

FROM RICARDOU TO JAMESON AND BEYOND

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This paper looks at three crossroads in the trajectory of French literary theory and my own career: 1971, 1981, and 1991. Along the road, theory has served for me as a source of frustration, inspiration, and controversy. Although theory never came naturally to me, nor has it been particularly well-suited to my intellectual outlook or goals, it has provided the ballast of my critical writing over the last forty years. Without theory, I could not have sustained the enduring commitment to and enthusiasm for literature that I retain to this day.

1971 marks the point at which the French New Novel morphed into the New New Novel. It was the year that I defended my doctoral dissertation on Claude Simon, one of the first. I had picked Simon in part for the same reason that, I believe, he ultimately won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1985. Over and above the unquestionable beauty and innovative nature of his writing it was also because of the social and political interest of works such as *La Route des Flandres* (1960) and *Le Palace* (1962). 1971 was also the year in which New Novel theory was, in my opinion, highjacked and promoted with a new degree of dogmatism by Jean Ricardou in *Pour une théorie du Nouveau Roman*. That other new novel critics seemingly followed Ricardou's lead and accepted his authority was undoubtedly a function of the fact that literature had at the time become increasingly enclosed in what Jameson famously called "the prison house of language." I thus found myself unwittingly placed on a theoretical terrain dominated by a thinker whose approach and literary and linguistic premises were antithetical to my own. By 1971 Simon himself had changed, as can be seen in his 1969 *La Bataille de Pharsale*. Following the theoretical lead of Ricardou, he claimed increasingly and insistently, if at times somewhat incoherently, that the "jeu du signifiant" and the generative processes of language were of virtually sole value to him in his writing. My handout provides an example in which Ricardou analyses the linked metaphors driving the narrative arc of *La Bataille de Pharsale*. That to my mind such a theoretical approach did not correspond to what Simon was about as a writer was less important than my growing discomfort with the New Novel generally. Although my students in the early 1970s enjoyed the fresh approach that the New Novel brought, and I enjoyed deciphering with them the complexities of the new movement, I was disillusioned at the prospect of a career studying works that I perceived as having minimal readership and little or no social or cultural impact. Needless to say, the formalistic pirouettes of Ricardou and his dogmatic control over the field only increased my discomfort.

The second crossroad occurred in 1981 with the publication of Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious*. By that time I had migrated to nineteenth-century studies, in part because of specific teaching assignments that I received; and I was heavily invested in Balzac. If Ricardou stands as a source of theoretical frustration for me, Jameson stands as a theoretical inspiration. My graduate education in the 1960s provided a weak basis for understanding such master narratives as Marxism and psychoanalysis. A knowledge of those master narratives was presupposed for readers of Jameson's book. In order to

understand them and other central theoretical works, I read theory for many years with my colleagues at Kent State University from various departments (French, English, Anthropology, Political Science, Linguistics, and Philosophy). I had a lot to learn. While trying to absorb with my interdisciplinary colleagues as much Lévi-Strauss, Foucault, Derrida, and Lacan as possible, I was reading and trying to apply Jameson's work, which seemed to me at the time to have achieved an ideal synthesis of semiotics, narratology, Marxism, and psychoanalysis.

The Literature of Images, which I published in 1987, lists eight references to Jameson in the Index. Items indexed are: application of Greimas's semiotic square; Balzac's narrative voice; Jameson's notion of containment strategies; the development of a Marxist poetics; and the importance of social and economic meaning in the novel. *The Literature of Images* calls for a relational reading of narrative landscape in which descriptive passages have a more integral, socio-political significance than structuralists such as Roland Barthes were inclined to grant them. Jameson inspired me and gave me the tools to approach socio-political issues systematically. If I rarely quote him these days it may be because his lessons became an integral part of my theoretical tool chest, in the same way that Genette's narratological concepts have been over the course of my career.

At the same time, it is clear to me in looking back at my reading of Jameson that even in 1987 I took issue with his refusal to acknowledge individual perspectives and voices. The master narratives of which he was the master dismissed such individual features, as is clear starting with the second sentence on your handout. There, Jameson eschews placing "undue emphasis on individual psychology and subjectivity." I wish that I could praise my mid-eighties self and say that already I sensed that such a dismissal was especially dismissive of the vision and voice of women, as is Marxism generally. Regrettably my feminist consciousness lagged behind that of others of my generation. Although Naomi Schor and other feminist critics were widely read at the time, I was for whatever reason not taking their work to heart. It is true that I wrote about women authors in *The Literature of Images*; and as the subtitle "from Julie to Jane Eyre" suggests, the analysis of women characters was central to the development of my argument. When I look at the bibliography of *The Literature of Images*, however, I am somewhat shocked to see that it includes Derrida, Eagleton, Genette, Lévi-Strauss, and Riffaterre; but that the only feminist work it lists is Gilbert and Gubar's *Madwoman in the Attic*. Such a confession is especially embarrassing for someone whose academic title is now Professor of French and Women's Studies and who even served for a year as Interim Director of Women's Studies. I did play catch-up, however. By 1991, when I published *Politicizing Gender: Narrative Strategies in the Aftermath of the French Revolution*, my bibliography includes Beauvoir, Felman, Kristeva, Schor, Wittig, and many other women critics and theorists.

By 1991 I had reached the third crossroad, the "beyond" referred to in the title of this presentation. For the sake of symmetry, I would like to present a third theorist who affected or influenced me as Ricardou and Jameson did; but the fact is that I approached the issues of slavery and race that I have been writing about for close to twenty years in a way that was less driven by theoretical issues than by historical ones. Delving into the intricacies of the Haitian revolution and the history of abolitionism in the first half of the nineteenth century along with discovering and making available unknown or little-known primary text material from that period: these have been my primary preoccupations.

One can never get very far from theory, however. In my recent work, the thorny theoretical issue concerns the intersection of race and gender. This is in one sense a new issue. In feminist works published in the 1990s, issues of race and colonialism often remain invisible. Consider for example Margaret Cohen's *The Sentimental Education*, a brilliant treatment of how a gender war of sorts was waged against women during the rise of the novel. In Cohen's concern with social issues in the early decades of the nineteenth century, gender is not linked to race. Accordingly, she fails to highlight women who addressed social issues during the 1820s, at the time of France's recognition of the independence of Haiti. It is perhaps because women writing about blacks prior to 1830 such as Duras and Desbordes-Valmore fail to fit into a progressive pattern of increased feminist consciousness that they tend to be overlooked in accounts of women's history. If there was a new story about the French novel of the first half of the nineteenth century to be told when gender was factored in, as Schor and Cohen so compellingly argued in the 1990s, there is now a new story to be told about that period when race is considered along with gender. The omission of race in works such as Schor's and Cohen's published in the 1990s undoubtedly reflects the fact that, at that time, the inextricability of race, class, and gender had not captured the attention of feminist scholars to the extent that it has in recent years. Going beyond French feminism and the insights provided by feminist French literary critics, my thinking about theory these days is heavily influenced by the theory of intersectionality, a sociological concept developed by black feminists such as Patricia Hill Collins that seeks to determine how various categories of discrimination—race, gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality—interact.

That my views on gender and race have landed me in turbulent theoretical waters leads me to my final observation that theory has served me most recently as a source of controversy. This is apparent in the remarks about my work in Christopher Miller's recently published and widely acclaimed *The French Atlantic Triangle: Literature and Culture of the Slave Trade*. Miller devotes a considerable amount of time to calling into question my assertion in the 1994 edition of *Translating Slavery*, recently published in an expanded and revised second edition, that women writing about slavery did so differently than men. Seeking to deconstruct clear divisions between genders Miller states, "gender, like any boundary, is a line of demarcation that can be crossed, tripped over, or even transcended through acts of translation"; and he asks, "Why are men who participated in the same intellectual project of abolitionist 'translation' not considered as part of the same picture? I will nominate counterexamples: several men who conform to the intellectual definition of a 'woman' that seems to be at work in *Translating Slavery*." Miller's deconstructionist theoretical principles cause him to misunderstand the importance that I and other feminist critics attribute to making little-known women writers available to students and scholars of French literature and history. It is telling that Miller resorts to a dismissive, aestheticizing language in his discussion of one of those writers, Sophie Doin, calling her works "well intentioned and noble in purpose but mediocre by any standard of literary quality." Ironically, this is the same language that Flaubert used to dismiss *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and that has blocked the entry of so many historically significant women writers into the literary canon. Miller's enthusiasm for restoring the "voices from below" of persons of color does not correlate with a corresponding desire to restore the voices of women, who have been similarly silenced in the past and present.