

After (the Death of) Theory Some Reflections, Some Recollections, a Repetition

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Abstract

Whereas Alan Kirby in “The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond” observes that “consumer fanaticism” prevails over plurality as a dominating social force, and proclaims the death of postmodernism, such a death, instead, suggests a linear narrative of Theory and literary criticism. Hence, my concern in this paper is that, while Theory is claimed to be over in the first world academia, is there a process of *after Theory*, which, on the one hand, connotes *going after* theory or a sense of continuity of theory and, on the other hand, belatedness, thriving (whether for hunting for/haunted by the ghosts of Theory or for celebrating the obituary) in the third world literary field? Such reflections on the death of Theory will be followed by some recollections of how the third world academy responds to the application of western literary theories on third world literature.

Keywords: Postmodernism, Theory, After Theory, Third World literature, Alan Kirby

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理論過（世之）後 若干反思、一些回憶、一點重複

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摘 要

本文卑之無甚高論，僅旨在思考或重複英美學界晚近所謂理論之過氣或過世之說法，並指出此說法反映了學界對理論（之艱深）或沒有理論的焦慮，或對理論招魂。哲學學者如柯比主張後現代主義已成為過去，理論亦然，如今是消費主義當道，文本的生產模式也甚受消費者／讀者／觀眾所左右，故吾人久不聞諸理論大家之名久矣。然而在台灣，似乎第一世界（歐美）與第三世界（台灣）學界之間仍然頗有理論思潮時差，一如第一世界理論與第三世界文學文本之相遇或不遇之間的時差。這也反映在我們引進新批評以來對西方理論的誤解、抗拒、擁抱、或欲迎還拒，故對（後現代主義／現代主義等）「理論過（世之）後」說的附和，其實也是一種焦慮，或對理論趨勢失焦的焦慮。

關鍵詞：後現代主義、理論、理論之死、第三世界文學、柯比

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You are free: you are the text: the text is superseded.

—Alan

Kirby 2006:37

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.

—Yeats 2000:64

The main title of this paper suggests neither an announcement nor a pronouncement. The announcement or pronouncement (of the death of Theory in the West) has been made, of course, by others in elsewhere, but not by me in this paper. The title here, which intends to provide two readings, thus, is just a repetition of the others' proclamation (to mourn and/or to act).

My act of repetition actually took place much earlier. In the second semester of the previous academic year I offered an elective course on "Modernism" for the graduate program of the DFLL [department of foreign languages and literature] of my university. Why a course on Western literary and cultural Modernism in 2006 in Taiwan, a little dragon of the NICs? To begin with the rationale for the course as well as to self-problematize such a self-created anachronistic situation, I wanted my students to read Alan Kirby's essay entitled "The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond." Of course we spent some hours discussing the death of postmodernism and, for that matter, modernism. If postmodernism is dead, what about modernism? I asked my students (perhaps also myself). As a movement before postmodernism, modernism should have been buried long before the death of postmodernism. The subtext, of my question, as a matter of fact, is: if postmodernism is dead, why should we get together in the classroom to talk about modernism, which is assumed to be dead quite a long time ago? Are we hunting for the specters of (post)modernism? Or, even worse, are we haunted by the specters of (post)modernism?

Emphasizing the change of the modes and conditions of cultural

production, Kirby argues that nowadays “the people who produce the cultural material which academics and non-academics read, watch and listen to, have simply given up on postmodernism” (34). If this is a paradigmatic shift, it is related specifically to the emergence of new communication technologies in the late 1990s or early 2000s throughout the world, resulting in a new view of the real based not on questioning “reality” but on individual involvement, physical intervention, and interaction with the ephemeral cultural texts produced. On the other hand, in the age of *post-postmodernism*, or *pseudo-modernism*, as termed by Kirby, academics (everywhere?) are “so swamped by the assumptions and practices of market economics that it is deeply implausible for academics to tell their students they inhabit a postmodern world where a multiplicity of ideologies, worldviews and voices can be heard,”¹ a world in which “consumer fanaticism” prevails over plurality as a dominating social force and proclaims the death of postmodernism.

Moreover, according to Kirby, the passing of postmodernism could also be evidenced in “the sense of superannuation, of the impotence and the irrelevance of so much Theory among academics.”² What is significant here is that Kirby’s argument suggests the conjunction of (the death of) postmodernism and (that of) Theory. (By Theory I mean “high theory” or simply “Initial T,” referring to “Theory” that begins with a capital letter.) As a matter of fact, when he attended some literary conferences in July last year, he surprisingly failed to hear any mention of Theory, or Theorists such as Derrida, Foucault, and Baudrillard, from a dozen papers. This might suggest that people in the academy in the West nowadays do not believe in Theory or postmodern theories any more. Or if they do, they believe in something else. It goes without saying that the question of what is this something else is what

¹ Alan Kirby, “The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond,” *Philosophy Now* 58 (November/December 2006): 37.

² Kirby, “The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond,” 34.

people, especially trend-watchers, are eager to ask. The present concern, here, however, is the (problematic of the) argument that Theory is over. In fact, such an argument has been made by a number of academics in the West for quite some time (instead of *Thinking Theory*, now we have books with titles such as *After Theory*; but just by looking at the title of *After Theory* we may think that it ironically means *going after* theory or a sense of continuity of theory, which is also one way of reading the main title of this paper: *going after the death of theory*). The argument seems to suggest that theoretical inquiry in literary field has been concluded or that we are now at a theoretical crossroads, or a crossroads without (the sign[post] of) Theory.

But the real questions are: If Theory is dead, who killed It? Where is the graveyard of Theory? In books such as *The Black Book of Communism* and *The Black Book of Psychoanalysis*, Marxism and psychoanalysis, the two important pillars of yesterday's Theory dynasty or industry, are under severe attacked from their authors.³ In Peggy Kamuf's words, deconstruction-as-Theory has been regularly exorcised as "a ghost" of "deconstruction-as-criticism-confined-to-literature-departments-where-it-is-now-dead."⁴ No doubt books such as the aforementioned series of black books attempt to bring the above theories to an end by pointing out their failure. Interestingly, Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* was published in 1994 [French version in 1993], many years ahead of 2000, the publishing year of *The Black Book of Communism*. How many times must Marx, or, for that matter, Theory, die? Certainly not twice, like the crocodile that dies twice.

The death of postmodernism and the rise of consumer fanaticism in contemporary academic world, in fact, also reveal that "the death of the

³ My information of the black book series is from Slavoj Žižek's *How to Read Lacan*, in which he mentions that in the two black books "all the Communist crimes" and "all the theoretical mistakes and clinical frauds of psychoanalysis" are listed respectively (1).

⁴ Peggy Kamuf, *Book of Addresses* (Stanford, California: Stanford UP, 2005), 221.

author” is no more wolf-crying, as the consumer/reader now increasingly becomes the (co-)author of whatever text. Or as Kirby has observed, “*pseudo-modernism* makes the individual’s action the necessary condition of the cultural product,”⁵ in which the individual involves by intervening physically. He cites the examples of reality TV programs, Ceefax, and *Big Brother*, of which textuality depends so much on the phoning in of the viewers. So, we might ask, paradoxically, that if Theory, Marx, and the author all die, who else is alive?

Furthermore, the conjunction between the death of postmodernism and that of Theory in Kirby’s argument might not be a real conjuncture. After the death of postmodernism we have pseudo-modernism or post-postmodernism; after the death of Theory, do we have pseudo-Theory or post-Theory? Or does Theory have an afterlife, or a translated life, in the “form” of specters, like the ghost in the shell? So, instead of talking about paradigm shift, we shift our topic of discussion to the ghost of Theory and hauntology in Theory. On the other hand, we can always sense that the death discourse on Theory implies a sense of mourning for the loss (or nostalgia for the good old days?) of Theory, as after Theory shows a state of ennui in academic and cultural fashion industry today.

Since now our question is “Is there a Theory in this class?” we could try to recall from the past, if there is a signpost for locating the past. When was the *last* time we talked about Theory (in class)? When were the good old days of Theory? Or, where have all the Theories gone? While the “last” or the “golden age” is indeed not easy to locate, the initial “point of departure” is certainly easier to remember. One might say: *After the New Criticism*--as if we are talking about situation after the deluge.⁶ It is globally agreed that New

⁵ Kirby, “The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond,” 35.

⁶ *After the New Criticism* is the title of Frank Lentricchia’s book (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

Criticism as a theoretical discourse has been marginalized as criticism in the wilderness after the rise of (post)structuralism, but it indeed survives many late deconstructionists (e.g., not many papers mention Paul de Man nowadays) and it survives in the form of analyzing kit for writing about literature in such courses as “Introduction to Literature,” or in textbooks with such titles.

Certainly some, if not all, of the Theories have gone to the third world, where (first-world) Theory and third-world literature meets like east-west encounter. The question of the death of Theory, therefore, is turned into another question: where does Theory (such as postmodernism) die? Or, to be more specific, where is Theory dead? If Theory is dead in the first world literature, does it also mean that it is dead in the second (which already ceases to exist) and third world literature as well? But what is third-world literature, if there is such a thing in the west, in the (imperial/colonial) eyes of the first-world theory-traveler in the journey to the rest?

The question brings me back to a rereading of Fredric Jameson’s controversial but crucial essay on third-world literature entitled “Third-world Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” in which he attempts to answer the question of “what is literature in the third world”? Of course, as we all know, he theorizes (all) third-world literary writings as “national allegories” —“*The story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society.*”⁷ Jameson’s “sweeping hypothesis,” in fact, demonstrates the relationship between the first-world theorist and third-world literature. While most of the time the third-world academics read first-world literature in English, most first-world theorists, including Jameson, read the “greatest Chinese writers” in English translation, if they do read Chinese literature at all, unless they happened to be sinologists. In this case they mostly fail to grasp

⁷ Fredric Jameson, “Third-world Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” *The Jameson Reader*, ed. Michael Hardt and Kathi Weeks (London: Blackwell, 2000), 320.

the literary language of third-world literature, or, for that matter, Chinese literature.

It is in this context that I read Chester Brookfield, the protagonist in Shirley Geok-lin Lim's first novel *Joss and Gold*, as the "first-world theorist." Indeed Chester Brookfield's travelling to Asia allegorizes the traveling of theory to the third world. The result of such an encounter of the first-world theorist with third-world literature is a hybridized Suyin, who has two fathers. The idea of traveling theory, which of course is indebted to Edward Said, helps to understand "the conditions of acceptance or, as an inevitable part of acceptance, resistances—which then confronts the transplanted theory or idea, making possible its introduction or toleration, however alien it might appear to be."⁸ In Lim's novel when Chester goes to Malaysia in the 1960's as a Peace Corps volunteer, he tries quite hard to make himself at home with the local cultures and befriends many local citizens of different ethnicity. But he leaves the "tropical paradise" after the 1969 racial riots so as "not to get involved with the local trouble,"⁹ as ordered by the U.S. Embassy. Just like Jameson who reads *all* third-world literature as "national allegories" without paying attention to the diversity and difference of the third-world literature, "Chester legitimizes the Malay culture and omits the co-existence of other cultures"¹⁰ just because he does not know how to cope with the difference. Only many years later, when he becomes an anthropologist, that Chester finally realizes that "[h]e was there to study difference, not overcome it, and he could finally relax with the natives, knowing guiltlessly that he was not one of them."¹¹ But in spite of that admirable self-understanding, he still fails to (re)claim his

⁸ Edward Said, "Traveling Theory," *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1981), 227.

⁹ Shirley Geok-lin Lim, *Joss and Gold* (Singapore: Times, 2001), 104.

¹⁰ Chin Tzu-Chun, "'Homeless Orphans': The Struggle for Self-Identity in Shirley Geok-lin Lim's *Joss and Gold*," MA Thesis, National Cheng Kung University, 2007, 68.

¹¹ Lim, *Joss and Gold*, 179.

appropriate role in reading/rendering a third-world (con)text.

But Theory in the third world is actually a (culturally) translated Theory. The introduction or transplanting of Theory in Taiwan is an example of how Theory moves from one place (first world) to another (third world) and how cultural translation works (and resists). Here I give only the case of the New Criticism and its reception in Taiwan from the late 1950s to the early 1970s. It is interesting to note that Joel E. Spingarn wrote an essay entitled “The New Criticism” in 1910, in which the term is employed quite differently from the way John Crowe Ransom used it in the 1940s. The essay was translated by Wu Luqin, who was then teaching the course “Literary Criticism” at the DFLL of National Taiwan University, and published in *Wenxue zazhi* [Literary magazine] in 1957. Spingarn’s essay, however, had already been rendered into Chinese by Lin Yutang and Li Chendong respectively in the early Republican period. What was considered “new” by Lin, Li, and Wu in Spingarn’s essay and what they thought might be useful to introduce to local critical field certainly proposed themselves as interesting topics of investigation. But here my emphasis is that Wu obviously didn’t choose the right “entrance stone” to render and contribute to the literary magazine that aimed to promote the New Criticism as the first wave of western Theory in the second half of the 1950’s.

The literary magazine *Wenxue zazhi* was founded by Xia Ji-an (Hsia Tsi-an) in 1956. Xia, an academic of the DFLL of National Taiwan University, published translation of the New Critical essays such as Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent” and Robert Penn Warren’s essay on Hemingway in the magazine, in addition to his own seminal essay of practical criticism on Peng Ge’s novel *Luoyue* [Setting moon] and an article on poetry, referring much to Brooks and Warren’s *Understanding Poetry*. In the few years of its publication (the magazine ceased to exist in 1960), the magazine published critical works which can be regarded as practical texts of the New Criticism contributed by overseas critics such as Xia Zhiqing [C. T. Hsia], Lin Yiliang, Li Jing, and

Chen Shixiang. Xia and *Wenxue zazhi*'s endeavor to popularize western Theory in Taiwan in the 1950's, however, did not seem to be a fruitful project,¹² though years later in his preface to the posthumous collection of works by Xia, Chen Shixiang wrote, "the western literary theory that [Xia] introduced conveys the essence of the New Criticism, which is currently the dominating theory in America."¹³

As Xia failed to reform the local literary studies by importing a Western dominating Theory in the late 1950s, for many it was Yan Yuanshu who preached the New Critical method in Taiwan. In a sense Yan's attempt is a supplement to the incomplete modernist project Xia left behind after he went to the United States. Yan discusses quite thoroughly the fundamental methods of the New Criticism in his essay entitled "Xin piping xuepai de wenxue lilun yu qi shoufa" [The theory and methods of the New Criticism], published in 1969. And in addition to the translation of *Literary Criticism: A Short History* by W. K. Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks,¹⁴ Yan also wrote a number of critical essays analyzing classical Chinese poetry and works of such local Modernist poets as Luo Fu, Luo Men, and Yu Guangzhong [Yu Kwang-chung]. While Yan's explication of modern Taiwanese poetry was quite well received, his ahistorical close reading of classical Chinese poetry became the target of a heated literary debate in the early 1970's. Xia and Yan's respective project of translating or transplanting Theory in the literary and academic institution of Taiwan (a third world country at that time) illustrates the fate of Theory in encountering with the literature of countries of the Others.

¹² A well-received book that practiced the New Critical doctrine at that time was *Piping de shijue* [Critical perspectives] by Li Yinghao, a critic from Hong Kong, not from the *Wenxue zazhi* circle.

¹³ Chen Shixiang, "Preface," *Xia Ji-an xuanji* [The collected works of Hsia Tsi-An] by Hsia Tsi-An (Taipei: Zhiwen chubanshe, 1971), vi.

¹⁴ See Yan Yuanshu, trans., *Xiyang wenxue pipingshi* [A history of Western literary criticism] (Taipei: Zhiwen chubanshe, 1987).

Since the title of this paper announces some recollection, I will mention two other pieces of old articles to fulfill the promise. The first one, Liu Shaoming's "Xifang wenxue piping yu Zhongguo wenxue" [Western literary criticism and Chinese literature], praises western Theory's contribution to the new critical perspectives in studying Chinese literature. According to Liu, unlike the biographical, philological or positivist approaches to conventional Chinese critical approach, western Theory emphasizes the intrinsic study of the text itself.¹⁵ Liu singles out *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction* by Xia Zhiqing, which is a New Critical reading of modern Chinese narrative literature, as a representative work that has successfully used western Theory to analyze Chinese texts. Xia, of course, discusses Lu Xun in his monumental book, but in his New Critical theoretical concept the candidate of his "greatest Chinese writer" is Zhang Ailing [Eileen Chang], not Lu Xun. Xia's book exemplifies that Theory from the west helps reformulate the modern Chinese canon. Liu and Xia obviously have not thought of the term "third-world literature," nor have they regarded Chinese literature as third-world literature. In such a case Theory seems to be a useful tool from the west.

Another article, a more recent one compared with that of Liu, is Aijaz Ahmad's "Literary Theory and 'Third World Literature': some Contexts," in which he listed the New Criticism as one of the four main dominant tendencies in English Studies (the other three are also related to the New Criticism: I. A. Richards's practical criticism, T. S. Eliot's quasi-Catholic criticism, and Modernism). "Third World Literature," on the other hand, is not third-world Literature, but a literary category in British and North American universities, hence the teaching of literature in the west, not in the third world. If the "pedagogical advantage" of the New Criticism, as pointed out by Aijaz,

¹⁵ See Liu Shaoming [Joseph S. M. Lau], "Xifang wenxue piping yu Zhongguo wenxue" [Western literary criticism and Chinese literature], *Ercan zaji* [Miscellaneous writings by Ercan] (Taipei: Siji chubanshe, 1976), 158.

among others, “served also to conceal the ideology of some of the leading lights,”¹⁶ the categorization of “third-world literature” shows a similar detachment from reality, or real geopolitics.

Aijaz’s discussion of English Studies in Anglo-American universities and in India reminds me of William E. Cain’s *The Crisis in Criticism: Theory, Literature, and Reform in English Studies*, published more than twenty years ago. Cain asserts that “the boom in literary theory has influenced and altered the curriculum *only in marginal ways*” (xii; emphasis mine). He points out that fashionable Theories such as deconstruction have neither contributed to reforms of English studies as a discipline nor undermined the institution: “The basic shape of English Studies is unchanged, and its shortcomings and deficiencies remain unexplored and unarticulated.”¹⁷ Cain’s investigation of the connections between Theory and English Studies eventually leads to his pointing out of the crisis in English Studies rather than that of Theory.

According to Cain, English studies simply lack of “system, order, and coherence.” Without observing such organizing principles, “a student can jump from contemporary fiction to Shakespeare’s comedies to American realism and then to other areas equally disconnected from one another.”¹⁸ Cain’s complaint includes the lack of a linear narrative of the history of literary study, a structural coherence, of the discipline, a knowledge of “continuities and relationships among writers, periods, texts, and interpretive procedures.”¹⁹ Cain’s statement, of course, expresses a very *prepoststructuralist* view.

¹⁶ Aijah Ahmad, “Literary Theory and ‘Third World Literature’: Some Contexts,” *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso, 1992), 53.

¹⁷ William Cain, *The Crisis in Criticism: Theory, Literature, and Reform in English Studies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1984), xii.

¹⁸ Cain, *The Crisis in Criticism*, xii.

¹⁹ Cain, *The Crisis in Criticism*, xii.

Cain's reference to literature here historicizes the institutionalization of literature. He reads the history of the institutionalization of literature according to the political situation of America after the Second World War. It is obvious that Cain takes his critical position from a pedagogical perspective. However, there is always a Theory, or rather, an anxiety of Theory, in class, especially in Taiwan and particularly in the graduate program of various FLL departments here. Theory, especially those theories related to the three *posts* (post-structuralism, postmodernism, postcolonial discourse) after the New Criticism, has encountered with debates, resistance, and theory phobia in the academy.

In addition to the unfriendly response to the use of the New Critical approach to read classical Chinese poetry, here is a typical example of local (or psychological) resistance to Theory. Earlier this semester when one of our graduate students, who took a required course on literary theory in the previous semester, was asked to say a few words in an occasion, in which the faculty members and graduate students of our graduate program meet and greet, he expressed himself quite proudly or cynically that he knew nothing about all the *post things*, referring specifically to postcolonial discourse and postmodernism. Pride, if not prejudice, conquers all.

Not only graduate students. There is always a paradoxical state of mind toward Theory in the academy. When Theory (especially deconstruction) *was* there, those haunted people tried all means to exorcise it. Once the death of Theory is pronounced, the academy on the one hand speaks of Theory as if what have been spoken of are not Theory but the ghosts of Theory, and, on the other hand, no doubt a number of academics read the obituary in a lighthearted mood.

The acclamation of the death of Theory, or, for that matter, of *whateverism*, in the age of post-postmodernism, in fact, simply suggests the idea of a linear narrative, a trend or turn in literary criticism. When he was

asked about the “trend” of French literary criticism, Tzvetan Todorov remained silent, for he knew only people from different “schools” of thought but not the trend. The American critical scene, however, for him, is more unanimous than that of the French, and with more frequent “turns.” So it is easier for him to talk about the trend of American critical school than the French turns.

While some trend-watchers, or signpost-seekers, propose critical realism and narrative theory as possible candidates, the death of Theory (or postmodernism, queer theory, cultural studies) brings about a state of waiting (similar to the waiting for Godot?) in the academy. Such a waiting is quite significant because it seems that the coming Theory after postmodernism plays the role of the messiah, coming to save the academic world from anxiety and fear in the age of post-Theory, though the real trend is still imaginary.

So, why a course on Western literary and cultural Modernism in 2006 in Taiwan after the death of Theory and postmodernism? My answer is rather simple: to see if Modernism is really dead in the west and the rest of the world, including Taiwan (we always assume that Modernism in non-western literary systems is translated from the west, so they are quite belated). We read Walter Benjamin and Jameson’s discourse on modernity and postmodernity, of course, and we also read Marshall Berman’s *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* to see how things fall apart, hoping that our act or reading—and remembering—“can give us the vision and courage to create the modernisms of the twenty-first.”²⁰ But Berman’s anticipation or encouragement belongs to the last millennium. Now we live in the age of (Kirby’s vision of) pseudo modernism, waiting for (the second coming of) our angel of Theory.

²⁰ Marshall Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London: Verso, 1983), 36.

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