

Vincent B. Leitch. *Literary Criticism in the 21st Century: Theory Renaissance*. London: Bloomsbury, 2014. ISBN 978-1-4725-2770-7. 174 pages.

This is a timely book that writes back boldly and critically at the ‘end-of-theory’ debate that has emerged within the Humanities since the beginning of the new century. Books like Valentine Cunningham’s *Reading After Theory* (2002), Terry Eagleton’s *After Theory* (2003) and Nicholas Birns’s *Theory After Theory* (2010) are all symptomatic responses to this apparent intellectual vacuum, summed up by Eagleton’s dramatic opening claim that the “golden age of cultural theory is long past” (1). Typically, the recommended remedy for this crisis in theoretical orientation is a back-to-basics return to close reading of the text, unhindered by those ideological filters that have been imposed on the reader by abstract and arbitrarily theoretical conceptualization.

Such a defensive retreat into formalism is however, according to Vincent B. Leitch, not only a vain hope, it is a mantra that conservative literary scholars have been repeating ever since the rise of critical theory in the 1960s. It is also a denial of the rich and varied range of theoretical approaches that have established themselves over the past fifty years, providing essential strategies for the critical discussion and analysis of literary texts in colleges and universities around the world. Who would really want to be without the critical insights provided by feminist, postcolonial, psychoanalytical, marxist, historicist, queer, ethical, narrative, popular cultural and ecocritical theories, to name but a few? The ‘end-of-theory’, like its corresponding ‘end-of-history’ claim, only seems to confirm that critical theory is still very much alive and kicking within the academic discourse.

Without doubt, Leitch himself is well placed to survey the condition of cultural criticism at the beginning of the 21st century, after having spent a lifetime as a professor teaching literature and theory at both small and big American universities. He is also the general editor of the *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, which is perhaps one of the foremost resources for key critical works in the field. In his latest book, it is clear moreover that Leitch’s own theoretical standpoint is informed not only by his long experience of pedagogical and research practice, but also his personal understanding of the contemporary world in which literature is produced, sold, consumed, taught, studied and researched:

Along with textual analysis and critical evaluation, I make it a point to celebrate aesthetic beauty and to praise the best of its kind whatever the kind. What most interests me personally in ideology critique is systematic focus both on historical modes of production like globalizing postmodernity and on institutions such as religion, education, and the family vis-à-vis the socioeconomic and political flows, frameworks, and antagonisms of the periods in question. Given today’s intensifying capitalism, it’s untimely to deemphasize or, worse yet, renounce ideology critique. As far as cultural critique, I, like many other critics, continue to find particularly rewarding in the classroom and in research questioning dynamics of race, gender, sexuality, and nationality. How, to take a case in point, do whiteness, femininity, queerness, national identity, and social class play out in 1920s US literary texts, for example, Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises*, Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, Larsen’s *Quicksand*,

O'Neill's *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, Eliot's *The Waste Land*, and Hughes's *The Weary Blues?* (46-7)

Leitch's overriding conclusion is that poststructuralism remains at the very heart of modern critical theory and its deconstructionist focus will continue to offer one of the most fruitful analytical points of departure for many years to come. This is also connected to what the author means when he argues that we are not facing a decline in theoretical awareness but in fact a post-millennial renaissance of critical engagement with theory. This is perhaps most discernible in the number of new publications in the pipeline by postmodern thinkers, both posthumous and those still active. Moreover, in relation to the demand to go back to the text, these numerous postmodern practitioners of critical theory, while continuing to show the closest attention to textual detail, remind us at the same time that there are never any innocent, ideologically untainted readings and that the ghosts of other repressed voices will always haunt us between the lines:

Of the projected 43 volumes to be published of Jacques Derrida's annual seminars, only three have seen print. We should expect more posthumous works by Jean Baudrillard, Jean-François Lyotard and others. The leading French feminists, prolific authors Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva, and Lucy Irigaray, continue to publish, as do leading male philosophers today, Alain Badiou, Etienne Balibar, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Jacques Rancière. And this group snapshot does not take into account later generations of poststructuralists in France or elsewhere (91).

In this same chapter, provocatively entitled "French theory's second life", Leitch reasserts therefore the real balance of power within theory today, not least in terms of how integrated the postmodern approach has become within the Humanities. When one sees their list of key critical concepts marshalled together, it is compelling to acknowledge not only the vibrant intellectual legacy that postmodernism has created, but also how indispensable these ideas are within today's teaching and research fields. To attempt to return to some prelapsarian stage of non-theory would lead to the complete impoverishment of critical thought that would be pointlessly counterproductive and plain foolish. Even those sceptical of some of these concepts have to admit they represent a reservoir of critical strategies that one has to work through, not just go round:

The current dominant schools and movements of literary and cultural theory, namely postcolonialism, new historicisms, and cultural studies, do not refute but extend poststructuralist work. What contemporary French theorists took from structuralism and phenomenology – for instance, the focus on systems and institutions and the attention to temporal sequencing and interactive flows – condition humanistic and social scientific inquiry to this day. French poststructural concepts remain essential research instruments such as abjection, biopolitics, cultural capital, deconstruction, docile body, *écriture féminine*, ideological state apparatus, mirror stage, rhizome, simulation, spectacle, and surveillance society. These key notions continue to shape protocols of close reading, of historicizing, and of critiquing. They fill today's guides, handbooks, and glossaries. French poststructuralist modes of analysis are recognizably different from anything that precedes them (they are distinctive assemblages), and they have not been superseded. In short, they are more durable

than anyone living during recent decades in our globalizing consumer societies, so addicted to the newest of the new and to rapid turnovers, had any reason to expect. French theory is not going away any time soon (91-2).

In accordance with the above, Leitch own book takes the form of a bricolage of chapters and sections, ranging from the very personal to the broadly political, each illuminating different aspects of the debate about theory. In the spirit of today's theoretical concerns with life writing, he begins his survey for example by declaring his own individual stake in the proceedings by including a detailed discussion ("What I believe and why") of his own private and professional trajectory, as well as some of the fundamental existential lessons this has taught him. It is an example of what feminists call 'situated knowledge', of seeking a clearer understanding of where you come from as a person and how this impacts on your own choice of critical focus. The consequences of the bank crash in the U. S., not least the collapse of the housing market, even for university professors, as well as the increasingly precarious nature of employment for academics, all form part of what Leitch calls the "psychological syndrome that fits our late postmodern social insecurity" (5), a critical insight that underpins his own political and cultural perception of society today:

This is my personal experience with mainstream casino capitalism, the triumphalist neoliberal free-market dogma spreading from the 1970s, which went into hyper drive in the nineties. It has become harder and harder for me not to talk about the recent reconfiguration of money, mortgages, work, education, retirement, debt, and their impact on the family as well as day-to-day life. The way I see it, this is a mode of criticism we need. It is different from the impersonal speculative way many critics do critique. Nearer home, the industry calls it 'financial literacy'. I prefer the broader intimate critique (4-5).

Two further chapters also take a more personal turn in that they are made up of interviews and conversations with other international academics within the field of critical theory and American literary studies. Perhaps the most interesting and revealing is the meeting between Leitch and Professor Zhu Gang of Nanjing University, China, who is the Secretary General of the China Association for the Study of American Literature. Not only does this exchange show that literary scholars in China are very well informed about the latest developments in critical theory in the West, but also that there is a growing interest in the relevance of traditions and theoretical concepts that exist outside the discourses that dominate in Europe and the U. S. At the end of his book, Leitch makes a case for these non-western sources of knowledge being more readily incorporated in the new phase in poststructuralist theory that is beginning to emerge: "Textbooks, teaching and publications have very recently started to reach beyond European traditions to African, Arabic, Chinese, Persian, South Asian, and other traditions of theory. Postmodernism lives on and continues to evolve" (131).

Leitch's book is a challenging mixture of historical survey, personal memoir, political polemic, critical review, postmodern prognostication and a declaration of love of literature and literary theory. Its combined yet hybrid nature is without doubt

one of its most appealing qualities, providing a stimulatingly partisan guide to the past, present and future of theory within the Humanities. It is also the sort of intellectually accessible and thought-provoking book that gives academia a good name. Anyone concerned with culture – from first-term undergraduate students to longer-in-the-tooth professors of literature – will benefit profoundly from reading it.

Ronald Paul