

# Theory and Trauma

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*This article questions the cosmopolitan spirit of modern literary theory in the context of its colonial aspirations.*

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Literary theory is usually regarded as being a child of the cosmopolitan spirit, with all of its well-known ambiguities. Not long ago, for instance, Galin Tihanov put forth the provocative thesis that it was born in the nationally reawakened countries of east-central Europe, such as Czechoslovakia and Poland, in the aftermath of the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In this transitional context, it was engaged in the process of constructing a new national and political identity of respective countries on the one hand and, on the other hand, transcending local encapsulation through linguistic, cultural, and methodological cosmopolitanism. Regarding this cosmopolitanism, the chief proponents of eastern and central European literary theory such as Lukács, Jakobson, Trubetskoi, Bogatyrev, Shklovsky, and Wellek lived the dislocated life of exiles and émigrés, travelers and strangers never completely adjusted to any one setting, steeped in more than one culture, writing in more than one language, children of heterotopia and polyglossia. As the embodiment of national, linguistic, and cultural homelessness on the model of Lukács' novelistic hero, identifying completely with neither a German nor Russian cultural and intellectual background, they enjoyed the expensive freedom of the creative modification of both. Due to this traumatic (because it was not self-inflicted) in-between position, they were able to "estrangle" the naturalness of any given literature by refracting it through the prism of another; that is, to perform abstraction as the key operation of modern literary theory (Tihanov 420). Tihanov indicates that the same uneasy but productive cosmopolitan legacy, as a necessary presumption of theoretical abstraction, holds for those theorists from central and eastern Europe that moved to France in the postwar decades – such as the Romanian-Jewish Goldmann, Lithuanian Greimas, or the Bulgarians Todorov and Kristeva – contributing to the establishment and the enrichment of narratology, structuralism, and poststructuralism.

It therefore seems as though moving from the abandoned scraps of the former political and/or symbolic empire into its center might be designated a subversive operation that engendered modern literary theory. Through such an unexpected return, characteristic of every trauma, theory reminds both the former colonizer and the formerly colonized that, although their national terrains are politically divorced, their mutual ethical, cultural, and intellectual dependency is still at work. If it is not going to be repeatedly and violently acted out in this divided constellation, it must be patiently worked through from both sides. In this sense, modern literary theory can be interpreted as a consistent attempt to work through the trauma of colonized hearts and minds until their decolonization is attained. This is how the nationally emancipating aspect of modern literary theory – which Tihanov (418, 424) sees as being as important a constituent of its emergence as cosmopolitanism – is to be understood: if a nation is supposed to assert itself against its oppressor, it must proceed not by excluding it as something external, but through recognizing it as something internal. The same is true for the oppressor, whose national vocabulary is also called upon to take the cosmopolitan route of self-assertion. Far from opposing each other, the colonizing and the colonized language and literature always imply each other. If decolonization is expected to truly achieve a de-traumatizing effect, it must be relegated from political terms into literary, cultural, and intellectual terms, where borders are not so sharp as to divide the national camps.

Once formulated in this way, it appears that this intellectually decolonizing operation of modern literary theory demands to be extended beyond the interwar and postwar decades addressed by Tihanov. In a certain sense, this would be even more appropriate: if central and eastern European countries can be considered to have been the western European inward colonies, in the decades that followed the arrival of Todorov and Kristeva the empire was besieged by intellectuals from outward colonies. Here is the beginning of Stuart Hall's story: "... in the very moment when finally Britain convinced itself it had to decolonize, it had to get rid of them, we all came back home. As they hauled down the flag, we got on the banana boat and sailed right into London" (Hall, *The Local* 24). Accordingly, his autobiographic narrative of "the formation of a diasporic intellectual" contains a significant corrective to the deep-seated association of cultural studies with the tradition of English cultural criticism and to its widely celebrated distinctively national profile (Gilroy 5). Namely, in all accounts of the emergence of British cultural studies, the New Left plays a prominent role as its precursor. It is usually understood as a peculiarly British response to the events of 1956, although it chiefly consisted of colonial intellectuals that came from outside in order to study

in England. They founded the New Left because they were not allowed to join the established bases of the British left. As one almost forgotten postcolonial theorist, the Tunisian Jew Albert Memmi (200), once noted, “if the French proletarian,” himself being a victim of oppression, “wants to feel a little taller, whom is he to step on if not on the immigrant worker?” When immigrants are at stake, class happens to be a much stricter gate-keeper of its institutions than nation. “A lot of us were foreigners or internal immigrants,” says Hall (*The Formation*, 492), “a lot of the British people were provincial, working-class, or Scottish, or Irish, or Jewish;” that is, they were all various kinds of internal and external “outsiders.” Without the history of colonial relations, these “outsiders” would hardly have become united, British Marxists would not have eventually joined them in the “Socialist Club,” and the journal *Universities and Left Review* never would have appeared. It follows that the New Left might be called British only in this postcolonial sense of diasporic identity. Starting from its very beginnings, the proud national(ist) history of cultural studies must be rewritten from a substantially revised cosmopolitan perspective based on a different version of dispersed and fissured identity.

The same seems to hold for such an elite European theory as French poststructuralism, repeatedly accused of having repressed the question of former colonies due to its focus on the eminently French libertine and revolutionary traditions. However, it gradually turned out to be more closely connected with the Algerian War for Independence than with the May 1968 embodiment of the French free spirit (Young, *White* 1). “Many of those who developed the theoretical positions subsequently characterized as poststructuralism came from Algeria or had been involved in the war of independence” (Young, *Postcolonialism* 413). It is true that Althusser, Bourdieu, Derrida, Lyotard, and Cixous, although in multifarious ways involved with Algeria, did not belong to any of Algeria’s indigenous peoples, but the subsequent history of Algeria has shown that this condition is “in its own way characteristically Algerian, for the many different kinds of Algerians ‘proper’ do not belong easily to the Algerian state either” (414). Like in many other non-European as well as European countries, Algerian national consciousness emerged only as a consequence of colonial oppression. Algeria had nothing in common as a country until 1830, when the French government was established and struggle against it began (Hobsbawm 138). The same holds for the extremely heterogeneous intellectual body of French poststructuralism, whose single common trait was its stubborn theoretical resistance to any centralization. Robert Young consequently interprets this as a composite theory, developed out of the bitter Maghrebian experience of French centralized colonialism, which makes it inextricably Algerian and French at the same time.

However, even if we graft the irremovable “traces of the other” onto our national substance, as modern literary theory presses us into doing in order to understand literature per se beyond its national derivations, the question remains whether the outcome of such othering surpasses the colonial relation as it was envisaged. Can trauma really be worked through after a nation makes its cosmopolitan detour in order to return to itself in a full consciousness of the other? Can one ever be fully conscious of the other, or does the other stop being the other at the moment one becomes fully conscious of it? That is, if it ceases being the other, the colonial relation is not surpassed, but reiterated and intensified. This line of thought casts certain doubts on the delineated cosmopolitan spirit of modern literary theory, recalling the colonial roots of this concept as it was envisaged by German and French proponents of the Enlightenment. How can something rooted in colonialism be expected to achieve decolonizing effects?

To recollect, the doctrine of the Enlightenment availed itself of the concept of mankind in order to make narrow-minded people aware of their common human obligations. In his treatise *On the Common Saying: “This May Be True in Theory, but It Does not Apply in Practice,”* Immanuel Kant (*Political*, 88/9, translation modified) thus addresses the “inborn duty” of each member in the “series of creatures” (*Reihe der Zeugungen*) to contribute to mankind’s progress by gradually extending its horizon of freedom. In order to qualify for the prestigious status of world citizen, man is now obliged to reflect upon this necessary engagement from the cosmopolitan viewpoint supposedly inherent in his natural disposition, instead of blindly engaging in the course of events as the state citizen would. However, not all races appear to be aware of what Kant takes to be the natural human disposition (*Naturanlage*); some are even disqualified in advance from the competition for the status of world citizen. It hardly needs to be mentioned that, all enlightened efforts notwithstanding, those that endorsed cosmopolitan feelings toward the end of eighteenth century did not exactly belong to the majority of the world population. However “natural” the self-cultivating spiritual imperative may have been (and still is) considered by its proponents, inasmuch as it rests on the frustrating postponement of immediate bodily imperatives, not everybody was (and still is not) ready to follow it.

Yet, whoever gives it up has to be excluded from the cosmopolitan community of mankind, dropped from universal history and put under appropriate supervision. In his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (111), Kant accordingly states that the difference between the white race and the Negroes is “fundamental” and “as great in regard to mental capacities as in color;” there is no one Negro “ever found who presented anything great in art or science or any other praiseworthy qual-

ity” because they are simply “so talkative that they must be driven apart from each other with thrashings.” Hegel provided the final explanation in *The Philosophy of History* (93): “The peculiarly African character is difficult to comprehend, for the very reason that in reference to it we must give up the principle which naturally accompanies all our ideas – the category of universality.” The cosmopolitanism of enlightened thinkers does not stop with the Negroes, though; some other races and nations deserve equally harsh discrimination. Johann Gottfried Herder, praised throughout the world for his democratic spirit, declares in his *Reflections on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind*: “We regard here the Jews as a parasitic plant hanging on almost all European nations and drawing more or less profit from their juice” (Herder 289). The Gypsies for their part are “strange, pagan, underground people,” equally spread all over Europe and “by birth far removed from everything that is called divine, decent and civilized,” stubbornly “keeping loyalty to this humiliating destiny,” deserving therefore “nothing but a harsh military discipline” (290). Europe can consider itself happy, he proceeds, for not having, for instance, Huns or Bulgarians as inheritors of the lands of the ancient Roman Empire, but Germans in particular, with their “stark, beautiful and noble stature (*Bildung*), decent customs, reliable reason, and honest mentality” (*Gemütsart*, 293).

It is this deeply disturbing nationalist heritage of cosmopolitanism that indicates its colonial roots. What sets the limits on its declared comprehensiveness is the inassimilable otherness of the other that resists serving the “imperialism of the same,” enhancing its possession and aggrandizing its fame. At first sight strongly opposed, cosmopolitanism and nationalism actually enable and support each other. Cosmopolitanism increases its power only if nations confirm its standards in their humble way; and they become acknowledged as nations precisely if they accept imperfectly applying these standards in order to then be ranked according to the estimated deflection of this application. As a consequence, mankind, instead of becoming a unity, divides into those that set the standards and those that more or less imperfectly apply them.

Inasmuch as it follows the cosmopolitan route of national self-assertion, literary theory, while setting the shifting standards of “literature per se,” also runs the risk of performing the same discrimination of mankind instead of uniting it. Its cosmopolitanism is also haunted by nationalism. It therefore makes sense when Tihanov (424) connects the “foundational paradox” of emergent central-east European literary theory with the “dual premise” inherent in Romantic critical tradition; that is, on the one hand “national enthusiasm” that for the first time provided texts for the national canons and, on the other, “universal human values” that, also for

the first time, turned literature into a unique surpasser of national borders. Modern literary theory is indeed heavily indebted to the Romantic concept of literature. Forming in Goethe's mind only after the experience of Romanticism, the cosmopolitan idea of world literature already puts all the writers under discriminating pressure to adjust to its standards and rhythm. Pascale Casanova (90–92) repeatedly highlights the pressing tempo of the world republic of letters established in the nineteenth century to which everybody was invited to surrender to prevent a merciless sanctioning of his or her work. However, what was it everybody was supposed to be surrendering to if each day passed a new judgment on the developing whole of world literature?

The idea of world literature seems to have for the first time really exemplified what Kant, in a brilliant anticipation of his *Critique of Judgment*, called “beautiful (or fine) art” (as opposed to both “mechanical” and “agreeable” art, §44). In the famous §46 of his first book, he states that a work of fine art cannot be determined by a given law because it emerges as a product of a genius that sets its own laws through it. Such exemplary art mobilizes the reason of those that enjoy it through a disengagement of the given form operating under the spell of habit. The paradoxical effect of it could be described as the mobilization of reason through the deactivation of its inhabited application. This is why it places such a heavy demand even on the “transcendental philosopher.” Through a successive self-exemption from application by any of the existing logical laws, it uncovers its own law as something to be followed precisely in its unprecedented inapplicability. Because its rule cannot serve as a precept, because no artist is able of formulating it, it cannot be imitated, but only followed (Kant, *Critique* 138/9). Can one imagine a more traumatic condition for artistic creation and reception? Now, my point is that precisely this successive self-exemption from application is the operation exemplified by the Romantic literature per se: as nobody is able to formulate its standards in an agreeable way, they cannot be applied but only followed in their exemplary inapplicability. Conceived as an instrument of incessant transgression, the Romantic idea of literature introduces what Giorgio Agamben called the state of exception.

In a brief but dense study devoted to this topic, he seemingly cursorily refers to Kant's analysis (Agamben 39). Having stated that the French Revolution introduced a new type of legal norm without any applicability, he associates it with Kant's category of reflective judgment (37). As is known, the exceptional law instituted by the French revolution to be applied to elected political cases, and the one instituted by Kant to be applied to elected aesthetic cases, are historically contemporaneous phenomena. Agamben's analogy suggests that pre-modern art was replaced by modern

art not only at the same time, but also with the same effect as when the normal legal state was replaced by the state of exception. Putting their applicants under traumatic pressure, both the modern state and modern art deactivate all applicable laws in order to mobilize a search for a new and extraordinary law that would eventually deactivate it itself. Inasmuch as it is indebted to such art that does not fall under any given law, modern literary theory is a direct product of the simultaneously traumatic and productive condition invoked by Agamben. It emerges out of a permanent state of exception haunted by an evasive demand that nobody is able to formulate. This is why all attempts by literary theory to come to terms with this trauma, for better or for worse, cannot but end with acting it out.

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## Teorija in travma

Ključne besede: literarna teorija / kolonializem / kozmopolitizem / kulturni imperializem

Na literarno teorijo se navadno gleda kot na otroka svetovljanskega duha z vsemi njegovimi dobro znanimi dvoumnostmi. Ni dolgo tega, kar je Galin Tihanov (2004) objavil izzivalno tezo, da se je ta duh rodil v narodno prebujajočih se deželah srednjevzhodne Evrope kot posledica razpadlega avstro-ogrskega cesarstva. Glavni predstavniki te literarne teorije so živeli odmaknjeno življenje izseljencev, popotnikov in izgnancev, ki se niso nikoli popolnoma prilagodili novemu okolju. Zaradi takega travmatičnega vmesnega položaja so bili zmogli »odtujiti« pristnost vsake dane literature tako, da so jo ulomili skozi prizmo druge: izpeljali so abstrakcijo kot ključno operacijo moderne literarne teorije. Enaka neugodna, a ustvarjalna svetovljanska zapuščina – kot nujna predpostavka teoretske abstrakcije – velja za tiste teoretike iz srednje in vzhodnoevropskih dežel, ki so se v desetletjih po vojni preselili v Francijo in prispevali k obogatitvi naratologije, strukturalizma in poststrukturalizma. Zato se zdi, da lahko selitev iz zapuščenih ostankov nekdanjega političnega in/ali simbolnega cesarstva v njegovo zdaj ločeno središče označimo kot subverzivno operacijo, ki je ustvarila moderno literarno teorijo. S tako nepričakovano vrnitvijo, značilno za vsako travmo, teorija opominja oba, nekdanjega kolonizatorja in nekdanjega koloniziranca, da četudi sta njuni nacionalni ozemlji politično ločeni, pa njuna medsebojna, etična, kulturna in intelektualna odvisnost še deluje. Če se v tej ločeni konstelaciji odvisnost ne bo ponovno nasilno izrazila, jo bo treba na obeh straneh potrpežljivo predelati. A tudi če na našo nacionalno substanco cepimo neodstranljive »sledove drugega«, ostane vprašanje, ali izid takega prepoznavanja drugega v sebi presega kolonialni odnos, o kakršnem je bil govor. Ali je travmo res mogoče predelati, potem ko narod opravi svoj svetovljanski ovinek, zato da se vrne k sebi in se popolnoma zave drugega? Ali se bomo sploh kdaj lahko zavedali drugega, ali drugi preneha biti drugi v trenutku, ko se ga v popolnosti zavedamo?

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