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Introduction

Theory and the Curriculum: A Colloquium

When the organizers of the 1993 Atlantic University Teachers of English conference asked me to organize a session on "theory and the curriculum," I realized very quickly that I did not want to take for granted what either of these concepts meant nor how the relationship between them might be articulated. I therefore wrote the introductory notes which follow, as a point of reference for the panelists I had invited. All four were very co-operative in agreeing to work within the framework I suggested, and I have edited their lucid and thoughtful papers in the belief that they will be of interest to a wider audience.¹

According to Gerald Graff, theory is what erupts when what was once silently agreed in a community becomes disputed, forcing its members to formulate and defend assumptions that they previously did not even have to be aware of (139). Divergent theories can obviously exert contradictory pressures on the curriculum, and as Graff has noted in several contexts, the normal reaction of university departments is to accommodate difference by simply adding new faculty or new courses. This strategy may not always work, however; and even if it does, it leaves the conflicts to be negotiated by the student. When that happens difference is only implicitly articulated in the curriculum, and this adds to the strains on teachers. Graff notes: "How well one can teach depends not just on individual virtuosity but on the possibilities and limits imposed by the structures in which one works" (114).

Graff's solution to the problem of incompatible theoretical paradigms and to the concomitant culture wars is well known: he proposes that the conflicts themselves should become part of the curriculum. In a sense, as he himself acknowledges, this is already the case. But attempts to formalize this proposal, and to move beyond the status quo, always meet with resistance (and here I had in mind Paul de Man's essay, "The Resistance to Theory"). Any consideration of theory and the curriculum should not simply assume that it is a matter of making some creative new suggestions and then implementing them. Theory meets with resistance at all levels; from another perspective, theory itself is a form of resistance to the established way of doing things, to the course of obstacles, the rat race, or the career track which, etymologically at least, constitute the "curriculum" (*curriculum* Latin = a race, course, career from *currere* to run). Resistance may take forms as basic as a refusal to hire theorists who challenge existing ideas; it is more likely to take the form of giving theory a room to work, but refusing its proposal to remodel the architecture of the department. The structures of the institution, the values and beliefs of colleagues, and the expectations of students, all offer points of resistance. Theory, on the other hand, is in a variety of ways a *resistance* to the authority of interpretive paradigms, and in postcolonial criticism the term resistance has a particular field of force. Furthermore, "theory" is, as will emerge in the papers which follow, a contested term, so for that reason too there can be no simple recipe for making changes to the curriculum; however, the papers give a cogent discussion of some of the issues involved in teaching theory and in thinking about the curriculum in literary studies.

Victor Li's paper begins with the fact of "theory" being a contested term, and traces some of the issues that are involved in the disputes over its meaning and its place in the study of literature, making helpful reference to de Man's "The Resistance to Theory." Victor's caution about the desirability and usefulness of a theory-survey course is echoed in David Baron's contribution. He covers some of the same ground but from the point of view of pedagogical practice. His paper is a report on what it is actually like to teach one of the theory courses that we so often argue about. Victor's comment that "instead of asking, 'Is there theory in this class?' it may be more productive to ask, 'Is there class in this theory?'" is developed at length by Teresa Hubel's paper. She argues that

class is the repressed term in academic discourse. Marjorie Stone's response adroitly relates the three papers and develops its own argument about two kinds of theory and their relative prestige.

NOTE

1. I am most grateful to the AUTE organizing committee at Acadia University, and in particular to Alan Young and Richard Davies, for asking me to organize the session.

WORKS CITED

- DeMan, Paul. "The Resistance to Theory." *The Resistance to Theory*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986. 3-20.
- Graff, Gerald. *Beyond the Culture Wars: How Teaching the Conflicts Can Revitalize American Education*. New York: Norton, 1992.