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Resistance to Recurrent Ideas in Critical Theory

Over the course of the "Theory decades", the recurrent ideas in Theory were subject to sustained critique. The main ideas proffered by Theory were never unchallenged and never amounted to a consensus, never mind a resolution of enquiry. Such was the excitement about these ideas, and such was the low view sometimes taken of dissenters, that for a time it certainly might have *seemed* as though a consensus was emerging, but, given the number of dissenting voices, not to mention the persuasiveness of them, it is impossible to think in terms of even a common outlook.

Now more than ever there is a desire to move on from the tenets or dogmas of Theory. It is time, in the view of many, to turn a number of sacred cows out to pasture. Against that background, it is especially interesting to look into the unhappiness with the big ideas in Theory registered by dissenting commentators over the course of the 80s and 90s, as well as the 2000s. This article seeks to provide a conceptually-organized account of the critique of critical theory which has accompanied it since its conception.

In this piece, I'll make use of the very concise account of "recurrent ideas in critical theory" (33) offered by Peter Barry in his *Beginning Theory*. Barry's objective is to introduce a roster of critical theories, running from structur-alism through feminist criticism to eco-criticism. He prefaces the survey of these theories with a short discussion of some of the most prominent, or, in his wording, "recurrent", ideas in critical theory. These, then, are ideas which crop up time and time again, often in decidedly different contexts. I'll provide Barry's summations of key ideas one or two at a time, before adding commentaries on the critique of those ideas presented by various non-conformist figures.

As it will become clear, the opposition to the different ideas takes different forms. Opposition to ideas 1, 2 and 5 is often confrontational, and more often than not outright refutation. With respect to ideas 3 and 4 (where the focus is, by and large, deconstruction), the tone is conciliatory in the responses I discuss, as though the objective were a relaxing of opposition.

This piece is structured around the notion of resistance to the recurring idea. For that reason it does not present in an *organised* manner the ideas we can work with once we have moved beyond critical theory. Those ideas are referenced throughout, however, and can be listed here at the outset: they are liberalism, universalism, fallibilism, "Enlightenment thinking", as well as two further ideas spoken of at the very end of this piece.

Resistance to Ideas 1 and 2

We might begin by carefully reading through the first two ideas Barry presents under the heading of "Some recurrent ideas in critical theory". (I have provided his account of the first idea in full and an edited version of the second.)

1. Many of the notions which we would usually regard as the basic 'givens' of our existence (including our gender identity, our individual selfhood, and the notion of literature itself) are actually fluid and unstable things, rather than fixed and reliable essences. Instead of being solidly 'there' in the real world of fact and experience, they are 'socially constructed', that is, dependent on social and political forces and on shifting ways of seeing and thinking. In philosophical terms, all these are *contingent* categories (denoting a status which is temporary, provisional, 'circumstance-dependent') rather than *absolute* ones (that is, fixed, immutable, etc.). Hence, no overarching fixed 'truths' can ever be established. The results of all forms of intellectual enquiry are provisional only. There is no such thing as a fixed and reliable truth (except for the statement that this is so, presumably). The position on these matters which theory attacks is often referred to, in a kind of shorthand, as *essentialism*, while many of the theories discussed in this book would describe themselves as *anti-essentialist.*

2. Theorists generally believe that all thinking and investigation is necessarily affected and largely determined by prior ideological commitment. The notion of disinterested enquiry is therefore untenable: none of us, they would argue, is capable of standing back from the scales and weighing things up dispassionately: rather, all investigators have a thumb on one side or other of the scales. [...] The problem with this view is that it tends to discredit one's own project along with all the rest, introducing a *relativism* which disables argument and cuts

the ground from under any kind of commitment. (33-34)

What Barry outlines in these passages are best thought of as the strong versions of two ideas, which entail the "cruder version" (Kronman 180) of social constructionism, out and out relativism, and the notion that ideals such a neutrality and objectivity are never possible to even the smallest degree, a conviction which typically comes with a sense that identity and opinion are inextricably bound up with one another. Anthony Kronman provides us with a sense of the lineage of 1: "Its sources include Kant's transcendental idealism; Nietzsche's perspectivism and his notion of will to power; Foucault's account of knowledge as a technique of control; Marx's analysis of the 'superstructure' of ideas; Wittgenstein's anti-metaphysical philosophy of language; and the writings of American pragmatists (Dewey and Pierce, in particular)" (180). And Todd Gitlin, who is also focused on the strong version of the idea in question, suggests that 2, connected to identity politics, stems from the sudden enthusiasm in the States for Foucault's ideas, which emerged in the 70s and 80s, especially his insistence that "Knowledge was 'power/knowledge'" (405).

Significantly, the two ideas have been repeatedly critiqued as a *unity of ideas*. If we turn to the critiques in question, certain tendencies (of interest to us) stand out. In the first instance, critics of this general outlook take 1 and 2 at face value. They assume that the stance in question argues that *all* intellectual conclusions are limited, and that *no one* can lay any claim to authoritativeness. When they go on the offensive, their critique focuses on *fallacies* which attend this kind of reasoning. In her article "Staying for an Answer: The Untidy Process of Groping for Truth", Susan Haack speaks of the "passes for-Fallacy". Articulating a fallibilist viewpoint, she spells out the nature of the fallacy:

From the true fallibilist premise that what passes for truth, known fact, strong evidence, well-conducted inquiry, etc., is sometimes no such thing, but only what the powerful have managed to get accepted as such, the passes-for Fallacy moves to the false, cynical conclusion that the concepts of truth, fact, evidence, etc. are ideological humbug. (558)

And in his "Social Constructionism: Philosophy for the Academic Workplace", Mark Bauerlein draws our attention to the "genetic fallacy", which he defines (in conventional terms) as "the confusion of a theory's discovery with its justification" (343).

The most interesting critiques, however, amount to a sense that those who adopt the conclusions of 1 and 2 inevitably go on to adopt one of two *other* positions, or (worse) an odd combination of two different stances. Firstly, advocates of this general outlook may give up on "knowing" all together but substitute "the known" for the "politically desirable", thereby converting epistemology into ethics, the true into the good. Here it is not a question of truth or facts, so much as *the right politics*.

Of course, commentators have identified this imposture as a dead-end, and critique it accordingly. As Gavin Kitching has argued in *The Trouble with Theory*, it amounts to a simple equation of truth with preference (121), which represents an abandonment of Enlightenment principles. Those principles insist that "truth and the consequences of truth [...] be kept apart – both conceptually and emotionally" (110), Kitching reminds us. At universities, it results in a situation in which scholars dismiss the conclusions of opponent academics as "ideology", while conducting overtly political research themselves. Speaking critically of a new university culture which is replacing the old, Graham Good, in *Humanism Betrayed*, explains how, though "concepts such as impartiality, objectivity, and rationality are

viewed with suspicion or simply dismissed as ideological cover-ups for patriarchy", teaching nevertheless comprises "advocacy of the teacher's progressive views" (17).

Alternatively, one may respond the situation described in 1 and 2 by embracing "standpoint epistemology", which amounts to an open declaration of *authoritativeness* on the part of particular, political groupings and their members. But another set of objections present themselves the moment this view is advanced. Standpoint epistemology is every bit as hierarchical as the old hierarchy of authority; it simple inverts it. With the work of dissenters such as Todd Gitlin in mind, Patai and Corral treat this development rather wryly in *Theory's Empire*. They speak of the "fairy tale" promulgated by academe today, describing it as "a story in which every character is situated in a place on the hierarchy of identities, while the value of individual contributions is to be based on the basis of identity claims" (397). And of course this line of thinking raises questions about consistency, to boot, for, as some commentators have pointed out, as a result of its turn to standpoint epistemology, identity politics often (somewhat surprisingly) ends up embracing a kind of essentialism (Gitlin 409).

The most trenchant criticism, however, stems from the fact that, in the view of some observers, proponents of this kind of relativism are in some cases guilty of the most cynical kind of tactical maneuvering. They "stay on message" with respect to the notion that all intellectual conclusions are limited but also routinely suggest that their epistemological viewpoint is authoritative. It is Haack again who, using tough and confrontational language, calls foul:

Proponents of Higher Dismissiveness aren't always or unambiguously relativist, however; often they shift up and back between relativism and tribalism: between denying that it makes sense to think of epistemic stand-

ards as objectively better or worse, and claiming that their (non-white, Non-Western, nonmasculinist, non-scientific, etc.) standards are superior. Shielded by this strategic ambiguity, they can duck accusations that their relativism is self-undermining, and at the same time evade the necessity of explaining what makes their tribalist epistemic standards better. (558-559)

The resistance to this recurrent twofold idea, unsurprisingly, also takes the shape of a larger defence of (cultural) liberalism, which is of course predicated on the individual, owing to the fact that advocates of 1 and 2 explicitly or implicitly challenge liberalism. The model suggested by 1 but especially 2 comes with i) a way of conceiving of society, and ii) an idea of how we should make progress, based on that conception of society. It is not the case (it is argued) that members of the dominant groups (or the dominated, for that matter) successfully develop individuality. Rather, they have only a standard group member identity, shaped by the inherent logic of their group and their social world, from which there is no escaping. These are produced by history: there is no "transcendent subject". The new model, then, insists upon our thinking in terms of groups in society. *Improvement* is a matter of advancing the cause of underprivileged groups, while "checking" the privilege of those who are deemed to be in possession of it. Cultural studies, of course, as it is currently practised, is part and parcel of this model. The characters in fiction, authors and scholars are identified through their identities rather than their individuality, and the study of culture conducted along these lines hopefully leads to less inequality and more social justice.

But the supersession of the focus on the individual comes with losses, as critics have pointed out. The ultimate goal of improvements brought about via groups can be intimated through conceptions such as "justice" and "equality"; but that is to say nothing of

freedom. Historically, (cultural) liberalism is an idea which those on the Left and those to the Right have identified with. It argues that "It is only when the individual is enabled to form an individual synthesis of ideas, beliefs, and tastes that a principle of freedom is established in society" (Frye 257), and that first and foremost the university is the place where individuality may be developed and freedom therefore fostered. Of course, the first thing to say about this is that this process should certainly involve a process of detaching oneself from, say, racist, sexist and classist assumptions which permeate one's socio-cultural environment, which takes us back to the aims of the identity politics model. But what is intimated by the idea of forming an individual synthesis entails a much much bigger engagement with one's cultural traditions, which go far beyond the categories emphasized by identity politics, important though they are.

Resistance to Ideas 3 and 4

Let's proceed to Barry's accounts of recurrent ideas 3 and 4:

3. Language itself conditions, limits, and predetermines what we see. Thus, all reality is constructed through language, so that nothing is simply 'there' in an unproblematical way – everything is a linguistic/ textual construct. Language doesn't *record* reality, it shapes and creates it, so that the whole of our universe is textual. Further, for the theorist, meaning is jointly constructed by reader and writer. It isn't just 'there' and waiting before we get to the text but requires the reader's contribution to bring it into being.
4. Hence, any claim to offer a definitive reading would be futile. The meanings within a literary work are never fixed and reliable, but always shifting, multi-faceted and ambiguous. In literature, as in all writing, there is never the possibility of establishing fixed and definite meanings: rather, it is characteristic of language to generate infinite webs of meaning, so that all texts are

necessarily self-contradictory, as the process of deconstruction will reveal. There is no final court of appeal in these matters, since literary texts, once they exist, are viewed by the theorist as independent linguistic structures whose authors are always 'dead' or 'absent'. (34)

The idea outlined in 3 is usually referred to as "the linguistic turn". Idea 4 relates to *meaning*. The technical terms which usually get used in connection with 4 are "determinate" (for meaning which is somehow already in the text and unchangeable) and "indeterminate" (for the situation in which meaning is in no way predetermined). Once again, the two ideas are deeply related. Taken together, the two (rightly or wrongly) are taken to represent the main ideas of the school of criticism known as deconstruction, and they are associated (again, rightly or wrongly) with French philosopher Jacques Derrida.

Deconstruction, in effect, throws down the gauntlet, issuing a challenge to the traditional critic. The deconstructionist's message is that the traditionalist critic, owing to his or her critical orientation, can never attain accuracy in interpretation. The main proponent of deconstruction in the United States for many years was J. Hillis Miller. Speaking of Hillis Miller's view of his own criticism, M. H. Abrams states, "His central contention is not simply that I am sometimes, or always, wrong in my interpretation, but instead I – like other traditional historians – can never be right in my interpretation" (240).

As with 1 and 2, 3 and 4 provoked a large scale critical response. Most well-known is John R. Searle's critique of Derrida, or rather the "dust up" between Searle and Derrida in the late 70s. Following on from where Searle left off, other strong critics of Derrida and deconstruction took deconstruction to task. Tackling 3 and 4 head-on, Raymond Tallis's *Not Saussaure: A Critique of Post-Saussurean Literary Theory* was one of the first studies to cri-

tique these ideas and their larger context. And John Ellis's *Against Deconstruction*, published one year after Tallis's monograph, upbraids Derrida and deconstructionists for what its author views as their countless wrong conclusions and misunderstandings.

The most thoughtful commentaries on ideas 3 and 4, however, are not the *refutations*, as it were, but ones which attempt to provide a *context* for deconstruction. What a number of commentators argue (displaying more generosity than deconstructionists, one might say) is that we should think of parallel contexts and parallel premises. To start with Abrams himself, in his view, Hillis Miller and Derrida's conclusions are "conclusions which are derived from particular linguistic premises" (240). Abrams names these "graphocentric premises", a phrase which obviously needs unpacking. The logocentric is a matter of prioritizing speech over writing, especially when studying language through a conceptual model. Converting the traditional set up, Derrida and Hillis Miller prioritize writing. What is more, they cast writing (écriture) in a special light. Writing is nothing more than handwritten black marks on a page; it has a *graphic* presence and no more than that. This shift in focus from speech to writing leads to an understanding of language in which the subject (the person producing speech) and his or her ordinary, *meaningful* speech are marginalised. The centre of language studies are now *noir sur blanc* (black marks on a white page), which ultimately leads to the situation in which the reader is engaged in "a free participation in the infinite free-play of signification" (244). Deconstruction flows inevitably from these premises: "Given the game Miller has set up, with its graphocentric premises and freedom of interpretative maneuver, the infallible rule of the deconstruction quest is, 'Seek and ye shall find'" (248-249). The point, however, is that deconstruction is of course based upon a set of premises; adopt another set of premises and you will arrive at another set of conclusions.

Abrams cleverly flags up the fact that, truth be told, Hillis Miller is a "double agent" (251). The book chapter (originally a conference paper) welcomes Hillis Miller to the podium, while humorously alluding to the fact that he (Hillis Miller) is bound to adopt logocentric premises for the purposes of his talk: "He will have determinate things to say and will masterfully exploit the resources of language to express these things clearly and forcibly" (251). This dovetails nicely with the next contribution made to the emerging sense that, in connection with meaning and interpretation, we should think in terms of parallel contexts. In "Limited Think: how not to read Derrida", chapter 3 of *What's Wrong with Postmodernism?*, Christopher Norris suggests that this double vision is actually "present" in the works of Derrida. Contrary to the widespread view, Norris argues that Derrida is not of the opinion that that "meaning is always and everywhere 'indeterminate'", regardless of how often that view has been connected with him (148), and consequently he (Derrida) does not insist on a divisive situation in which "meaning is either fully determinate or subject to a limitless 'undecidability'" (144). Norris, in effect, finds that Derrida is a double agent, too.

Wendell V. Harris critiques the deconstructionist challenge in his article "The Great Dichotomy", the next piece to suggest a double context for meaning and interpretation. Are the deconstructionists (or, as he renames them, the "hermetics") generally right about reference and meaning? he asks. He splits theorists into two camps: in opposition to the hermetics stand the apologists for hermeneutics. Rather than viewing one camp as right and the other as wrong, he argues, we should instead factor in the consideration that it is very much as though they are answering different questions. Rather than asking about "the abstract structure of language" (the hermetics' preoccupation), the hermeneutics group is focused upon "how we get on with the process of interpretation upon which we constantly rely". *Language in use* is the key concept. "Once one

asks the question in this way", states Wendell, "the characteristics of language that hermetic criticism asserts to be absolute barriers are seen not to apply to language in use" (196).

On the strength of these pieces it seems as though détente between the hermeneutics group and deconstructionists started to emerge over the period in question. Even Searle, Derrida's would-be nemesis, has recourse to the parallel world argument, in his "Literary Theory and Its Discontents". Searle "pans" Derrida in the article (as is his wont), but, towards the end of the piece, he admits that the controversy may come down to different interests:

> My impression is that a fair amount
> [...] of what passes for passionate con-
> troversies and deeply held divisions
> within literary theory is in fact mat-
> ter of confusions having to do [...] not
> with competing answers to the same
> question, but with noncompeting an-
> swers to different questions, different
> questions that happen to be expressed
> in the same vocabulary. (170)

However, what these commentators are doing is arguing for the intellectual integrity of what hermeneutic commentators set out to achieve in their work. If they are extending an olive branch to deconstructionists, generating a sense that under certain conditions deconstruction is important and valid, they are also offering stiff resistance to that theory's tendency to invalidate hermeneutic approaches. Just as ideas 1 and 2, then have been met with a robust response, so, even in the most accommodating critiques, ideas 3 and 4 are challenged

Resistance to Idea 5

The fifth recurrent idea relates to what Barry terms "'totalising' notion":

5. Theorists distrust all 'totalising' notions. For instance, the notion of 'great' books as

an absolute and self-sustaining category is to be distrusted, as books always arise out of a particular socio-political situation, and this situation should not be suppressed, as tends to happen when they are promoted to 'greatness'. Likewise, the concept of a 'human nature', as a generalised norm which transcends the idea of a particular race, gender, or class, is to be distrusted too, since it is usually in practice *Eurocentric* (that is, based on white European norms) and *androcentric* (that is, based on masculine norms and attitudes). Thus, the appeal to the idea of a generalised, supposedly inclusive, human nature is likely in practice to marginalise, or denigrate, or even deny the humanity of women, or disadvantaged groups. (34-35)

Just as it is the strong versions of a set of ideas that are intimated by 1 and 2, it is a strong version of 5 which threatens to become an orthodoxy in the humanities, and a great many dissenting thinkers have seen problems with these ideas, too. To begin with the notion of the "canon", in the Introduction to *The Critics Bear It Away: American Fiction and the Academy*, Frederick Crewes is at pains to distance himself from the hidebound attitude to the canon:

> I want keen debate, not reverence for great books; historical consciousness and reflection, not supposedly timeless values; and continual expansion of our national canon to match a necessarily unsettled sense of who 'we' are and what we ultimately care about. Literary culture, I believe ought to be an instrument not of fearful elitism but of democracy – and this means that a certain amount of turmoil surrounding the canon should be taken in stride. In my view there can be no such thing as a sacrosanct text, an innately civilizing idea, or an altogether disinterested literary critic. (xiv)

Nevertheless, theory has inspired an attack on the notion of canon that Crewes views unfavourably. His focus is scholars of American literature, and he presents his observations with reference to different generations of Americanists. In a first phase of the new era, New Americanists successfully foregrounded the need for a historicist perspective in literary commentary. The earlier liberal Americanists had paid insufficient attention to such concerns in their work. Crewes sees value in historicist approaches, and his conclusion is that the effect of such commentary is also benign: it was possible to match an interest in the "conditions of production" with a sense that we benefit from having a canon, even if it is a subject of debate as well as change. In a second phase, however, commentators began to promulgate the idea that *political* evaluations of literary works are of prime importance. Crewes is hard-hitting in his depiction of this generation:

> These young academics launch their arguments from a base of egalitarian pieties about race, class, and gender as routinely as cold war liberals started from the formalist aesthetics, the Founding Fathers, and the canon according to F. O. Matthiessen. (xvii)

Once again, it is Foucault's ideas which hold sway (xix-xx). Unchecked, the effect of this would be to set up an alternative canon where political correctness is the sole criterion of what is of value. (The parallel with the desire for politically-appealing intellectual conclusions, discussed in connection with points 1 and 2, should be clear.) The dream of this younger generation is for a *coincidence* of literary value and politically-appealing sensibility. But that, Crewes concludes, is sometimes not in the offing. We should honour "art that flows from a vision", even if it comes with its author's prejudices, he argues.

> In the long run, it seems unlikely that New Americanists will induce many

readers to believe that literary value coincides with the presence of politically acceptable notions in the text. Will we really want, say, a Faulkner who has been purged of his saturnine resentment of women or his deep ambivalence towards blacks? For now, increasing numbers of critics seem to be answering *yes*, even if that means rating *Requiem for a Nun* above *The Sound and the Fury*. Common readers, however, unless they have been academically retrained to distrust their pleasures, sense the difference between calculatedly progressive pap and art that flows from a vision, albeit a feverish one. I prefer to honor that distinction, even while exploring the challenge to criticism posed by a major's writer's blatant prejudices. (xxi)

(Crewes' phrasing is somewhat lacking in deftness, perhaps even slightly insensitive, but his *argumentation* is persuasive nonetheless.)

Turning to the second "'totalising' notion" Barry mentions, what of "human nature"? This idea takes us back to social constructionism and Foucault of course. Perhaps this idea is to an extent in tension with point 1, in as much as social construction has critiqued the construction of gender. After all, this aspect of point 5 seems to suggest that we could arrive at a definition of human nature if only we could transcend our "centricities", while social constructionism suggests that there is no such thing as human nature. Putting those concerns to one side for the present, it is enlightening to consider an account of literature which unapologetically rests on the conviction that it makes sense to think in terms of human nature. In Northrop Frye's late view, which he outlines in *Words With Power: Being a Second Study of the Bible and Literature*, mankind is always aware of "primary concerns". There are four of these:

Primary concerns may be considered in four main areas: food and drink, along with related bodily needs; sex; property (i.e. money, possessions, shelter, clothing, and everything that constitutes property in the sense of what is "proper" to one's life); liberty of movement. (47)

Primary concerns stand in opposition to secondary concerns – loyalty to nation or family or a political ideology. These are a threat to primary concern. Typically, they scupper our hopes of experiencing the fulfilment of primary concerns.

All through history secondary concerns have taken precedence over primary ones. We want to live, but we go to war; we want freedom, but permit, in varying degrees of complacency, an immense amount of exploitation, of ourselves as well as of others; we want happiness, but allow most of our lives to go to waste. (43)

Of particular interest to Frye is the way in which literature relates to concern:

In proportion as we try to approach literature with a sense of personal involvement or commitment, one pole of it begins to look like the revelation of a paradisal state, a lunatic, loving, poetic world where all primary concerns are fulfilled. It is a world of individuals but not of egos, and a world where nature is no longer alien but seems to be, in the medieval phrase, our 'natural place'. It is one pole only: the other pole is the imaginative hell explored in tragedy, irony, and satire. The hell world may be described as the world of power without words, where the predominant impulse is to tyrannize over others so far as one's ability to do so extends. But it is the paradisal pole that gives us a perspective on the hell

world, or, in our previous figure, provides the norm that makes irony ironic. (88)

What is important for the purpose to this discussion is that Frye's view is clearly animated by a sense that it is possible to speak of how people are, what they want and what is good for them: in other words, human nature. Does he fall foul of the hazards attending this kind of intellectual interest? Is his view Eurocentric or androcentric? Does he marginalise, denigrate, or deny the Other? As if to anticipate the critique outlined in the latter part of 5, he speaks in a defiant manner about how inclusive his viewpoint is.

> The axioms of primary concern are the simplest and baldest platitudes it is possible to formulate: that life is better than death, happiness better than misery, health better than sickness, freedom better than bondage, *for all people without significant exception.* (43, my emphasis)

The Import of Dissent

It is often said that if the notions summarized by Barry didn't represent a consensus or a resolution, they were at least vastly superior to the ideas of older commentators and contemporary dissenters. Theory sceptics are routinely referred to as "liberal humanists", though the degree to which the description fits is a moot point. (Without necessarily subscribing to this view, Barry shares it with the reader, owing to its widespread diffusion.) Another response is based on the ordinary left/right paradigm: dissenters are conservatives or (just as bad) political liberals who are in cahoots with conservatives, etc. Of course this account of the opposition holds very little water indeed. So many opponents of critical theory are dyed-in-the-wool left-wingers, while postmodernism, an important manifestation of critical theory, has consistently been critiqued for its apolitical nature. In the Intro-

duction to *What's Wrong With Postmodernism?* Norris laments the state of theory-inspired "political" writing:

> What hope, one might ask, for socialist values or left-oppositional thought when a journal like *Marxism Today* can devote most of its monthly space [...] to arguments which dump just about every item of socialist principle in an effort to accommodate free-market ideology, consumer politics, 'postmodern' lifestyles, the 'end of ideology', the collapse of the real into various forms of mass-media-induced simulation, and so forth? All this, be it noted, in the name of theory, or certain forms of 'advanced' theoretical reflection taking rise from French poststructuralism and its latterly fashionable offshoots. (2-3)

The metaphor which comes to mind is religious rather than political: that of an "orthodoxy" (already used by Haack and numerous others). Certainly, the ideas in question have operated in English departments rather in the manner of correct or accepted norms. And the notion that the arguments of dissenters represent *heresy* also carries great appeal.

But the final point I want to address relates to aesthetics and the *variety* of the work done in English departments. In the first instance, the most significant effect of the various schools of criticism which have dominated the scene over the past four decades relates to how they have affected pluralism. Deconstructionism, as we have already seen, mounts a challenge to pluralism, but the greater challenge is connected to the fact that most if not all critical theories have sought to undermine it, albeit in an uncoordinated manner. A critic such as M.H. Abrams bases his work on one set of premises and not others, but, as a pluralist, he is keenly aware of the value of work conducted on first principles different from his own. But, typically, academics working with a critical

theory have little or no interest in such pluralism. Having surveyed a number of fashionable approaches to Shakespeare in *Looking for an Argument*, Richard Levin, speaking of the commentators he has considered, states "Some of them explicitly reject the very idea of pluralism, and even those who are not so explicit rarely practice it" (11).

Turning to the second concern – aesthetics – of the approaches which are brushed aside by what we can only call anti-pluralism, one is of particular relevance: the aesthetic or formalist approach. Levin comments that

> The cultural materialists, [...] along with most other post-structuralists, claim that this formalist perspective itself is no longer tenable because the work of Barthes, Foucault, Lacan, Althusser and Derrida has invalidated the 'humanist' assumptions (of a unified and autonomous author, as the

origin of meaning, etc.) on which it rests. (205)

This is where we would be if the conclusions suggested by these recurrent ideas in theory were irrefutable: pluralism, hopelessly out of favour; the formalist approach "untenable". But the ideas in question are not irrefutable. As this article has documented, the recurrent ideas in question have, from the start, been subject to the most astute kinds of critique, and if one views the debates with a measure of independence, one can only conclude that dissenters' critical responses have hit the mark.

The implications of this simple fact make for happy reading – for many of us in academia, at least. To limit myself to the implications it has for the two concerns just highlighted: i) pluralism can safely come out of the doghouse, ii) the formalist/aesthetic approach to literature is an entirely viable option for literary scholars.

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