



“Confetti”, 1894, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec; from *L’Affichomania: The passion for French posters* by Jeannine Fali

## Literary Criticism

KEITH HOPPER

At the height of the “Theory Wars” in the early 1990s, the Cambridge historian Geoffrey Elton memorably dismissed post-structuralist theory as “the intellectual equivalent of crack”. Since then, post-structuralism has lost much of its allure, while literary theory has fragmented even further into a mishmash of diverse rhetorical modes and ideological discourses. For readers approaching literary studies for the first time, the multiplicity of approaches on offer can easily lead to a state of interpretative vertigo, which academic professionalism does little to assuage. This pedagogical disconnect provides the rationale for the admirable *Literary Agenda* series published by Oxford University Press – “a series of short polemical monographs” which focus on “the importance of literature and of reading in the wider world”.

In the preface to *Tradition: A feeling for the literary past*, Seth Lerer lays his critical cards on the table: “this book affirms the value of close and nuanced reading for our understanding of both past and present. Tradition, in my view, is not a thing, it is an activity. To work within tradition is to make anew, not just to curate”. Lerer insists that this does not mean a return to the “moral preoccupations” of F. R. Leavis’s *Great Tradition*: “I do not wish to efface forty years of theoretical and critical professionalization. I do not think that literature . . . offers a univocal set of authorial intentions, which, once discovered, ends any process of interpretation”. Instead, Lerer proposes a more supple balance between text and context, combining the “personalized historicism” of T. S. Eliot with the “distant reading” strategies of Franco Moretti: “the study of

literary works not as verbal artefacts but as markers in the social exchange of taste and knowledge”.

In theory, this allows room for the political and social criticism of Edward Said and Judith Butler (even Geoffrey Elton gets an honourable mention for his understanding of “power and enforcement” in the Tudor period). In practice, Lerer seems more in step with Harold Bloom’s quest to discover the “the hidden paths that go from poem to poem” (*The Anxiety of Influence*, 1973). However, Lerer rejects Bloom’s grandiose notion of the Western Canon in favour of “a private canon of great books”, and is more interested in demonstrating the ecstasy of influence rather than its anxiety. Lerer’s own personal canon is largely made up of books about books or, more precisely, texts which celebrate the affective power of reading: “My writers here were all great readers. Dickens and Orwell, Rushdie and Bradbury, Dickinson and Frost, Anne Bradstreet and Gjertrud Schnackenberg, Chaucer, Dante, Virgil – all built their literary structures on the scaffold of their bookshelves”.

The real pleasure of Lerer’s essay lies in his elegant close readings and his fluid mapping of intertextual pathways. *Tradition* is a quietly affecting book, not least in the way that it encourages readers to reflect on their own “archives of the self”, and the particular stories that have shaped us along the way.

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