have anything to add or a criticism to make he asks that you say it to him (fff!). Opposition, it seems, must be made according to the terms of our democracy, which we must assume is Democracy itself. It’s much like the faux signpost at my former employer’s, “Complaint department: 3,000,000 miles.”

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literature in relation to its components, on the one hand, and an attempt to understand the ontological, epistemic, axiological and praxic nature and implications and assumptions of the very phenomenon of 'literature' as a cultural foundation and practice.

A site of struggle! Come on, a re-enactment more like. But let's try. I suspect that the terms "literary theory", "Literary Theory", "theory itself", "literature", and "literature" are variables in a rhetoric answering Lyte's query into "the study". Should Lyte locate x or should he understand x? It's represent/value all over again.

The study of literature as I understand it occupies a site of struggle between these two locations, Literary Theory and 'literature', between the attempt to locate literary theory in relation to its components, on the one hand, and an attempt to understand the ontological, epistemic, axiological and praxic nature and implications and assumptions of the very phenomenon of theory itself as a cultural foundation and practice.

In the former quotation we find John Lyte in 1998, full of himself, and in the latter invention we find the very opinion of his 1993 article. Let's try again and without the either/or I attempt to locate John Lyte in relation to his, err, components, and attempt to understand just what John Lyte must be. Maybe if I look at one hand and then the other, I'll begin to struggle.

Normally, I would agree with Cardinal Newman's use of the proverb, "avoid those who cause divisions" but the latest acquisition boasted by Kronk University is a stock of *Master of Art in English Language and Literature degrees*, to be conferred ceremoniously. I wish all who attend the best of luck. "This is no impeachment . . . it only showed some want of knowledge" (Burke 19). I am no legislator. If theory's hucksters can use a set of balances in public view and, as the scales sneak to the fulcrum of "literariness", convince us that they can best tell justice from injustice, liberalism from conservatism—yes, even while all correlatives become a question of absence or presence, and public dissent ("a little more than kin, and less than kind") stands for ideals—then what can one do? The Radicals jibber: "Freedom from what? What's not Left?" But let's not come too quickly upon the disguised and poisoned rapier those with an interest in theory call text. Text may be the stone that holds the sword eternal but *they* own the courtyard. The very story of success is theory's courtier, the supporting cast for literature, Hamletizing honest, or all-too-human, folk who become, in the training of theoreticians, figments necessary in the experimentation that becomes knowledge these days. They will figure a currency of norms from "will life imitate art/will art imitate life" and the result will be nothing less than a practical joke rushed to higher offices, proof that the system is itself the only virtue. Of course, they

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maintain positive outlooks and enjoy some security. The temple is as good a marketplace as any for a farce.

Literary criticism is subsumed, a bastardized cultural studies, to bond undergraduates who must get with the program. Disenfranchised youth setting out to meet the folks that they thought they recognized in snatches from our commercialized Canadian identity crisis It's not Theory's anti-human bullying that anyone would worry about. It is the continuance of English literature as instrumental to the Humanities in Canada. Will English survive and remain a discipline of thought? Not given the senselessness of the University's disciplines, a senselessness that denies a discipline its function, even as it rectifies dogma. Hard work is only a part of it. Lyte calls *his* "precepts", so the lesson is still there, still in coming to know the right answer, "agreeing so as not to perceive." The wrench is still in getting the right answer wrong. A few acceptable answers:

(From #5) . . . no solid ground of truth beneath the shifting sands of history . . .

(From #6) An individual is a nexus of social meanings and practices, psychic and ideological forces and uses of language and other signs and symbols . . .

(From #9) Culture and individuals are constructed through networks of affiliated language, symbol and discourse usages; all of life is textual, a tissue of signifying relationships.

Simple foolery, says the wrench. Simply a fool who built on shifting sands—sure, *tolerance*—until a parable exposes the fool! Until that, and then the "schooled" counter with "The Wisdom Thesis", or the "ordinary-use negative connotations" we find in the Religion and antiquity of our Academe. Tolerance? Or did the shifting sands make the fool?

Though I have not found sufficient reason, or what appeared to me sufficient, for making any material change in my theory, I have found it necessary in many places to explain illustrate and enforce it. (Burke 3)

Oh, fuck off Burke.

Apple Nodham