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Literature in Theory

Peter Berkowitz on ***Theory's Empire: An Anthology of Dissent*** edited by Daphne Patai and Will H. Corral

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Daphne Patai and Will H. Corral, eds.,
Theory's Empire: An Anthology of Dissent.
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The love of literature is endangered, and for more than three decades a large faction of professors of literature has contributed to extinguishing the flame.

True, large social forces are also implicated. Literature takes time, but these days women as well as men work long hours, and for many, the satisfaction they derive from their jobs provides an essential component of happiness. Literature requires leisure, but more and more adults, to say nothing of children, live frenetically paced, ruthlessly scheduled lives and learn to survive by multitasking — on the job, at home, out on the town, on the road. Literature needs sustained concentration, but TV and film have conditioned us to take our entertainment in one helping: Even in the movie theater, which shuts out distraction, we grow antsy if the tale requires more than two hours to move from beginning to middle to end. Literature calls for calm, reflection, and the ability to be alone with oneself, but the telecommunications revolution, proceeding from telegraph and telephone through radio and film to TV, cassette tapes, video, CDs, DVDs, email, Internet, cell phones, instant messaging, and podcasting, enables us to surround ourselves with an endless flow of entertaining stimulation that serves as a buffer

between us and our thoughts. Literature depends on the willingness to linger over a phrase, to luxuriate in an image, to peruse a passage again and again, but information-age inundation by the written and spoken word encourages gluttony for, rather than pleasure in, words. Although any particular individual can go a long way toward solving the problem with the flick of a few switches and the pulling of a few plugs, there is no going back for society as a whole, and there will be no quick and easy fixes as society moves forward.

In these circumstances, it would be advantageous if our universities provided a haven from the forces so inimical to the love of literature. To do this, they need only live up to their official mission, which includes safeguarding knowledge of the cultural and intellectual treasures of the past, transmitting an appreciation of them to today's students, and, at the same time, equipping students to challenge authoritative interpretations and think for themselves. Unfortunately, the teaching of literature at our universities today routinely makes matters worse, burying knowledge of the classics, deadening students' literary sensibilities, and demanding students' assent to a partisan, dogmatic, and incoherent system of beliefs.

This bizarre campaign goes back almost 40 years, to the importation from France into American literary studies of the then-fashionable ideas of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, philosopher and literary scholar Jacques Derrida, and historian and social critic Michel Foucault, among others. It flies the flag of a thing sometimes called deconstruction, sometimes postmodernism, sometimes poststructuralism, but most commonly, among literature professors, Theory. A recent article in The Chronicle of Higher Education ("The Fragmentation of Literary Theory," December 16, 2005) confirms that though it has splintered into schools and sects, Theory remains a powerful force in literature departments around the country. In the superb introduction to their valuable anthology of dissent from the dominant paradigm, editors Daphne Patai and Will H. Corral quote from the introduction to the authoritative Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism (2001) to illustrate the tremendous claims that professors make on Theory's behalf:

> *There are very good reasons that . . . contemporary theory now frames the study of literature and culture in academic institutions. Theory raises and answers questions about a broad array of fundamental issues, some old and some new, pertaining to reading and interpretive strategies, literature and culture, tradition and nationalism, genre and gender, meaning and paraphrase, originality and intertextuality, authorial intention and the unconscious, literary education and social hegemony, standard language and heteroglossia, poetics and rhetoric, representation and truth, and so on.*

The precious "and so on" further emphasizes, as if the string of amazing topics concerning which Theory "raises and answers questions" did not make crystal clear, the all-but-limitless claims to complete and final knowledge asserted by Theory's partisans. Indeed, whatever version of it is embraced, Theory is to a considerable segment of the present generation of literature professors what the Dialectic was to previous generations of Marxist intellectuals — the key to almost everything.

Contemporary literary theory did not emerge in an intellectual and cultural vacuum. The subordination of art to argument and ideas has been a long time in the works. In The Painted Word, a rumination on the state of American painting in the 1970s, Tom Wolfe described an epiphany he had one Sunday morning while reading an article in the New York Times on an exhibit at Yale University. To appreciate contemporary art — the paintings of Jackson Pollock and still more so his followers — which to the naked eye appeared indistinguishable from kindergarten splatterings and which provided little immediate pleasure or illumination, it was "crucial," Wolfe realized, to have a "persuasive theory," a prefabricated conceptual lens to make sense of the work and bring into focus the artist's point. From there it was just a short step to the belief that the critic who supplies the theories is the equal, if not the superior, of the artist who creates the painting.

But literary studies in the American academy took a bigger, bolder step. A common point of departure was the promising presumption that a particular theory — about, say, social class, or the laws of economic motion, or psychosexual development, or the

works of literature. From this provocative starting point, however, many professors rallied to the belief that Theory laid bare inalterable and unarguable truths and in the process generated a devastating critique of existing political institutions — at least those that were liberal and democratic and of the West — and a radical program for their moral and political transformation.

As the essays in Theory's Empire — drawn from a range of critics and written over the course of the past three decades — demonstrate, Theory's central tenets are few, are neatly summarized, and purport to describe the world as it really is: "There is," as Derrida famously put it, "nothing outside the text." Indeed, all the world is text. Equivalently, what passes for knowledge — not only in literature but throughout the humanities, social sciences, and even the natural sciences — is socially constructed, or a text that is collectively authored. Texts are radically indeterminate and inevitably self-subverting. No author can successfully inscribe his or her intention in a text or convey meaning through literature. Every text is no more and no less than what a reader makes of it. Cultural studies — the examination of how hierarchy and subordination are produced and performed in everything from mundane habits, mass media, and popular culture to international relations and theoretical physics — is the highest form of intellectual inquiry, and because all the world is text, literary theorists are its consummate practitioners.

It might appear that nothing in particular follows from these propositions for politics, or that what follows is that in politics, as in the interpretation of literature, anything goes. If you can just as easily argue that the tragedy of Othello — in which the dark-skinned Moor, owing to Iago's vile treachery, violently murders his beloved wife Desdemona — is really all about racism, or sexism, or suppressed homosexual yearning, then you should be just as free to contend that Shakespeare sought to explore in Othello the vulnerability of even deep love, the power of jealousy to disorient and blind, and the viciousness and destructive force of envy. But the encouragement of pluralism — whether in interpreting literature or in pronouncing on politics — is not the way Theory works.

Indeed, as Dennis Donoghue shows in his contribution, "Theory, Theories, and

provides a representative passage in which Derrida proclaims the transformative agenda to which Theory gives rise:

> *If, then, it lays claim to any consequence, what is hastily called deconstruction as such is never a technical set of discursive procedures, still less a new hermeneutic method operating on archives or utterances in the shelter of a given and stable institution; it is also, and at the least, the taking of a position, in work itself, toward the politico-institutional structures that constitute and regulate our practice, our competencies, and our performances. Precisely because deconstruction has never been concerned with the contents alone of meaning, it must not be separable from the politico-institutional problematic, and has to require a new questioning about responsibility, an inquiry that should no longer necessarily rely on codes inherited from politics or ethics.*

The particulars of Theory's transformative agenda remain murky. But the tendency is plain. The vast majority of causes that Theory's proponents champion involve the demand for the liberation of imagination and desire from the allegedly false and malevolent limitations imposed by two constitutive elements of the West. One oppressor is the tradition of rational thought from Socrates and Plato through the Enlightenment and its contemporary heirs. The other is the Western tradition of individual liberty and equality under law as developed and instituted in the West but especially in the United States.

Indeed, to reconcile Theory's affirmation of the radical indeterminacy of texts with its claim that such indeterminacy generates an emancipatory and typically egalitarian political program, one would have to suspend the ordinary laws of reason — recognized, contrary to Theory's extreme pronouncements, not only in the West but around the globe and from time immemorial. If texts are all there is and the world is nothing but a text, if moral and political standards like everything else are constructed

emancipated to rewrite other people's lives in whatever ways that strike their fancy and that they can get away with?

The contradictions of Theory, however, don't end with the simultaneous rejection of the authority of reason and morality and the affirmation of an extreme progressive political agenda. Proponents also claim that all readers already and inevitably engage in Theory while themselves engaging in a relentless effort through their scholarship, classroom teaching, publications, and hiring and promotion decisions to bring into the fold — or banish — nonconformists and unbelievers. Proponents of Theory proclaim that all is in flux and everything is up for grabs, and at the same time they treat that proclamation as an article of faith too self-evident or well-established to question. And they argue that texts cannot create or convey a stable meaning — to believe the contrary is to commit the sin of "essentialism" — while maintaining that the history of the West is essentially a history of oppression, suppression, and repression and that the classics of the West reliably exhibit the sins of racism, sexism, and homophobia.

Lest one get carried away with a rehearsal of Theory's excesses and deficiencies, it is important to pause and stress that the problem is not literary study informed by theory but literary study overwhelmed by bad theory. Theory certainly can bring into focus sin and villainy as well as virtue and heroism. In the study of literature, historical and social scientific knowledge of race, class, and gender can complement wider learning in the humanities. It is the rigidity and vacuousness of the form of theory that goes by the name Theory that needs to be rejected.

In Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles (1979), a short book widely regarded as a classic of the movement, Derrida displays, along with a delight in language and an interpretive virtuosity, Theory's worst qualities. The book is of special significance because if there is a single thinker to whom proponents of Theory turn even more than Derrida for inspiration and authority, it is Nietzsche. As Morris Dickstein observes in "The Rise and Fall of Practical Criticism," Derrida's book begins valuably by showing that Nietzsche's scattered remarks on women shed light on his understanding of the elusiveness of truth. Given the enticing opening sentence of Nietzsche's Beyond Good and Evil — "Supposing truth is a woman, what then?" — and his following observation that

receives strong textual support. But Derrida has larger ambitions. He wants to show that "there is no such thing either as the truth of Nietzsche, or of Nietzsche's text."

Seizing upon a fragment surrounded by quotation marks in one of Nietzsche's unpublished manuscripts — "I have forgotten my umbrella" — Derrida observes that we cannot know Nietzsche's intention:

> *Because it is structurally liberated from any living meaning, it is always possible that it means nothing at all or that it has no decidable meaning. . . . It is quite possible that that unpublished piece, precisely because it is readable as a piece of writing, should remain forever secret. But not because it withholds some secret. Its secret is rather the possibility that indeed it might have no secret, that it might only be pretending to be simulating some hidden truth within its folds.*

So far so good, though Derrida does expend an exorbitant amount of verbal energy affirming the unexceptionable truth that the meaning of a century-old sentence fragment lifted from an unpublished manuscript in a foreign language can be difficult if not impossible to discern.

With admirable restraint, Dickstein summarizes Derrida's exceedingly extravagant next step:

> *From this exquisite miniaturization, however, Derrida leaps without warning to the largest generality: the possibility that "the totality of Nietzsche's text, in some monstrous way, might well be of the type 'I have forgotten my umbrella'"*

> *be true of Derrida's own "cryptic and parodic" text, which, he suggests, may be no more than a joke, a parody of his own ideas, and so on.*

Of course from the inability to specify the meaning of a single, particularly obscure sentence fragment, nothing whatsoever follows for the interpretation of Nietzsche's larger body of work, much less for the nature of literary interpretation as a whole. Perhaps, as Dickstein gently suggests, the trouble is with Derrida's credulous American scholarly readers, who treat his fantastical speculation as if it established the futility of the quest for meaning as a truth for all time.

Or perhaps, had Derrida spent less time indulging in grandiose game-playing and devoted more energy to studying the movement and drama of Nietzsche's thinking, he could have used his considerable gifts to shed light rather than to spread fog. Certainly he would have increased the likelihood of gaining insight had he focused on Nietzsche's books rather than on scribbled notes and sentences wrenched from context. For example, Derrida might have seen that what Nietzsche seeks is not to demonstrate that the world is reducible to our interpretations of it but that truth can be won by those who learn to love it well. In addition, Derrida might have come to appreciate the genuine tensions that constitute Nietzsche's thought. True, in Beyond Good and Evil Nietzsche asserts that "There are no moral phenomena at all, but only a moral interpretation of phenomena" (Sect. 108). But in the same book he repeatedly affirms the reality of a rank order of men and moralities (for example, Sects. 59, 61, 202, 203, 287). It is neither the one opinion nor the other, but the contest he sets in motion between them and Nietzsche's unflinching struggle to understand the claims of both, that sets Beyond Good and Evil apart from Theory's blithe indifference to egregious contradiction. If Derrida had been more patient and thorough in his reading, he might also have pondered Nietzsche's view that textual criticism run amok — the "critique of words by means of other words" as Nietzsche put it in Section 3 of "Schopenhauer as Educator" (and elaborated in The Case of Wagner) — is an expression of modern decadence. And if Derrida had concentrated not only on Nietzsche's criticism of the ambition to self-knowledge but also on Nietzsche's praise and pursuit of it, Derrida and his Theorist followers might not have looked for the will to power in every corner of the

Reform of the teaching and study of literature will take time. Universities change slowly. The institution of life tenure, and the central role played by senior faculty in the easy-to-manipulate peer review process in the humanities at both university presses and scholarly journals combine to create an academic system in which true believers determined to reproduce their ideas and disseminate their opinions exercise largely unaccountable power. Progress will depend on faculty, many of whom have been educated, in Theory's arrogant and angry terms, to "interrogate" texts, recovering what David Bromwich, in "Literature and Theory: Notes on the Research Programs of the 1980s," calls "tact," or the capacity to "show some feeling for the language in which the work was written, for the period in which its author wrote, and for the particular inflections that its style gave to the idiom it inherited and revised." From where, though, will the inspiration and impetus to acquire the necessary training or retraining come?

Perhaps those in whom the love of literature is young and eager offer some hope. Can aging hipsters rambling on in the classroom in opaque language about oppositional aspirations and transgressive interpretations while living comfortable and conformist lives really be a pretty sight to curious and intelligent college students? Many of those students choose to study literature at the university because in high school, or at home, or by chance they were exposed to the likes of Homer, Sophocles, Dante, Chaucer, Molière, Cervantes, Goethe, Keats, George Eliot, Dostoevsky, Melville, Virginia Woolf, and Proust. Or J. K. Rowling, C. S. Lewis, and Tolkien. Or Saul Bellow, Tom Wolfe, Kazuo Ishiguro, and A. S. Byatt. And perhaps such students can reawaken in their professors the pleasure in a story well told, the delight in a character who surprises and confounds, the thrill in a formulation that captures an emotion, that sets free a thought, that spurs the imagination to further flights. It is in these exciting experiences that the love of literature is born.

Those professors can make a good start in healing themselves by reading Wayne Booth's wonderful "Hippocratic Oath for the Pluralist," with which Theory's Empire concludes. And then they should solemnly dedicate themselves to its principal ordinances:

i. I will publish nothing, favorable or unfavorable, about books or articles I have not

> I will try to publish nothing about any book or article until I have understood it, iv.
> which is to say, until I have reason to think that I can give an account of it that the v.
> author himself will recognize as just.
>
> I will take no critic's word, when he discusses other critics, unless he can convince me that he has abided by the first two ordinances. I will assume, until a critic proves otherwise, that what he says against the playing style of other critics is useful, at best, as a clue to his own game. I will be almost as suspicious when he presents a "neutral" summary and even when he praises.
>
> I will not undertake any project that by its very nature requires me to violate Ordinances i–iii.
>
> I will not judge my own inevitable violations of the first four ordinances more leniently than those I find in other critics.

The collective embrace of such ordinances would doubtless restore sanity to the discipline. But in its final lines, Booth's Hippocratic Oath provides the individual scholar no exemption or excuse in the event of the discipline's failure to right itself: "We could achieve all this, as a profession. But I will not allow my own practice to depend on the remote hope that we will."

Whether university literature departments can become sources for the inspiration and cultivation of the love of literature is of concern on more than narrow educational grounds. To be sure, most students will have at most only a few courses over four short college years to study the literary treasures of the West and beyond. Their literature professors should not be permitted to rob them of this golden opportunity to read and revel in novels, plays, and poetry by force-feeding them instead indigestible abstractions, formulaic denunciations, and pretentious proclamations. But also, paradoxical as it may sound, literature taught for its own sake serves a vital public interest in a liberal democracy. In our busy and distracted age, this may be even more true. Literature transports students to other times and places. It acquaints them with

glorious variety. In short, the study of literature for its own sake helps prepare citizens for the challenges of freedom.

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