

*Paul Smith*

## **Introduction**

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that traditional modes in the study of the humanities in North America have, in the last ten or twenty years, been drastically questioned. Primarily responsible for this has been the influence of multifarious theories and methodologies (a whole spectrum of structuralist, post-structuralist, deconstructionist, psychoanalytical, feminist and post-marxist thinking) challenging the time-honoured praxis of the humanist. The extent of the alteration can be measured by the institutional status attained by figures like Jacques Derrida, Fredric Jameson, Hayden White, Dominick LaCapra, Terry Eagleton, and Jonathan Culler, all of whom have in some way or another helped to make the theoretical respectable over the last few years.

But this theoretical influx has been by no means either homogeneous or uncontested. Apart from the institutional resistance to most forms of theoretical undertaking—a resistance itself taking many forms, including not only straightforward assaults in academic or journalistic contexts, but also what can only be described as cynical labour practices—numerous tensions and seemingly unresolved questions exist amongst the practitioners of theory themselves. Often these are not mere differences of opinion within a context of solidarity, but symptoms of quite bitter struggles for the vindication of particular modes of thinking. Even where the bitterness is absent, or where solidarity of aims and assumptions exists, it becomes clear that the contemporary practice of theoretical work is not a cohesive body. For instance, there is still no common ground of intellectual agreement between, say, deconstruction and Marxist thinking; the often formalist approaches of structuralism and the fantastic post-structuralist work of writers like Deleuze are divided by more than the particle “post”; within deconstructionist thought, or within feminist thought, there are many competing programmes and antagonistic arguments.

None of this is to say that theory as such has failed. Indeed, quite the opposite seems to be true: theory has now gained a quite solid footing in the humanities academy. However, the goals and the efficacy of theoretical speculation are now coming under intense scrutiny by intellectuals who are themselves well versed in it. Such scrutiny is, in my view, currently necessary exactly because of the apparent success of theory. We are becoming more and more accustomed to the institutionalisation of theoretical work: many major university presses publish little else; other presses manage to *sell* little else; a whole generation of theoretical representatives is now tenured or tenurable in universities. The list of epiphenomena could go on. What's important is that many scholars—younger ones especially—are now beginning to suspect a stagnation of the theoretical project of the sixties and seventies and to construct an informed re-evaluation of it.

I'm not at all certain that all of the contributors to this issue will recognise their own avowed motives in what I have just proposed. I am certain, however, that all the essays here can be understood as making their own contributions to this development. That is to say, I think that all the work in this issue is in a sense "after theory."

During a recent conference at Brown University, entitled "Feminism/Theory/Politics," some of the most noteworthy papers and discussions were conducted around the question of what could be salvaged for a feminist politics from the theoretical explosion of the last decade or so. Speakers as various as Jacqueline Rose, Naomi Schor, Nancy Miller, Gayatri Spivak and Stephen Heath seemed to me to be deliberately negotiating the kinds of tensions and problems implied by the phrase, "after theory." In the North American context feminist thought has been commonly marked by the double inscription of what might crudely be called questions of women's experience, on the one hand, and theoretical discussions of femininity on the other. Probably in no academic sphere have the apparently conflicting demands of pragmatic politics and theoretical elaboration been so crucially intertwined. The history of that connection is long and complicated by now; but if there is a tendency at the moment for feminism to put the strictly theoretical approaches of deconstruction, Lacanian psychoanalysis, or the androcentric theorising of writers like Barthes under close critical scrutiny, this can perhaps be taken as an important indicator. Theoretically informed feminism is currently addressing the recognition that theory must always be mediated through specific historical and political realities if it is to be informative.

In this sense feminism is, as in so many other instances, exemplary. It seemed, therefore, not inappropriate that the first few essays in this issue should be concerned with feminism. The first is by Juliet Mitchell

who has made many important theoretical and practical contributions to feminism. Her sense in this essay that psychoanalysis is in a privileged position to mediate the interaction between theory and what she calls humanism is certainly controversial. Yet the essay identifies the terms which are at least implicitly of interest for the rest of the issues and locates them in our contemporary situation.

The problematic that Mitchell's essay proposes is taken up in relation to her two primary informing concerns—psychoanalysis and feminism—by the accompanying essays by Andrew Ross and Christina Crosby. Ross is concerned to push the logic of the discoveries of psychoanalysis towards a radical questioning of the very rationality that underpins the project of theory. His essay suggests ways of countering the charge often made against psychoanalysis, that it is appropriate merely to a conservative or complicit politics. Crosby's paper explicates some of the ways in which different manners of feminist theory are worked through. Carol Bové's essay on Proust and Kristeva follows these two essays and is offered as an example of how feminist work is in the process of reconstructing practical work from a base in theory.

Feminism is not, of course, alone in its attempts to take stock of and go beyond post-structuralist theory or, at least, to draw lessons from it. In most of the disciplines of the human sciences scholars have been busily re-adjusting to what amounts to a radical shift in the presuppositions and assumptions of traditional academic inquiry. One thinks, for example, of an historian such as Hayden White, intellectual historian Dominick LaCapra, or left intellectuals such as Fredric Jameson: these and many others have been contributing to not simply the recuperation of continental theory in North America but equally to its reconstruction in a new field. One of the effects of this work has been a kind of miscegenation of the disciplines and the opening up of some of the institutional rigidities of the human sciences.

Most of the work in this issue, then, arises out of that effect. Yet it remains remarkable that in this major shifting of paradigms in the human sciences most of the protagonists are men who have little, if any, interest in the work of feminists within similar problematics. The question of men's involvement in and contribution to feminist thought is not a simple one, but it seems a crucial one. Stephen Heath is often cited by feminists as one of the few men who take seriously feminist work. His essay here not only addresses the question of men's relation to feminism, but also exemplifies the kind of discussions that emerge when the human sciences' recent privileging of theory is displaced in favour of a privileging of institutional and social issues having had repercussions far beyond the usually accepted purview of the academy.<sup>1</sup>

Four of the essays in this collection—those by Konstan and Isenberg, Rooney, Durant and Polan—are intended to offer a sampling of the kind of work that is currently being undertaken in traditional literature departments. What marks these pieces of work in common is, I think, a willingness to draw away from the accepted methodologies and acceptable readings with which literature departments have long been comfortable. But beyond that, and in their different ways, they also exhibit a willingness to pass beyond the orthodoxies of structuralist and post-structuralist theory. For example, David Konstan, a classicist, and Charles Isenberg, a slavist, draw upon critical efforts as diverse as Russian formalism and the Foucauldian history of sexuality in order to stimulate their re-reading of a major canonical text, namely, Theocritus' poetry. And Dana Polan's essay makes use of an even wider spectrum of critical reference points to provoke a reconsideration of the political lessons that can be drawn from Sartre's work. Whereas Konstan's and Isenberg's essay comments directly on the effects that theory forces upon traditional academic criticism, Polan's essay points further away, suggesting work that needs to be done in a wider political context. And Alan Durant's essay on the notion of secondary orality is similarly a more practical exercise insofar as it shows how the jurisdiction of English studies can be usefully extended to systems of representation—broadcasting in this case—which are part of the public sphere.

Ellen Rooney's piece is a critique of the results and consequences of American mainstream literary criticism's realisation that, despite what it may prefer to claim, its work is necessarily predicated upon particular theoretical preassumptions. If it is true that critics such as Stanley Fish function to reassure traditional humanism about the effects of this realisation and about the supposed dangers of continental theory, then Rooney's criticisms are especially apt at a time when the conservatism of academic humanism is receiving multiple shots in the arm from both North American governments. Her own stance is not, however, a polemical defence of non-humanist theory; rather, she simply uses that theory as a way of approaching the political underbelly of the reception of theory in mainstream criticism.

Like Durant's and Rooney's papers the final five essays in this collection all address in one way or another the current situation of our institutions, practices and readings. One of the major preoccupations of contemporary critical discourse is to 'historicise' itself, or to locate both itself and its objects in their appropriate social, historical and political contexts. Stephen Bann's essay is a crucial one here in that it offers a perspective on what epistemological positions are available to the historian after theory's considerable influence on historical studies.

His work is supplemented by Paul Bové's attempt to show what the work of 'historicisation' might involve in relation to particular texts, and by Lisa Frank's wide-ranging discussion of history. Frank's essay ostensibly deals with theology but in fact is concerned to elaborate primarily upon the reception of continental theory in North American critical discourse and to look at that work in its wider political situation and implications.

An important part of the responsibility of the humanities, and a large chunk of the liberal arts, is to preserve and carry on a culture.

For some 15 to 20 years now there has been a serious degree of embarrassment, of distancing, even of repudiation of that culture on the part of many of the people whose responsibility, one would think, is to transmit it. Many people in our colleges and universities aren't comfortable with the ideals of Western civilization . . . . All right, if the purpose of the institution is not to transmit that culture, then what is the institution's purpose? Find me a better one, O.K.?

The speaker is William J. Bennett, the U.S. Secretary of Education, in an interview published just after his elevation to that position.<sup>2</sup> Bennett's utterance is one that cannot possibly be isolated from its specific historical context: the rise of the new right in most first world countries. One—*only* one—of the ideological efforts of the new right has been focussed on educational apparatuses. Specifically under attack has been a scarcely marginal sentiment in the humanities: that both the nineteenth century notion of culture and also the traditional humanist methodologies for studying cultural phenomena are dangerously inappropriate to an understanding of late capitalist cultural formations and change. The last two essays in this collection—the first by Alan Kennedy, and the second by myself, Henry Giroux, David Shumway and James Sosnoski—attempt in their different ways to reiterate that sentiment and to suggest at least partial answers to William Bennett's challenge.

#### NOTES

1. Heath was a participant in the two 1984 Modern Language Association convention sessions which were sponsored by the Society for Critical Exchange and entitled "Men in Feminism." The speakers, Paul Smith, Andrew Ross, Alice Jardine, Elizabeth Weed, Judith Mayne and Peggy Kamuf were addressing the questions raised by Heath's essay in this issue. The panels' papers are published in *Critical Exchange*.
2. *New York Times*, February 17, 1985, p.20E.