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Theory's Umpires

DEPENDING ON WHOM YOU TALK TO, literary studies in the past twenty years have either been destroyed or liberated. The villains are Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, or else they are the heroes. Currently they and their followers occupy the central positions of authority in what are still called the humanities, particularly English departments. They are in and remain in. Those who would criticize them do so from the outside. Now editors Daphne Patai and Will H. Corral have collected two decades worth of essays attacking critical theory under its many names—deconstruction, postructuralism, New Historicism—and doing so with the persuasive power all such attacks have when the other side is given no chance to rebut. The volume in question,¹ over 700 pages including its index, amounts at times to a major assault but just as frequently seems like a collection of grievances, in which the outs snipe at the ins.

The opening essays decry the ascendancy of theory as “a total explanatory force,” in the words of Denis Donoghue’s “Theory, Theories, and Principles.” Donoghue does an excellent job of giving the genealogy of the current state of affairs in which the many things we lump together as critical theory have come to rule:

The theories that claim to constitute Theory in the past two centuries include Kant’s *Third Critique*, Hegel’s *Aesthetic*, Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil*, Marx’s *Capital*, Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*, Derrida’s *Of Grammatology*, and de Man’s *Allegories of Reading*. The list is not exhaustive. Even if one of these works seems to refer only to local considerations, as *Capital* does, it claims endlessly allusive power of explanation and prophecy; it sets no limits on its rhetorical scale.

The list is not exhaustive because he leaves out Michel Foucault’s highly influential attacks on the Enlightenment, including *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. Donoghue does point out that the kind of reading encouraged by deconstructionists like Derrida and de Man was already evident in the work of William Empson, for example. The difference was Empson did not indulge in

¹ THEORY’S EMPIRE: An Anthology of Dissent, ed. by Daphne Patai and Will H. Corral. Columbia University Press. \$72.50; \$29.50.

the “high dismissiveness” that characterizes so many of today’s critical theorists. As Donoghue says, referring to Empson’s deconstructive reading of Gray’s “Elegy,” he “did a lot of such work without making a fuss about it and certainly without claiming that he should have institutional privilege over his rivals.” But this acknowledgment also reveals what motivates many of those gathered here to ventilate their anger. Critical theory has carried the day and in doing so taken no prisoners. The arrogance of the victors is hard to endure, especially for those who formerly held sway.

Of course, those who formerly held sway also think their successors are just plain wrong. A number of essays seek to refute Derrida and Foucault and those who think like them. This is one of the most compelling yet doubtful aspects of the anthology since none of those who are criticized is allowed to respond. Thus, Raymond Tallis refutes all post-Saussureans by arguing that they have not understood Saussure, the Swiss linguist whose teachings serve as premises for structuralists and poststructuralists alike. Nothing in Saussure’s linguistic theory, Tallis argues, would suggest that language creates its subject, as the deconstructionists would have it, resulting in Roland Barthes’s famous claim that the author is dead. “Language,” states Tallis,

is predicated upon the prior existence of speakers: a most curious state of affairs that raises innumerable questions. Among them is the question of how the speaker could refer to himself or herself—or want to do so—unless he or she existed in the first place: self-reference must presuppose some kind of preexisting self to refer to.

Literary historian M. H. Abrams, taking on his critic, New Historicist J. Hillis Miller, complains, “His central contention is not simply that I am sometimes, or always wrong in my interpretation, but instead that I—like other traditional historians—can never be right in my interpretation.” He asserts that Miller has bought into a Nietzschean theory that there is no such thing as correct interpretation and that this is one of the premises of Derrida. Abrams expresses the general helplessness of his fellow contributors to the volume:

It is of no avail to point out that such criticism has nothing whatever to do with our common experience of the uniqueness, the rich variety, and the passionate human concerns in works of literature, philosophy, or criticism—these matters are among the linguistic illusions that the criticism dismantles.

He is certainly correct, that ideas like commonality of experience and humanity are dismantled by Miller and others. Critical theory’s assault on the universal, coming particularly from New Historicists in their critiques of postcolonialism, is deeply troubling. But Abrams adds a note, too, that is telling. “There are,” he admits,

rich rewards in reading Miller, as in reading Derrida, which include a delight in his resourceful play of mind and language and the many and striking insights yielded by his wide reading and by his sharp eye for unsuspected congruities and differences in our heritage of literary and philosophical writings.

Success in the world of ideas continues to be based on who tells the best story. One of the gripes of the anti-theorists is that the followers of Miller and Derrida, et al., don't tell it as well as their masters.

One of the best essays in this regard is also one of the shortest. D. G. Myers begins "Bad Writing" by asserting, "Bad academic writing is nothing new." He demonstrates the latest in this tradition by quoting the sentence that won the journal *Philosophy and Literature's* 1994 Bad Writing Contest. The winner, Judith Butler, author of *Gender Trouble*, is, he observes, "routinely placed in the company of Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida." And yet, since she keeps company with these characters, I suppose one shouldn't be surprised at the way she writes. Still, there's a certain *schadenfreude* to be had in observing the following display of idiocy in her winning sentence:

The move from a structuralist account in which capital is understood to structure social relations in relatively homologous ways to a view of hegemony in which power relations are subject to repetition, convergence, and rearticulation brought the question of temporality into the thinking of structure, and marked a shift from a form of Althusserian theory that takes structural totalities as theoretical objects to one in which the insights into the contingent possibility of structure inaugurate a renewed conception of hegemony as bound up with the contingent sites and strategies of the rearticulation of power.

Another winner, but only in second place, of the contest Myers cites is Homi K. Bhabha, an oft-quoted critic of postcolonialism, who composed the following:

If, for a while, the ruse of desire is calculable for the uses of discipline soon the repetition of guilt, justification, pseudo-scientific theories, superstition, spurious authorities, and classifications can be seen as the desperate effort to "normalize" formally the disturbance of a discourse of splitting that violates the rational, enlightened claims of its enunciatory modality.

About this, Myers observes, "Academic writing wasn't supposed to be this way . . . it was supposed to seek truth." And yet I imagine both Butler and Bhabha would counter that the truth itself is problematic. Myers concludes by sounding a note in the chorus of grievance. The problem,

he points out, is not with academic writing *per se*, but with what this bad writing is a symptom of, “the political reality of contemporary universities.”

No longer defined by the common attachment to ordinary rational principles, they have become institutions of one-party rule. To canvass for this party is to promote your career; to dissent from it is to put your career at risk.

While this is true enough, still the complaint comes from one who, apparently, is a member of the party out of power.

Another vexing issue confronted is the influence of identity politics on literary theory. No one in the academy would, I think, deny the importance of African American literature, Asian American literature, Hispanic American literature, Native American literature, and what is called World literature, work by writers in English from Africa and South Asia. Ethnic identity has been taken increasingly seriously as a field of literary study during the past twenty years, as have feminist literature and gender studies, followed by gay literature and queer theory. Invited into the academy, these fields and modes of thought lead to inquiries where one must tread carefully. For whether or not Foucault is behind or beneath all this, with his theory that truth and power are inseparable, the critics in *Theory's Empire* attribute to his influence the worst excesses, particularly of feminist and queer theory. One risks suggesting that one is a misogynist or a homophobe or a racist by inquiring about the validity of these fields and their theories. The problem identified by some of these essays is the way a kind of absolutist thinking, which gives rise to suspicion and assault, in the most *ad hominem* forms, has emerged in these very fields. Todd Gitlin calls it “the aggrandizement of difference” in his essay “The Cant of Identity” and sees a contradiction between the anti-essentialism of critical theory and many of those who profess identity politics. They are, he says, “fundamentalists—in the language of the academy, ‘essentialists’—and the belief in essential group differences easily swerves toward a belief in superiority.” And yet Gitlin acknowledges that the “American pace of change constantly eats away at identity.” There may be no societal reason for critical theory, which seems to have been invented, as the critics argue here, for the providing of tenure to conventional young scholars. But it is very hard to dismiss identity politics, even at their most extreme, because we know they are the consequence of deeply ingrained prejudices in American society.

Nevertheless, it is not pleasant to be accused from the superior vantage point Gitlin identifies. Here I can speak from the experience of being accused of homophobia because of a criticism I made of John Ashbery's *Flow Chart* in these pages (“The Curse of Discursiveness,” *The Hudson Review*, Vol. XLV, No.1, Spring 1992). Disparaging Ashbery's poetry and his readership, I wrote, “I think that, unlike his admirers,

Emperor Ashbery knows he is naked.” This observation was seized on by a critic involved in queer theory who detected in my comment an inflection of homophobia. Homophobia is, in my opinion, a vicious prejudice. I thought I was talking about a strong element of posturing and insincerity in the Ashbery’s work, *of which he was fully aware*. I made the mistake of speaking in metaphor, which current theorists choose to ignore or cannot digest, as they pursue literal-minded agendas. In order to refute my argument, the critic resorted to an *ad hominem* attack, but only because he assumed I had done the same. If that is the way critical discourse is to be carried on, then we have reached a moment of bad faith.

Of all the issues dealt with in *Theory’s Empire*, the most vexing is the revolt against scientific inquiry and discovery and the resultant claim that science, like the humanities generally, is a social construction and, like all social constructions, incapable of identifying any essential truths, mainly because there are none. The chapter with the greatest effect collects essays not written by those who have been professionally supplanted by critical theorists, but figures like Noam Chomsky and Alan Sokal, bemused by the logical step which posits that if, as Foucault has suggested, the Age of Reason was nothing more than an imperialism of the mind, then the science extending from that time to this must also be regarded as a kind of imperialism. In these essays there is less a tone of outrage than one of patient explanation. Chomsky informs a conference on the subject that science is always amending its suppositions; he admits to being puzzled by the accusations of Western absolutism and arbitrary signification aimed at the scientific method. Only the metaphors science uses might be called social constructions. If science is not in pursuit of truth, it is surely after fact. Thomas Nagel exposes the *ad absurdum* extension of anti-scientific thinking when he describes the French feminist Luce Irigaray’s theory that Einstein’s famous equation, $E=mc^2$, may be “sexed,” for “having privileged what goes the fastest.” Alan Sokal notoriously exposed the hunger for such thinking in his hoax essay “Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity” in *Social Text* in 1996. Yet Sokal’s phony essay and the positive editorial response to it were a logical extension of Foucault’s revolutionary interpretation of the Enlightenment. If his interpretation has been widely accepted by critical theorists in the academy, why was anyone surprised by Sokal’s essay?

Another dubious aspect of critical theorists is their attack on the very humanism that gives them the power and freedom to speak. A number of the essays here identify this contradiction. Politically the proponents of critical theory have been caught in their contradictions just as surely as their predecessors. The most glaring case in point is their ambivalent and ambiguous response to the fatwa by the late Ayatollah Khomeini against Salman Rushdie for his novel *The Satanic Verses*. One of the postcolonial theories based on Foucault is Gayatri Spivak’s claim that the West has done linguistic violence to the local cultures of the East.

Russell Jacoby, in his essay “Thick Aestheticism and Thin Nativism,” shows how this led her, among others, to the worst sort of noncommittal obfuscation with regards to Khomeini’s fatwa, a gross offense against the freedom of speech she herself enjoys in the West. As I recall, the best response to Rushdie’s dilemma was from an Anglo-Asian novelist who chided him that he should have known better, crossing fanatics like Khomeini. It did not excuse the offense, but it simply reminded people that Khomeini and his ilk were and are fanatics, as they continue to demonstrate. The critical point is that such an event makes it clear that writing can have political consequences, and when the time comes to take a stand, you look both foolish and dishonest if you hide behind the rhetoric that has served you so well professionally, even as you pose as politically progressive.

The question, finally, for academics is not how did we get here, for here we are. But where do we go from here? The reason this is the question is that the academy has always been a place where one or more theories of or approaches to literary study have been supplanted by others. That anyone is surprised or outraged at this is laughable. It took a colleague of mine, who studied the literature of the Indian subcontinent, to inform an older, very conservative member of the department that the so-called canon was, in fact, an invention of the British raj, circa 1835, to educate its clerical class in India. That we study contemporary literature by living writers in the academy today baffled W. H. Auden back in the 1960s. If you were a young student, like Robert Penn Warren, at Vanderbilt University in the 1920s, even though you had the novelty of John Crowe Ransom’s course in writing the short story, your instructor in English literature, Edwin Mims, expected you to memorize 500 lines of poetry, most of it by Tennyson. My own field, creative writing, made its inroads in English departments throughout the twentieth century, starting with courses like Ransom’s. Necessity and interest drive these changes.

The best proposal for what comes next is Marjorie Perloff’s in her essay “Crisis in the Humanities? Reconfiguring Literary Study for the Twenty-first Century.” She begins by reviewing the meaning attached to poetics by Plato and Aristotle, and the relation of poetics to rhetoric, and its importance as a way of understanding the fictive, the imaginary. She regrets that the emphasis on cultural studies makes poetry little more than a “cultural production.” Cultural studies, she notes, “is committed to the demolition of such ‘obsolete’ categories as poetic autonomy, poetic truth, and formal and rhetorical value.” While there is value, she finds, in seeing poems as reflections of their time, cultural studies has little or no use for their uniqueness as works of art and, indeed, “can dispense with poetics altogether.” Her fellow contributors to this volume say as much in their essays, all with varying degrees of alarm. Perloff, however, sees a possible resolution to this crisis in the Internet. She lists numerous Internet sites where one can access work by and about William Blake, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Ezra Pound, and

Samuel Beckett. Her argument is that if the academy is going to ignore these writers, and, in fact, all literature, then “the action moves elsewhere.”

Who is accessing these sites? Students, surely, but not only students or their professors. It seems that there are actually thousands of people “out there” who want to learn more about Beckett’s work and share their interpretations of and enthusiasm for that work.

To Perloff, the proliferation of Internet sites devoted to these and many other authors is also a sign that the reading of literature is not dead. Still, someone must teach these indiscriminate readers how to approach these Internet riches. The pleasure of reading needs to be emphasized.

What is urgently needed—and here again Internet possibilities may lead the way—is a more “differential” and inductive approach to literary study, indeed to the humanities in general. This does not mean “covering” all periods of English (or whatever) literature or making one’s way through as many canonical works as possible. But the wider one’s reading in a specified area, the greater the pleasure of a given text and the greater the ability to make connections between texts.

While there might be something of the desperate measure here, still I hear Randall Jarrell saying, “Read at whim.” Perloff would add, “Read widely at whim.” It sounds like a plan. Whether or not a return to the pleasure of reading will sweep the academy remains to be seen.

Meanwhile, since it is a cultural construction and therefore a human institution, the academy will continue to be subject to notions that range from the sublime to the ridiculous. Many of the essays in *Theory’s Empire* amount to anecdotal accounts that illustrate the ridiculousness of the opposite camp. Everyone can tell tales on colleagues whose narrow- or broad-mindedness has resulted in statements of questionable taste and intelligence. When I arrived at Vanderbilt University over twenty years ago, the attitude toward the study of authors was still “the deader the better.” When we tried to hire a specialist in African Caribbean literature, a colleague insisted that in fact there was no such thing. When someone countered that there was, indeed, and it was being written by the likes of Edward Kamau Braithwaite and Derek Walcott, he responded that being written didn’t make it literature. Yet after the ice was broken, and we began to hire young critical theorists, the change in attitude toward the literature of their fields was unsettling. After I heard our new specialist in Renaissance and gender studies give a very good talk on desire in *Twelfth Night* and how its characters crossed sexual boundaries, I asked her if this crossing or transgression was not what made the comedy funny. Her response: “That’s where we differ. I don’t think the comedies are funny.” I have heard of a pair of

Marxists in an English department who only communicated on paper, refusing to speak because speech could not be critiqued. At the undergraduate level I have had the experience of advising an honors thesis in which a student wished to argue that sexism kept Diane DiPrima from being as well known as the male Beat Poets. When I suggested that the quality of her work might also have been a factor, she countered that she wasn't interested in whether the work was good or not. And once, in conversation with a colleague at the University of Leeds, when I mentioned that some of my students knew more about "The Flintstones" than D. H. Lawrence, he responded cheerily, "It's another kind of literacy!"

Frank Kermode who contributes an essay, "Changing Epochs," to the last chapter of the anthology reminds his fellow academics that all of us work with people "who hate or despise literature and literary studies." This was true in the previous regime as well. But Kermode adds about these colleagues, with the tendentiousness that marks this collection throughout, "and institutional change has given them power." Maybe so, but power, so called, in the academy has a tendency to change hands in surprising ways.