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SIGNIFICANT FICTIONS IN RECENT LITERARY THEORY

As the Fifth Literary Theory Colloquium of the ICLA approached, it seemed appropriate to cast my mind back over the period — short enough in terms of strict chronology, but long in critical events — from the first Colloquium in Munich in 1988, through the Lisbon, Taiwan, and Tokyo Colloquia to the present *Colóquio* in Madeira in 1992, and to consider what, if any, strong lines had emerged, what had been uncovered, gained, or freshly glimpsed. Did our inquiries have any direction, any pattern, any results? To try to review and sum up all that the participants had offered is clearly not within the scope of any one participant, in one brief paper, and indeed might occasion a protest at such presumptuousness. Confining myself to trying to discern the trajectory of what I had myself done, I found, to my slight initial surprise (for the events had seemed diverse), that there was indeed a direction and a continuity.

In 1988 at Munich the theme of the first Colloquium was the «Formation and Deformation of Concepts in Literary Theory». That title, formulated during the chairmanship of Lubomir Doležel, still serves as a productive marker of our direction and our aims. In exploring in my paper at Munich the cluster of notions of the «gap» (or *Leerstelle* or *Leerheitsstelle*) in its range of current applications from the philosophy and history of science to phenomenological and reader response theories, it emerged plainly that the terminology of *absence* rather than *presence* will seem to characterize our age just as «the Classical and Christian Idea of World Harmony» (to use the terms of Leo Spitzer's historical semantics) characterized the (Western) past¹. The recent appearance of GAP as a popular advertising slogan on the sides of the familiar red buses in London seemed a kind of Barthesian proof: the slogan, ripe for *Mythologies*², reads: «right basics right right rhythm. Pure GAP». Or, in another formulation, on another bus: «Classic GAP». GAP, it subsequently emerged, is a chain of clothing shops: perhaps another way of displaying our true nakedness.

The pervasive sense of absence, with its cluster of related terms and practices, is often linked explicitly or implicitly to the «Death of God», already proclaimed by Jean Paul and reiterated by Nietzsche and others down through our time. Other significant Deaths followed. The substantial psyche, or (immortal) soul, dependent

on a God whose existence could not be proven by any of the standard «proofs», was already called in question by Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1780). Shifting away from the substantial psyche to Kant's more technical notions of the mode by which the unity of the faculties of mind was maintained, the Romantics explored the self characterized by the more intermittent, flickering realisations enabled by the faculty of the imagination in the privileged moments when its powers could be fully exerted, particularly the moments of aesthetic creation. The twentieth century has oscillated between the continued proclamation of the Death of God (each time discovering the depths of the loss more fully than before yet feeling it less), and the intricate technical description of the construction of a psychological self, through the development of psychoanalysis from Freud to Lacan and the literary works springing from it or annexed by it.

These attempts at formulating a psychological self are notable for the fact that they have their root in clinical descriptions of pathologically malformed, disordered, damaged or rudimentary human selves, those in whom the «self» is absent. Language, with its «fiction of the I», as Lacan put it, has been typically for our time the site of exploration of this absence.

In this situation the self becomes increasingly elusive. Those who continue to speak affirmatively of the self refer to it with increasing remoteness as an ideal state of unity, sanity, and order which is largely unrealizable. Psychologists, the professionals of the self, are committed to speaking of it as an essential term of their trade, yet it is increasingly defined by negation. The British psychologist, D. W. Winnicott, for example, speaks of a «true self» which is contrasted to a «false self»; others stress that the self is experienced as an object formed by its experience of the kind of care extended to it by its parents (usually the mother). But this is «false self», whatever the quality of the care (mothers take note: whatever they do is wrong), because it depends on identification with the parental view. The «false self» manages the «true self» — which may never come to light³. Psychoanalysis has come to be regarded in some quarters even within the profession not as a «cure» (cure being impossible or unprovable) but as an «experience».

The attempt to locate the self or «self-experience» of patients is described by another psychoanalyst as follows: «We encounter the self of a patient clinically only in moments of true regression to dependence and holding»⁴. These primitive «regressed» moments are also presented as the rare moments when the patient may be freed, come into touch with himself, and make a new beginning. For example, one such occasion is described as follows: a young woman in her late twenties recounted in therapy that ever since her earliest childhood she had been unable to do a somersault, although at times she had tried desperately to do one. «I then said», (the psychoanalyst reports), «What about it now?» — whereupon she got up from the couch and, to her great amazement, did a perfect somersault without any difficulty. This proved to be a real breakthrough». The young woman, the analyst assures us, went on to pass a «most difficult» examination, became engaged, and got married⁵. «And

she lived happily ever after» is strongly implied. In this case, clearly, «self-experience» is presented as a miraculous cure; but more often it is only a fleeting moment — a somersault's span.

Increasingly, psychiatrists describe not their patients' elusive self-experience but their own moments of self-experience in the rare moments of contact with their patients' regressed selves. The experience of seeking the self-experience of the absent self is often described in literary terms, as when Masud Khan explicitly defines it as the sort of epiphany James Joyce described in *Stephen Hero*, which he quotes: «a sudden spiritual manifestation»⁶. The recourse to literature on the part of professional psychoanalysts is, like the rhetoric of «the Bible as literature» on the part of theologians, a position of desperation. This still essentially Romantic poetic moment, then, by which irreparable loss is concealed or mitigated by imaginative recuperation, must be disposed of if the proclamation of the Death of the Self — the Death of Man that follows from the Death of God — is to be made good. Many recent critics have set themselves fiercely to dispose of it.

It was, accordingly, to the various current attempts to root out the lingering notion of the imagination, the next phase in the domino deaths we have been chronicling, that my next papers turned. At the Taiwan Colloquium in 1990 on «Concepts of Literary Theory in East and West» my paper «The Concept of Orientalism in the Romantic Movement» showed how closely the notion of the Orient was intertwined with the development of theories of the characteristic functioning of the imagination, as exemplified in the early Romantic writings of William Beckford⁷. Recent writers like Edward Said have been sweepingly dismissive of European scholarship, translation, and incorporation of Oriental literary motifs on the grounds that they were all tainted by ideological imperialism. The deformation of concepts drawn from other cultures is a legitimate and indeed a pressing concern⁸; but in our present context the political attack of Said and especially his epigoni has acted to undermine the notion of the imagination itself. My paper for the Tokyo Colloquium, «Ideologies of Imagination: Remote Readings of Romanticism» was devoted to other recent declarations of the Death of the Imagination⁹.

Both Marxists and New Historicists gun for the imagination. Terry Eagleton, for example, in the *Ideology of the Aesthetic*, recognizing that (thanks to the success of the Romantic critical programme) «imagination» even today has a positive connotation in ordinary usage, replaces the term «imagination» by «the imaginary», giving a negative and sceptical turn to Kant's «mediatory zone» whose function is to «bring the orders of pure intelligibility home to felt experience»¹⁰. Coleridge, the primary exponent of the imagination in English, he consigns to a right wing that stretches from Burke to Hitler, characterized by a belief in an organic society devoid of reason¹¹. Thus the result of Eagleton's tactics is to render the imagination imaginary — an imaginary, moreover, whose function is to conceal political and social realities. On the basis of this misuse of terms a technique which elsewhere in current

criticism is deployed with panache and passes for style, he rings the death knell of the aesthetic sphere.

Declaring the death of phenomena labelled «Romantic» is a favourite preoccupation of critics of many stripes. Recent critics proclaim the «novelty» of old arguments that had already taken productive forms within the Romantic dialogue, while using them as weapons against the very predecessors who had first formulated the arguments¹². The death or disappearance of the author in our time has been perhaps the most discussed Death in literary contexts, from the New Criticism to the more flamboyant formulations by Barthes in the influential essay «The Death of the Author». As he put it: «the text is henceforth made and read in such a way that at all its levels the author is absent»¹³. Foucault similarly proclaimed: «Where a work had the duty of creating immortality, it now attains the right to kill, to become the murderer of its author»¹⁴. Through a structural approach to the text, through the notion of *écriture* as a concern for the conditions of any text, and more fundamentally through the need to discuss «the functional conditions of specific discursive practices», the author has been replaced by «the author factor», that is, the functions referred to by the name «author». New historicists and cultural materialists have capitalized on the elimination of the author to open the evacuated text to the tides of history and politics.

Now as these giants topple round us — God, Man, the Self, the Imagination, and the Author — a new knight enters the lists: Jean-François Lyotard comes to fell the «grand narratives». According to Lyotard, postmodernism is to be defined as «incredulity towards metanarratives»¹⁵. In Lyotard's influential book *The Postmodern Condition* the grand narratives were still largely confined to the grand narratives of the Enlightenment already called in question by Horkheimer and Adorno in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1942). «The penetration of techno-scientific apparatus into the cultural field in no way signifies an increase of knowledge, sensibility, tolerance and liberty», as the Enlightenment believed. «Experience shows rather the reverse: a new barbarism, illiteracy and impoverishment of language, new poverty, merciless remodelling of opinion by the media, immiseration of the mind, obsolescence of the soul». In his more recent book *L'Inhumain* (1988), *The Inhuman*, Lyotard underscores this: we must, he tells us, give up the narrative of «the emancipation of humanity»¹⁶.

The toll of Deaths reached a new high with the death of the grand narrative not of any particular author but of humanity itself. But now, in *The Inhuman*, we seem to be dealing with a different kind of claim: for the death that figures largest in this book is none other than the Death of the Sun.

The Death of the Sun is a «fact» projected into the future, a prediction or prophecy rather than a *fait accompli*; but it is presented as none the less certain for that. No evidence is given, no reference to evidence is made. No particular scientific authority is named. It is presented as a simple, irrefutable and incontestable fact on which present contemplation and action must be based. What will follow post-

modernism?; well, Lyotard tells us: it is none other than «post-solar thought»¹⁷. Even as an un gainsayable scientific fact «the Death of the Sun» nevertheless has a feeling-tone, an affect about it, and a familiar, an all-too-familiar rhetoric:

If, as a limit, death really is what escapes and is deferred and as a result what thought has to deal with, right from the beginning — this death is still only the life of our minds. But the death of the sun is a death of mind, because it is the death of death as the life of the mind.¹⁸

In short, this fact is to put a stop to the religions, myths, aesthetics, and grand narratives of death that modern thought has dealt in. A mighty fact indeed.

We must ask ourselves what sort of fact this is. In this end-dominated discourse, both cultural critique and literary work privilege a «fact-fiction» based on the assumption of the verity of a hypothetical event within the parameters of the possible as currently understood by science. For we are increasingly faced with scientific replacements, substitutes, and equivalents for the «dead» — the outworn religions, debunked myths and aggrandizing narratives. This, surely, is the reason for the phenomenal sales of Stephen Hawking's outline of current physics and astrophysics, *A Brief History of Time* (1988). This account by «one of the world's leading cosmologists» purports to give the scientific facts about the origin and fate of the universe «from the big bang to black holes» (his subtitle). What degree of factuality attaches to them? Pursuing Lyotard's «Death of the Sun», we find that Hawking offers, for example, the round figure of «five thousand million years or so»: «Our sun has probably got enough fuel for another five thousand million years or so...»¹⁹. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, as the culmination of an article on «The Life History of a Typical Star», concludes dramatically but reassuringly: «These events will not come to pass for thousands of millions of years»²⁰. This reassuringly vague gesture at an inconceivably distant future is in strong contrast to the deliberately menacing quality of Lyotard's reiterated pseudo-precise «4.5.» Fact, if it is fact, is being employed as rhetoric. And how should a «fact» of 4.5 billion years hence — or «thousands of millions» of years — influence our behaviour?

Some recent fiction makes this kind of fact its subject — not surprisingly, perhaps, it is often labelled «science fiction», although this label is far too restrictive of its scope and still implicitly dismissive of its literary value. One of the best of its kind — Suvin classes his work as «speculative fiction» — is J. G. Ballard's *Myths of the Near Future*²¹. A number of his other short stories and novels could well have appeared under this collective title. Ballard projects «scientific» scenarios not 4.5 billion years hence but thirty years hence. The «factual» claim allied with their imminence gives them a chilling persuasive power. Typical Ballard scenarios: a genetic defect will cause living creatures to be born blind, beginning with cattle and moving on to humans (one of the *Myths*). A new crop fertilizer will induce monstrous growth in birds who then prey upon farm cattle and humans (as in the story «Storm-bird, Stormdreamer», in *The Disaster Area*). Oil supplies will run out and the great

cities have to be abandoned (as in «The Ultimate City» in *Low-flying Aircraft*). The waters will rise and only a few northern outposts of human life will be left, soon to go under, as in his early novel *The Drowned World* (1961).

These scientific hypotheses or plausible extrapolations of them employed as fictions by fiction writers and cultural commentators are perhaps the most significant fictions of the present day. Ballard himself has ventured to say that the literature from our time that will live on is «science fiction» in this extended sense, and that it will live on simply as the fiction of our time.

In the hands of a cultural critic like Lyotard or a cosmological commentator like Hawking it becomes evident that these fact-fictions are not adequately described by the anodyne (or dismissive) generic phrase «science fiction», or even the more nearly appropriate «speculative fiction».

Lyotard goes on in *The Inhuman* to produce his own scenario of life today based on the «fact» of the death of the Sun 4.5 billion years hence: we must prepare ourselves now for «exodus from our solar system» and for «the separation of thought from its vehicle the body»²². Hawking, for his part, moves into the vacuum left by philosophy (he makes linguistic analysis the guilty party) and talks freely of God (though His name is omitted from the index)²³.

As we place these proclamations of Death end to end it becomes evident that we are dealing not with theoretical systems (though often there is a putative theoretical matrix) but a cluster of metaphors. This represents the progression that Ricoeur has valuably analyzed as the attraction between different spheres of discourse expressed in or effected by the deceptive similarity of concepts, the overlapping of terms, analogy, or poetic metaphors²⁴.

The rooted presence of metaphor in scientific as in other narratives has been traced by a number of scientists and philosophers of science, for example, John Ziman in *Reliable Knowledge* (1978) and Mary Hesse in *Models and Analogies in Science* (1963), as well as by the analysts of the «one culture» in which literature and science are asserted to be equally embedded²⁵. Ziman, Hesse and others have carried out their analyses in all sobriety. But in our time these scientific fact-fictions are the stuff of cultural myth-makers drunk on their own residual metaphors. They are more prone to erase the distinctions between discourses (between philosophical or scientific discourses on the one hand and poetic on the other, in Ricoeur's terms) than to observe them²⁶. It has been evident throughout this colloquium that we as literary critics are still prepared to see fiction as a life-line and to celebrate the power of the work of art to fictionalize fact and factualize fiction. Fiction, at least, is not dead. Our very professional vulnerability and responsiveness to fiction, however, should put us on our guard: these new scientific fact-fictions wielded by cultural critics need our closest critical scrutiny. Our next Colloquium, to take place in London in April 1993, on «The Third Culture: Literature and Science», will try to address them directly.

It is remarkable that the fictions we have passed in review all relate to Death; and we are obliged to entertain the idea that after all we are approaching the

Millennium again, and that as at every other turn of a millennium the chiliasts are out in force predicting the apocalypse, the end of the world, and the Day of Judgment, in one form or another. That is, of course, a significant fiction of our culture drawn from one of its major texts: The Book of Revelation. Perhaps it will be some comfort, at least, that this Book, while widely influential, was for a very long time uncanonical. It belonged too clearly to a literary genre of the pre-Christian period — the genre of apocalypse — to be accorded theological truth in the Christian era. Perhaps now, paradoxically, we may accept these recent critical prophecies and lamentations as significant fictions even while they proclaim the death of the literary myths and grand narratives that animate them. We may even go so far as to accept, as a millennial celebration or potlatch, their familiar Romantic tone of anguish and apocalyptic loss.

In the nineteenth century the cry was «Theology is dead — long live literature»; the cry of the late twentieth century is «Myth is dead — long live fiction». Finally, perhaps, having allowed the chiliasts their night out, we may adopt as our post-millennial cry: «the death of 'the death of...'». As John Donne once wrote, metaphorically no doubt, «Death shall have no dominion».

Notes

- ¹ E.S. Shaffer, «The Concept of the 'Gap' in Twentieth-Century Theoretical Discourse», First Literary Theory Colloquium, in *Proceedings of the XII International Comparative Literature Association Congress* (Munich, 1989).
- ² Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* [1957] (Paris, 1970), trans. Annette Lavers (London, 1972).
- ³ Christopher Bollas, «The Self as Object», in *The Shadow of the Object* (London, Free Association Books, 1987).
- ⁴ Masud Khan, *The Privacy of the Self* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1974).
- ⁵ M. Balint, *The Basic Fault: Therapeutic Aspects of regression* (London, 1968).
- ⁶ Khan, *The Privacy of the Self*, p. 296.
- ⁷ E. S. Shaffer, «The Concept of Orientalism in the Romantic Movement», *Proceedings of the Third ICLA Literary Theory Colloquium* (Taipei: National Taiwan University Press, 1992).
- ⁸ *Comparative Criticism*, vol. 9 (Cambridge University Press, 1978), Editor's Introduction, «'Monsters methodiz'd': translating the Other», pp. VIII-XXI.
- ⁹ E.S. Shaffer, «Ideologies of Imagination: remote readings of Romanticism», Fourth ICLA Literary Theory Colloquium, *Proceedings of the XIII International Comparative Literature Association Congress* (Tokyo, 1992).
- ¹⁰ Terry Eagleton, «The Kantian Imaginary», in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 3.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 369.
- ¹² For further examples, see E. S. Shaffer, «Illusion and Imagination: Derrida's 'parergon' and Coleridge's 'aid to reflection'», in *Aesthetic Illusion*, eds. Frederick Burwick and Walter Pape (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1990); and E. S. Shaffer, «The Death of the Artist», in *Appearances: studies in culture perception, and the arts*, eds. Frederick Burwick and Walter Pape (Oxford University Press, 1993).
- ¹³ Roland Barthes, «The Death of the Author», *Image-Music-Text*, ed. Stephen Heath (Glasgow, 1977).

- ¹⁴ Michel Foucault, «What is an Author?» [1963], *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 113-138.
- ¹⁵ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: a report on knowledge* [1979], trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester University Press, 1984), p. XXIV.
- ¹⁶ Jean-François Lyotard, *L'Inhumain: Causeries sur le temps* (Editions Galilée, 1988), *The Inhuman. Reflections on Time*, translated by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1991), p. 62.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 23.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- ¹⁹ Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time* (London and New York: Bantam Press, 1988), p. 83.
- ²⁰ The full paragraph is worth quoting: «Eventually, the sun will die as a white dwarf, but before that happens it will evolve as a giant star. The Earth will become uninhabitable and probably will be swallowed up in the vastly extended envelope of the red-giant-stage Sun. These events will not come to pass for thousands of millions of years». See «Stars and Star Clusters», *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. 28, p. 217.
- ²¹ Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (Yale University Press, 1979), p. 67.
- ²² Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, pp. 12-14.
- ²³ Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*, pp. 174-5.
- ²⁴ Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor* [1977] (London: Routledge, 1986), p. 267.
- ²⁵ E. S. Shaffer, «The Sphinx and the Muses: the third culture,» editor's introduction to *Comparative Criticism*, vol. 13, «Literature and Science» (Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. XIV-XXVII.
- ²⁶ Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, p. 263.