

THEORETICAL DOWNSIZING AND THE LOST ART OF LISTENING

by SIMON STOW

WRITING AT THE TURN of the fifth century A.D., St. Augustine of Hippo, a figure profoundly concerned with the relationship between the text and the world, expressed concern that that humans were being “hurled into an abyss of their own theories.”¹ Augustine could not perhaps have imagined how prophetic his words would prove for literary studies in late or postmodernity, where it seems that almost everybody is searching for the Next Big Idea. A spate of recent books in and on the discipline—self-reflexivity has always been a hallmark of this area of study—suggests, however, that the Next Big Idea in literary studies is, somewhat ironically, a form of theoretical downsizing. While two books, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s *Death Of A Discipline* and Jean-Michel Rabaté’s *The Future of Theory*, identify the death and/or decline of theoretical literary study (Rabaté suggests that he is only “half-serious” about his claim to be writing for the future), a third, Valentine Cunningham’s *Reading After Theory*, promotes a return to the text in literary analysis. What the three books have in common, however, is that they all imagine an active, if somewhat reduced, afterlife for Theory in

Reading After Theory, by Valentine Cunningham; 194 pp. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2002, \$21.95 paper. *The Future of Theory*, by Jean-Michel Rabaté, v & 170 pp. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2002, \$57.95 cloth, \$19.95 paper. *Death of a Discipline*, by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, xii & 128 pp. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003, \$22.50.

the discipline, even as they disagree over the nature, aims, and substance of the discipline itself. Spivak and Rabaté, who see the discipline as being about some form of critical engagement with the world outside the text, imagine a future in which a literary study, stripped of its more egregious theoretical excesses, becomes a more effective tool for social change. Cunningham, while not entirely averse to a social role for literary studies, nevertheless imagines a future in which Theory, having been put in its place, is subordinated to the real business of literary study: *reading*. Paradoxically, by reminding us that reading is, as it was for Augustine, often a form of *listening*, it is Cunningham who may provide us with a better model for engaging critically with the world through, or at least aided by, literary analysis.

As she makes clear in *Death of a Discipline* and elsewhere, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is firmly committed to the role of literary studies in generating social justice.² Unlike Rabaté and Cunningham, however, Spivak does not problematize Theory in literary studies. As befits one so embedded in the method, she simply takes it as read that a theoretical engagement with the world through literary texts is what the discipline is about. Unfortunately for Spivak, she finds the discipline poorly equipped for its role. The failure, as she sees it, is one of imagination. By way of illustration, Spivak tells the story of her encounter with a European activist working to set up financial institutions in Bangladesh. “Even as I was translating at breakneck speed two local critics of the bank,” Spivak writes, “it was clear that she had built the justification for microcredit on imagined Bangladeshi villages peopled by little Euro-U.S. women who happened to be Bangladeshi” (p. 49). Spivak wishes to assist these “patronized ‘others’” (p. 51) by seeking “to reclaim the role of teaching literature as training the imagination—the great inbuilt instrument of othering” (p. 13). Citing Shelley’s observation, “We want the creative faculty to imagine that which we already know” (p. 50), Spivak suggests that poor language training and a lack of methodological rigor circumscribe the imaginative function of literary studies. The self-described “fantastic solution” that she offers is a newly reconfigured “discipline always attempting to harness the power of fiction even as it approaches Area Studies and the social science disciplines” (p. 49). In particular, Spivak is keen to appropriate the language training undergone by Area Studies specialists—as a precursor to their fieldwork—as a means of enhancing the understanding that comes through literary study. By improving their language skills in this way she believes literary scholars will achieve a new, broader consciousness as they “attempt to

figure themselves—imagine themselves—as planetary rather than continental, global or worldly” (p. 38). Her model for this newly reconfigured discipline is, she says, “the international group ‘Doctors Without Frontiers,’ whose members travel to solve health problems and dispense healing all over the world” (p. 38). The future of literary studies, as Spivak envisions it, is an international, interdisciplinary squad of scholars—emboldened by wide reading and girded with impeccable language-skills—ready and willing to address the world’s problems wherever and whatever they might be.

For all the grandiosity of her vision—and Cunningham is quite vitriolic on the subject of what he sees as Spivak’s “egotism” and “self-promotion” (p. 52)—Spivak is undoubtedly correct when she criticizes some of the political posturing of the discipline as it currently stands. Her suggestion that “the literary text in isolation does not lead to savvy politics” (p. 53) and that “the literary is not a blueprint to be followed in unmediated social action” (p. 23) are lessons that many literary critics and a number of social theorists who write about literature would do well to learn. As far as social scientists are concerned, Spivak believes that they too have much to gain from the disciplinary border-crossing that she advocates. The social sciences have, she notes, long feared the “radical impulse in literary studies” (p. 19). It is this that has cramped their imaginations, and led them “to measure success by statistics or photo-ops” (p. 50). A social science infused by literature can, she believes, tell us more about a society than the current approaches precisely because, in their lack of imagination, the current approaches are too implicated in existing power structures (p. 13). The merging of literary studies with the social sciences seems then, for Spivak at least, to be the solution to a number of difficulties in both disciplines.

Jean-Michel Rabaté begins his book with a discussion of the *urgency* of Theory: the perpetual fear expressed by Judith Butler, among others, that is always already too late (p. 1). As far as Spivak is concerned, this may well be the case, for attentive readers of Martha Nussbaum’s work—especially *Poetic Justice* and *Upheavals of Thought*—might be forgiven for thinking that they have seen Spivak’s claims somewhere before.³ The attempted marriage of literary imagining and social science modeling has long been a hallmark of Nussbaum’s work in law, philosophy, and social welfare. Admittedly Spivak comes at it from the opposite direction, from literature to social science rather than then other way around, but her claims are remarkably similar. Nussbaum’s work, as I have suggested elsewhere, is far from unproblematic, but it is

considerably better thought-out than Spivak's.⁴ Spivak provides little to no evidence that her marriage of literary analysis and social science will produce the outcome she desires. Instead of simply repeating, in a rather more platitudinous form, Nussbaum's suggestion that literary studies will expand the imagination of the social sciences—and here I might defend my colleagues in the social sciences about whose methods she seems remarkably ignorant—Spivak might have begun to theorize about what this marriage might look like and how its goals might best be achieved. Raising the question, “How can I as a reader of literature, supplement the social sciences?” (p. 37), Spivak fails to answer it in any meaningful way. When she does hint of how she conceives of this marriage, it is either unclear what the practical methodological implications of her examples might be, or how they differ from past formulations of the discipline. In the first instance, she asserts that, “the one-to-one effort to establish barefoot schools and to train local teachers of children in two aboriginal pockets in Western Bengal . . . is the longest possible term preparation for the supplementation of something like the social sciences by the humanities.” She then adds, unhelpfully, “I am not going to explain this any further now” (p. 35). In the second instance, she points to Derrida's *The Politics of Friendship* as “an example of how the humanities and the social sciences must supplement each other” (p. 27). If the claim had been developed, then Jean-Michel Rabaté's work suggests that far from *solving* Spivak's problems, it might actually have been a further cause for concern.

A recurrent motif in Rabaté's book is the tale of Thales, a philosopher so concerned with looking at the stars that he fell down a well (pp. 136–37). Anxious to avoid this model of philosophy, Rabaté focuses on the ways in which Theory engages with the world. Indeed, it is this concern to distinguish itself from mere philosophy that leads Rabaté to assert that Theory “has to keep a bond, however flexible and dialectical it may be, with literature” (p. 8). Critics of Theory, observes Rabaté, object to “the seduction contained in the mixture of lack of rigor and grandiose pronouncements” (p. 11). Like Spivak, Cunningham is concerned to revitalize the discipline by avoiding some of these more excessive aspects of the discipline's history, a number of which he gladly concedes. He notes, for example, that many of the texts written “at the height of the Theory years are unreadable today” (p. 92). He nevertheless offers an account of Theory as a potentially radical and dynamic force, one that is “supposed to ask difficult, foundational questions that all somehow entail revisionary readings of culture and its foundational

texts" (p. 9). Identifying Theory's dual origins in "'pure' intellectual contemplation" and in "a ritual witnessing in the framework of the city" (p. 9), Rabaté suggests that it is this last aspect that will save Theory from the fate of Thales. Like Spivak, he sees hope in interdisciplinarity, defining Theory as "a broad site upon which four main domains enmesh and interact: philosophy, history, sciences like linguistics and psychology and literature (often with the help of the fine arts)" (p. 17). Strikingly absent from Rabaté's discussion, however, is any conception of political theory, a discipline that seems to concern itself precisely with the questions posed by Theory's dual origins. Hannah Arendt, a potentially key figure in this discussion is mentioned only in passing, in a discussion about an unrelated matter. Indeed, for all his claims about introducing rigor back into Theory and avoiding grandiose pronouncements, Rabaté shows himself to be remarkably blinkered, as when he observes that it was Derrida who made "Plato, Levinas, Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger, Bataille, Mallarmé, to name just a few . . . popular overnight" (p. 7). Indeed, Plato seems to be a key figure in Rabaté's work, but Rabaté refuses to identify him as any kind of Theorist because he wants to void "the eternalizing gesture" (p. 17). This seems like a weak and not entirely clear reason for excluding a central figure of Western Thought from the pantheon of Theory, especially as Plato seems to be precisely the kind of writer that Rabaté champions elsewhere—one whose texts potentially force readers to think differently about the world and the way they live. This may in part be because Rabaté too easily conflates Socrates, the literary character, with his author Plato, stating that "a deep suspicion of literary writing remains a constant in Plato's doctrine" (p. 108). Separating author and character might have led him to reflect on the irony in Plato's written words.

The strength of Rabaté's work lies, nevertheless, in his discussion of Theory's capacity to generate critical thought. The function of Theory is, he says, "to startle an audience and make it demand new moral, political, or intellectual justifications for what passes as a group's collective values and cultural identities" (p. 17). This experience—what Arthur C. Danto referred to as the "transfiguration of the commonplace,"⁵ and Stanley Fish called "dialectic"⁶—has played a central role in critical thought and is perhaps the beginnings of a meaningful critical engagement with the world. The role of literature here is clear—almost all of us have had the experience of a text that forces us to think differently about the world in which we live—and this is perhaps what Rabaté means when he says "Theory is literature . . . but literature

raised to the power of speculation, literature when the term includes the ‘question of literature’ or ‘the thinking of literature’” (p. 8). The central problem with Theory for Rabaté, and one which he willingly concedes, is “the ease with which it produces standard interpretations, repetitive or dull writing” (p. 98). Indeed, identifying Theory as a kind of “power tool,” Rabaté observes that “boredom was massively institutionalized in American universities when Theory gave birth to endless copy-cat readings, killing any sense of the ‘new’ in texts” (p. 100). There is, as Rabaté acknowledges, a central tension between Theory as an attempt to transfigure—to be new and startling—and the entirely expected readings that it often produces. So much of this transfiguration effect depends on reading, and beyond a few interesting but underdeveloped observations about moving between the specifics in texts and the generalities of theory, Rabaté does not really resolve this tension in any convincing fashion. For this reason it is—albeit paradoxically—Cunningham who seems to offer us the best way to use literature to generate critical engagement with the world, even as he consciously eschews much of what Spivak and Rabaté hold dear.

Writing of his fellow countryman Robert Hughes, the Australian critic and novelist Clive James observed, “The message of his work, far from being ‘look how much I’ve read’ is ‘look how much there is to read.’”⁷ This seems to be the highest praise one could bestow upon a critic: that he or she returns one to the text, the canvas, the music or the movie screen filled with a sense of the new; a feeling that one is going to experience something unique, exciting, challenging or even transfiguring. If Rabaté is prepared to concede that Theory has a tendency to the opposite—a capacity for rendering the text simply another example of a pre-existing category—Cunningham is concerned to show just how much damage this theoretical approach does to both the texts and, by extension, the reader. He seeks, furthermore, to find a way to avoid it. This is not to say that Cunningham is against Theory, far from it. “In many respects,” he notes, “reading is so much more alive under the impact of Theory than it was; texts have in many ways become so much more vividly present, so much richer and deeper in their newly acquired valencies” (p. 39). Nor is he against the politics of Theory. “Who would not be happy,” he writes, “with the way theory has not just given a voice to former marginal interests and persons in texts, but has given an affirming voice to critics from, or identifying with those margins” (p. 53). This is an important point. Cunningham is not just leading a reactionary charge against the progressive politics of

Theory under the guise of “textual integrity” or “proper reading.” Rather, he is genuinely concerned with the way in which the practice of reading texts has been undermined or hijacked by theoretical concerns. In his work we see perhaps the methodological rigor that both Spivak and Rabaté seek, but do not seem to know how to find. Give or take the odd rhetorical burst aimed at the excesses of—among others, Spivak, Fish, Eagleton, Said, and Rorty—Cunningham’s work is also remarkably balanced, avoiding what Rabaté calls the “Hysteria” of Theory, in favor of an approach consistent with his stated aim of “seeking to place rather than simply denigrate” Theory (p. 37).

For Cunningham, “placing” Theory means finding an appropriate role for it in the reading process. As Cunningham notes: “Reading always comes after theory. We all, as readers, trail behind theory, theory of some kind or another” (p. 3). Here he is talking about the sort of *competences* that we need in order to read a text: what Wittgenstein would call “stage setting” information. In noting this Cunningham sees himself standing against “the central Western myth of the free individual and the Open Book” (p. 6). The quintessential example of this is, as Cunningham notes, the conversion of St. Augustine, recounted in the latter’s *Confessions*. The idea that the text alone is sufficient for anybody to see the light—be it religious or political—remains a central component of much of the work that we see on politics, literature and philosophy. The claim that reading text *X* will produce reaction *Y* is, for example, integral to the work of Martha Nussbaum. Cunningham, however, shows us how much of this reaction depends on the reader’s assumptions going into the text, and how much her training in reading affects her likely experience of the work. When readers are taught to see texts as examples of particularly all-encompassing theories, he notes, results can be disastrous. “Theorists are as a class,” he notes, “bad readers” (p. 59). Cunningham supports this claim with some particularly egregious examples of poor textual readings, readings which, more often than not, prop up a political claim about the world. In so doing, Cunningham shows us precisely the lack of rigor—the failure to consider other possibilities—in many theoretically driven readings of literature. This is the same lack of rigor identified by both Spivak and Rabaté. Unlike them, however, Cunningham also shows us an alternative way to go about reading: one that might promote a more compelling engagement with the world that does consider other such possibilities.

Despite its promulgation of what Cunningham considers the harmful Western myth of the Open Book and the free individual, the story of

Augustine's conversion in his *Confessions* does capture something about the transfiguring potential of literature (a topic with which Rabaté believes Theory should also be concerned). Cunningham's work does not deny this transforming power of literature; it simply alerts us to how much of this experience depends on the way in which the reader reads the text. This was something of which Augustine was also acutely aware. In his own texts he was deeply concerned to draw the reader through a transformative process that brought that reader closer to God. "Let the reader, where we are equally confident," he wrote, "stride on with me; where we are equally puzzled, pause to investigate with me; where he finds me erring, call me to his side. So we may keep to the path, in love, as we fare on toward Him 'whose face is ever to be sought.'"⁸ For Augustine, reading was a process of *lectio divina*, a way of *listening* to the text (as historically, reading was literally listening for most people in this period). This process involved reading, meditating on what was read, and listening for the voice of God. Cunningham offers us a secular parallel when he suggests that although we are guided by Theory in our readings, we should also listen to what we read by "letting literary texts speak in their own voice" (p. 86). This is, he notes, something that applies to all texts, literary *and* theoretical. Like Rabaté, Cunningham notes that much of what passes for Theory—the sort of unending play of signifiers and open-ended interpretations—is often based on a misreading of the work of theorists such as Lacan and Derrida who are seen, perhaps wrongly, to advocate this approach. This means, he says, "listening to what Theorists really say as well" (p. 86). By 'listening' Cunningham means "what we might call critical measure and rhetorical tact" (p. 64). It is a way of recognizing that the text, as well as Theory, might have something to tell us. Further, it suggests that the experience of the text might lie in the interaction between the reader's experiences and reading-training, and what the text says and how it is written.

What then does this have to do with the experience of reading and critical engagement with the world through literary study? Spivak revives the old argument that reading is a way of expanding the imagination. It is an argument with which Cunningham and Nussbaum would both have sympathy. As Cunningham notes, however, "Spivak can't ever avoid thinking about herself in these thoughts about the Others. And her namings of the Third World women Other usually involve the loud naming of herself" (p. 52). Theory, improperly placed, gets in the way: it drowns out the Other, just as it drowns out or diminishes what

Cunningham calls the “Incredibly Disappearing Text” in the act of reading (p. 69). Learning to read in the manner Cunningham suggests—that is, by listening to both the Theory and the text, rather than simply imposing the former on the latter—might well lead to improved listening in these actual encounters with the Other: precisely that which Spivak claims to seek, but which her method seems to prohibit. Similarly, Rabaté talks about Theory’s capacity to shock and to transfigure, and yet the sort of Theory-driven readings that we generally see in the discipline seem to do precisely the opposite. Such readings are “knowing,” they simply see the text as an example of a pre-existing category and—lacking singularity—they cannot possibly shock or transform. By learning to listen to the literary text we might, once again, be transfigured by it, and as such begin to see another set of possibilities: a necessary precursor to critical thought, and indeed, critical engagement with the world outside the text. Literature offers those of us concerned with the world outside the text great opportunities for critical reflection on it. Cunningham reminds us, however, that such opportunities will continue to be squandered until we learn to diminish the role of Theory in our reading, and listen once again to the voice of the text, not in isolation, but as part of on-going dialogue between it and us. The “voice of the text” is not, of course—as it is for Augustine—the voice of God: it is simply the voice of an alternative. As it stands now, however, Theory seems to preclude listening to anything beyond itself, and as Cunningham notes: “Reading, real reading, proper reading cries out for more, much more” (p. 139).

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1. Cited in Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Augustine and the Limits of Politics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), p. 57.
2. See also Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).
3. Martha Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice. The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997) and *Upheavals of Thought. The Intelligence of the Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
4. Simon Stow, “‘Unbecoming Virulence’: The Politics of the Ethical Criticism Debate,” *PHILOSOPHY AND LITERATURE* 24 (2000): 185–96.

5. Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).
6. Stanley Fish, *Self-Consuming Artifacts. The Experience of Seventeenth Century Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), p. 1.
7. Clive James, cited in the *New York Times*, June 29, 2003, p. 22.
8. Cited in Garry Wills, *Augustine* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), p. xiv. Cunningham identifies the similar experience of Maggie Tulliver in George Eliot's *Mill on the Floss*, whose experience of St. Thomas à Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ* was led by the previous reader's underlinings and page markings (p. 11).