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Patrick M. Bray, *The Price of Literature: The French Novel's Theoretical Turn*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2019. xiv + 147 pp. Notes, works cited, and index. \$99.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN: 978-0-8101-3933-6; \$34.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN: 978-0-8101-3932-9; \$34.95 U.S. (eb). ISBN: 978-0-8101-3934-3.

Response by Patrick Bray, University College London.

I would like to thank the Chief Editor of *H-France Review* for the invitation to respond to Adam Watt's review of my 2019 book, *The Price of Literature*. Since the publication of my book, I have changed universities and moved continents, which has given me a broader perspective on French studies that may be useful in contextualizing my book for readers of H-France.

In *The Price of Literature*, I wanted to examine how theory functions in a novel and how we as readers and scholars react to the theory in the purportedly fictional works we study. Looking at the invention of the concept of "literature" as a liberated art form at the turn of the nineteenth century, the book proposes that literature's newfound freedom to represent anything at all meant that it could not, paradoxically, represent a theory of itself, except as subversive form or what I call "the novel's theoretical turn." The book focuses on five writers (Mme de Staël, Balzac, Hugo, Flaubert, and Proust) who pushed the limits of literary representation by making the theoretical literary and the literary theoretical. In the conclusion, I propose that the value of literature, its "price," lies in how it distributes meaning by lending form to thought—literature allows us to distinguish the differences between discourses and also to question these shifting distinctions.

The book's three interrelated concepts (the price of literature, the theoretical turn, and the distribution of literature) all describe ways of understanding the epistemological stakes of literary writing since 1800. Moreover, these same stakes are mirrored, I would argue, in the study of literature today, since the place or status of literary scholarship in the university is dependent on what truth (and of course what value given to that truth) can be found in our object of study. And just as the nineteenth-century writers I study performed a theoretical turn to upend established ways of thinking and introduced new concepts through formal innovations, literary scholarship at its best interrogates its own use of form, its own "distribution" of the literary and the theoretical. At its worst, I suggest, scholarship on literature seeks to contain the philosophical and political potential of creative texts by policing disciplinary boundaries and drawing exclusively on the authority of nonliterary texts. As Jonathan Culler defines it, "theory is work that succeeds in influencing thinking in fields other than those in which it originates." [1]¹ The

¹ Jonathan Culler, *The Literary in Theory* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2006), 3.

theoretical turn, as I propose, is a way for scholars of literature to be aware of the interdisciplinarity of their own thought and writing.

Consequently, since I advocated for a “theoretical turn” in scholarship that would expand and explore what it means to study literature, it was logical that I should take a risk (a considerable one given the strict policing of discourse in the academy) with my own academic writing. Throughout the book, but especially in the preface and the conclusion, I included personal reflections on my intellectual trajectory, and I made a deliberate attempt to write in a non-academic and more casual style, while maintaining scholarly and conceptual standards. By alternating between the formal and the casual, the scholarly and the personal, I hoped to call attention to the conventions we use in literary studies and to the types of arguments these formal strictures force us to make. I wished to avoid the excesses of literary scholarship that often seeks to exhaust a field (and its reader) by saying everything possible about a topic in order to avoid criticism, at the cost of saying nothing at all. Instead, I opted for a more informal essay style that followed a clear argument as I confronted the text. This allows for certain suggestions left unsaid, certain plays with words that allow the reader to continue the work of interpretation instead of beating it to death. The most powerful works of criticism (by Barthes, by Beckett, by Rancière), for me at least, shine for their brevity and originality, even when they refuse to conform to academic conventions or leave out extensive bibliographies.

What made me feel that a personal critical viewpoint would be worthwhile for readers was that my experience was not unique, given the specific context of French (and foreign literature) studies in the US. As a professor at an American research university and as Chief Editor of *H-France Salon*, I felt I had a handle on certain trends in the field that went beyond simply research topics but looked into the future of professional literary studies in French. Again, we tend to relegate professional issues to the margins, though the material conditions of our work invariably influence our research.

Just as I tried to balance different discursive styles in my writing, I opted for a short book that was still rigorous within the American peer-review system. I was inspired by the shorter books published in the UK, for example the Research Monograph in French Studies series at Legenda founded by Malcolm Bowie, which encourages monographs of around 50,000 words (and therefore shorter than my book). The US peer review process in university presses is very robust, so it was a gamble to propose a stream-lined academic book for such a stringently disciplinary system. The quirks of peer review meant two rounds of responding to the reviewers’ requests—sometimes having to add awkward explanations (like the one Watt notices at the end of the Balzac chapter) or moving the order of paragraphs around which then leads to confusing changes in style. The book inevitably reflects the material conditions of its production, for better and for worse. Sometimes errors get through peer review—as Watt remarks, I misplaced Albertine’s death in a negligent rhetorical flourish. As I noted in my Proust chapter, errors in Proust criticism are very common due to the form of Proust’s novel and can reveal as much about our desires as readers as what is in the text itself. It was poignant therefore that I misplaced Albertine’s narrative demise (embarrassingly placing it at the end of *La Prisonnière*), and that nearly a dozen readers of the book before publication also missed it; my error may reveal something about our collective ways of reading Proust—perhaps that we expect a different narrative break between the two volumes or that we already anticipate Albertine’s death earlier in the novel.

Watt is skeptical about my assessment of the state of French studies, likening it to a “disgruntled conversation overheard in a staffroom.” Perhaps this is due to the difference of academic contexts between the two countries, though I must say that UK academics I speak to seem even more alarmed than I do. After I wrote *The Price of Literature*, I left my professorship at Ohio State University for a position at University College London, but my position at OSU was not filled in French; this is the first time there has been no nineteenth-century French literature scholar at OSU in the long history of that French department (and OSU is one of the two largest universities in the United States). Moreover, funding models in the two countries are starkly different—the National Endowment for the Humanities, what might be compared to the British Academy or to the AHRC or to the European Research Council, favors projects that have only practical or pedagogical goals. Private funding is also scarce and similarly favors individual researchers working interdisciplinarily over those working in collaborative groups as is much more often the case in Europe. Money and politics greatly influence what kinds of research get done, and so it should not be a surprise that research trends in the UK are different from the US. While the situation in the UK certainly looks better for the moment, Brexit and the general problems of the university should make us very cautious. The state of the field globally is very much in danger when French studies in the US is threatened.

Watt’s UK-focused context might explain his fear that undergraduates may be inspired by my work. In the US, it is fairly uncommon for French undergraduate students to read extensive amounts of secondary material and increasingly they read comparatively little literature (as I remark in my book with reference to the curricula of the four American universities where I have taught: Harvard, Indiana, Illinois, and Ohio State), and so I did not write the book with undergraduates in mind. In the UK, from what I have seen, the practice of teaching secondary material is much more widespread, and my first book has been taught in many classrooms across the UK. So far no one has reported any harm or adverse reactions among colleagues or students due to my scholarly work. Surely, we can teach students to recognize different discursive registers and multiple ways of making an argument. In my own classroom, I encourage students to be creative and to analyze texts closely—but I do not dictate to them, just as I would not to my colleagues, pre-conceived ways of thinking or writing.

At the end of the book, I introduce the notion of a “distribution of literature” and call for literary studies to be thought of as the discipline (or anti-discipline) that investigates this distribution. By so doing, “we have a more flexible understanding of texts and structures of knowledge that can adapt to the time and to different sensibilities, encompassing an ever-greater diversity of thought and perspectives” (p. 121). As we find ourselves attacked on all fronts (within the university and without), we should encourage a variety of approaches and a diversity of perspectives that can question what it means to study literature in French.

NOTE

[1] Jonathan Culler, *The Literary in Theory* (Stanford CA.: Stanford University Press, 2006), p. 3.

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