The Rise (and Fall?) of Theory

Ian Watts

"The golden age of cultural theory is long past," Terry Eagleton declares on the very first page of *After Theory* (2003) with an air of certainty and finality that is oddly reminiscent of F. R. Leavis' pronunciations on what constitutes good literature. Coming from someone who wrote a seminal introduction to literary theory and is himself a prominent Marxist critic, this is a startling claim, but one that has found an increasing number of supporters in the academic literary community over the past few years. Of course, few (if any) academics are arguing that we should return to the early- or mid-twentieth century when various forms of liberal humanism reigned, nor is such a move even possible given the vast changes that have occurred in society and culture since then. "There can be no going back to an age when it was enough to pronounce Keats delectable or Milton a doughty spirit," Eagleton observes in his characteristically caustic tone (1). Yet the sense that the theoretical enterprise as it has been conducted since about 1965 should be reassessed and perhaps redirected appears to have only grown with the advent of the twenty-first century and the controversies surrounding 9/11 and the war on terrorism.

This development was further highlighted by a conference held in 2003 at the University of Chicago, the first such event under the auspices of the journal *Critical Inquiry*, where many of the participants expressed dissatisfaction with the current state of theory. "My question is simple," Bruno Latour says at the beginning of his presentation. "Should we be at war, too, we, the scholars, the intellectuals? Is it really our duty to add fresh ruins to fields of ruins? Is it really the task

Chrestomathy: Annual Review of Undergraduate Research, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, College of Charleston
Volume 4, 2005: pp. 257-280
© 2005 by the College of Charleston, Charleston SC 29424, USA.
All rights to be retained by the author.

of the humanities to add deconstruction to destructions? More iconoclasm to iconoclasm? What has become of critical spirit? Has it not run out of steam?" (225). Latour's remarks, with his allusions to war and ruins, refer to a situation that few people outside of the field of English studies are aware of: the simmering, decades-long conflict between supporters of "theory" — a rather grand, overarching term that conflates a disparate series of theoretical approaches that share certain basic assumptions – and those who remain loyal to the basic assumptions underlying modes of liberal humanism, which previously dominated the Anglo-American literary academy in the spirit of Arnoldian-Leavisite moral formalism in the United Kingdom and the closely related New Criticism in the United States. Although the strategies associated with the formalist "practical criticism" of these earlier traditions continue to dominate basic literary instruction, theory has largely succeeded in capturing the momentum and energy that once resided with its predecessors. However, the recent spate of books and articles like Eagleton's *After Theory*, as well as the retrenchment and soul-searching that was on display at the 2003 *Critical Inquiry* conference, suggest that all is not well in what Latour goes on to call "Criticalland." Of course, each critic has his or her own reason to be dissatisfied, and the solutions offered are myriad. Does the continuing debate about the state of theory, however, indicate that we are steadily reaching the point at which what Robert Scholes terms "hypocriticism," or the tendency to engage in hyperactive theorizing, will be replaced within English studies by another dominant school of thought, in much the same way the theoretical approaches of today replaced New Criticism, formalism, and so on? If we subscribe to this cyclical idea and believe that theory's time will eventually pass, then it may be helpful to consider what theory itself largely replaced and what clues this past transition may offer for the future.

Before the explosion of theory in the 1960s and 1970s, when the teaching of literature in both the United Kingdom and United States was dominated by formalism, formalist strategies were developed by a diverse and often quarrelsome group that included such figures as T. S. Eliot, I. A. Richards, and F. R. and Q. D. Leavis. In their profound desire to rationalize and justify their approaches to literature, they could even be said to anticipate many of the advances later made by

the great theorists, but they operated from a very different set of core assumptions and goals than those advocated by their distant descendants. For these early critics — particularly the moral formalists — the key figure was Matthew Arnold, who is perhaps most widely known as the author of "Dover Beach," "Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse," and other melancholy poems. He was also, as Samuel Lipman notes in his introduction to *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), "the most important English literary critic of his time, a penetrating social observer, and a religious thinker whose reputation has suffered for his having been, much against his will, a prophet of our despair" (ix). The origins of this despair, which inspired much of his criticism and was so memorably expressed in his poetry, lay in the anxieties of his age, many of which have persisted into our own. This was the mid-nineteenth century, the Victorian era in England, when the face of Arnold's society was being radically transformed by the Industrial Revolution that would eventually sweep the globe. New scientific discoveries were calling into question long-held religious beliefs, while agitation for reform and even revolution had reached a fever pitch. (Arnold delivered the lecture that would become the first section of *Culture and Anarchy* in 1867, the same year Karl Marx published the first volume of *Das Kapital*.) Both of these developments were of critical importance to Arnold, who longed for the social and cultural stability once provided by the old aristocracy and feared that the rapidly ascending middle class was incapable of assuming responsibility for the welfare of the nation. "The mass of mankind will never have any ardent zeal for seeing things as they are," he claims in "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" (1865); "very inadequate ideas will always satisfy them" (254). Far from stimulating artistic creativity and encouraging new venues for culture, the dynamic society of Victorian England, with its emphases on reason, order, and science, was little more than "a colossal machine for the manufacture of Philistines" (255).

Arnold's attitude towards the social and political circumstances of his era would have a tremendous impact on the subsequent development of English studies, which was steadily establishing itself as a discipline at about the same time. "Criticism, for him, involved a long-term programme for the reform of Britain's entire intellectual

life," Chris Baldick observes, "an effort to temper and soften the stridency of contemporary political and religious partisanship, a strategy for containing radical new movements within traditional frameworks in the interests of social and cultural harmony; a stance summed up in the term borrowed from Sainte-Beuve — 'disinterestedness' " (22). If the church and aristocracy could no longer defend the citadels of high culture, then it would be the responsibility of Arnold's new elite to, in his own words, "learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world" (265). The teaching of literature thus acquired a sort of missionary zeal that had once been reserved for religion, while students of English were supposed to avoid drawing any connection between the great and lasting works of poetry and prose they studied and the ultimately transient issues and concerns of the day. Arnold "was to create a new kind of critical discourse which could, by its display of careful extrication from controversy, speak from a privileged standpoint, all other discourses being in some way compromised by partial or partisan considerations," Baldick continues. "This achievement, gratefully acknowledged by Eliot and Leavis, came at a certain price: a systematic suppression of theory and of argument" (25-26). Those who came after Arnold would, in fact, find much to argue about, and in their own heyday the New Critics in America and their moral formalist cousins in the United Kingdom struggled mightily against advocates of linguistic/etymological and biographic/historical approaches to teaching literature. Nevertheless, they were ultimately successful in transmitting Arnold's basic conception of literary study, with much modification and qualification over the years, into the following century.

The great link between the mid-twentieth century New Critics/ moral formalists and arch-Victorian Matthew Arnold was T.S. Eliot. Like Arnold, Eliot is perhaps best known as another "prophet of our despair," but his chief contribution to literary study lies in his emphasis on formalist analysis and articulate defense of classical sensibility. From Eliot's perspective, all of the social ills Arnold first diagnosed in the mid-nineteenth century had since become terminal diseases, and the first World War in particular had destroyed whatever belief in progress that still lingered from the Victorian era. Given this view of history and society, it is not surprising that Eliot first accepted Arnold's

basic tenets and later formulated his own critical approach, which Edward Said refers to as "High Anglican humanism," around them (17). Eliot actually intensified the elitist undertones of Arnold's philosophy, with a corresponding impact on both his criticism and poetry (as anyone who has waded through the patchwork quilt of obscure allusions that constitute *The Waste Land* can confirm). He also elaborated on the theme of "disinterestedness" or "objectivity" in works such as *The Sacred Wood* (1922). "In arguing for a criticism without opinionated controversy, judgment, or appreciation, Eliot is carrying further Arnold's remark that the critic's job is to 'get out of the way' of the work," Baldick notes. "The noisy voice of personal opinion is to fade away before the all-important creative work, and literary judgment is to form itself invisibly, as a spontaneously generated 'fact' " (118-119). Interestingly, Eliot may have agreed with later grand theorist Roland Barthes that the author had to be pushed aside, but this did not necessarily imply the liberation of the reader; in Eliot's mind, the death of the author only allowed the reader to interpret the text without the supposed hindrance of considering the author's biography or personality.

Eliot was not only engaged in abstract discussions about the myriad responsibilities and limitations of literary criticism, however. Along with I. A. Richards and the Leavises, he laid the foundation for the formalism which for nearly half a century (from the 1920s to the 1970s) was the dominant method of literary analysis in British and American schools, and remains the primary form of instruction for introductory English classes to this very day. In its various manifestations, including practical criticism, close reading, and moral formalism, formalism is probably what most people fall back on when asked to "get at the meaning" of a text. By encouraging students simply to consider the words on the page and ignore any extra-textual information that may or may not be relevant, including the biography of the author, formalist criticism upholds Arnold's firm belief that literature should remain in some sort of ethereal state above the messy world we actually inhabit, even as its varied practitioners deviated from Arnold's understanding of why literature should possess such an exalted status. For the American New Critics, as Scholes notes, "Canonical texts were not seen as repositories of truth and beauty or touchstones of high

seriousness but as embodiments of a discourse so ambiguous that it could not be debased and applied to any practical or dogmatic end" (25). Regardless of their slight differences with Arnold, the actual implications of their philosophies were very much the same.

Formalist approaches also benefited from the fact that they provided a relatively simple, cost-effective way of studying literature that quickly distinguished analysis in English classes from the type of thinking that occurred in other departments that competed for the same students, money, and resources. In short, some version of a formalist ethos came to define what most people thought English was *all about*—and, for many instructors and students, still defines it, despite the rise of theory over the past three decades. "As universities became more and more driven by their professional schools and their links to a technological system of values and rewards, literature departments, and especially departments of English literature, represented the last, purest bastion of liberal education," Scholes continues. "Under this regime, the study of English was as 'disinterested' as Matthew Arnold himself could have wished, but on firmer ground, the ground of literariness itself, defined as a place of paradox and interminable analyses" (27). Formalist critics were thus successful in endowing literature with an aura of grand exclusivity that served English departments well for many years. Many students were attracted to English not because it promised wealth or immediate job opportunities (hence the expression, "the few, the proud, the underemployed"), but because it was supposed to be a truly civilized subject, as opposed to the dull, utilitarian rationalism of chemistry or engineering. "I was thoroughly indoctrinated in the religion of literature," Scholes says. "That is, I came to believe, with others of my generation, that reading literature and criticizing it were the best things a human being could do with life (with the possible exception of producing literature that might lend itself profitably to such exacting critical scrutiny)" (76). Although it is impossible to gauge how thoroughly those generations of English students who were educated in the context of this mythology actually absorbed it, there can be little doubt that it still survives, either through its advocates or critics, to the present day.

In their desire to cordon off English from the remainder of the university and establish a universal method of literary study, though,

the New Critics and moral formalists were constructing a fortress that would inevitably attract the attention of those audacious enough to besiege it. They largely held off the proto-theoretical assaults of Marxism, psychoanalysis, and feminism in the 1930s and 1940s, firmly establishing themselves at the center of English studies in the 1950s, but by the following decade many of their students were becoming increasingly restless. In part this was due to the defensiveness and self-imposed isolationism of these approaches, which placed little or no emphasis on the possibility of drawing connections between the actual text and the various contexts (historical, political, philosophical, and so on) in which it was produced. Such was the situation Valentine Cunningham, author of *Reading After Theor*y (2002), encountered when he first studied English: "Anyone who was a student in the early 1960s (like me) will recall the sheer dullness of the by-then established New Critical routines suffocating reading in their affectionate but strangulating grip, and the sinking feeling that a future in criticism might actually mean a whole lifetime of reading (and writing) yet one more minute clarification of some line or lines for *The Explicator*, and that's all" (38). The study of literature had become a near-mystical activity for Arnold and his descendants, but many of their disciples no longer received the same satisfaction from pursuing the principle of "disinterestedness" that their predecessors had.

Even more of a concern for the theorists who later challenged the English studies establishment was its inherit elitism. One could certainly detect this as far back as Arnold, who gave the word "philistine" its modern connotation, but Edward Said identifies the desire to segregate literature from mass culture and literary study from other intellectual pursuits as part of a larger movement to recast humanism in an exclusionary light. "Humanism is thought of as something very restricted and difficult, like a rather austere club with rules that keep most people out and, when some are allowed in, a set of regulations disallowing anything that might expand the club's membership, make it less restricted a place, or make it more pleasurable a location to be," he observes (16). Certainly the dour public persona cultivated by Eliot, as well as the penchant for glib, all-encompassing judgments best exemplified by F.R. Leavis, did little to dispel this impression. "It was Dante, not Shakespeare who was the presiding

figure here," Said continues, "along with a belief that only compressed, difficult, and rare forms of art, forms inaccessible to anyone who did not have the requisite training, were worth bothering with" (16). Arnold and his later descendants were all reacting to the threat posed by the democratization of culture, which had become possible with the spread of industrialization and the development of new means of mass communication. In essence, they foregrounded the issue of culture in the study of English long before cultural theorists did so, though they possessed entirely different reasons (and a much narrower definition of culture) for doing so. "In a world dominated by science and commerce, the humanities were being pushed increasingly to the margins," Eagleton writes, "but this lent them the powerfully distancing perspective on the social order which was not so available to those in the thick of its commercial, scientific, and technological interests. Ironically, then, it was their growing superfluousness in a philistine society which lent the humanities a new kind of spiritual centrality" (83). The withdrawal of literature from the public sphere heavily mandated by formalist critics, however, effectively eliminated the most direct avenues for social change available to those literary missionaries who otherwise claimed to be so concerned about the state of culture and society.

As in many other places, a wave of change arrived in the field of English studies during the tumultuous 1960s. Despite its claims of high-minded disinterestedness, English, along with other humanities departments, were by then integral components of "the establishment" due to their value as centers of what Pierre Bourdieu terms cultural capital. After all, in the great Cold War struggle between capitalism and communism, the West often promoted its rich cultural heritage in addition to its economic and military power as further evidence of its inherent superiority. In such an environment, even those great works of modernist gloom from the earlier part of the century, with all of their skepticism about the state of modern civilization, were fêted as cultural treasures. "Joyce and Kafka were welcomed on to the university syllabuses, while modernist works of painting proved to be lucrative commodities with which no self-respecting corporation could dispense," Eagleton observes (64-65). The generation of critics and literary theorists who arose in the 1960s and afterward thus looked at

English studies not in isolation, but as part of a general paradigm that was ripe for challenge.

Of course, the various theories that appeared with such force in the 1960s and 1970s did not simply materialize out of thin air. Several of them, including Marxism, psychoanalysis, and feminism, had existed for decades, if not longer, and structuralism had strong roots in early twentieth-century linguistics. However, each of these theories remained largely confined to the particular realm from which it first emerged, despite the efforts of early theorists to extend their scope. Certainly there is a wide gulf between the portraits of women created by traditional psychoanalysis and feminism, while structuralism and Marxism are not immediately compatible with each other, given their emphases on language and economics, respectively. However, each of them targeted totalizing concepts such as human nature and absolute truth that attempted to encompass and explain the whole of history and humanity. Culture, with its constantly shifting and evolving centers of meaning, became the new measure of all things, and under the banner of "cultural theory" and "cultural studies," theorists of various persuasions pursued new and controversial avenues of literary study. Their famous predecessors, according to Edward Said, were "thinkers such as Marx, Freud, Nietzsche, and the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. This group of pioneers showed, in effect, that the existence of systems of thinking and perceiving transcended the powers of individual subjects, individual humans who were inside those systems (such as Freud's "unconscious" or Marx's "capital") and therefore had no power over them, only the choice either to use or be used by them" (9-10). The convergence of these theoretical approaches in the second half of the twentieth century marked a fundamental shift in how many people in the humanities and social sciences thought about some of the most fundamental bases of Western civilization, and as time passed it became increasingly apparent that nothing less than the intellectual heritage of the Enlightenment was being reassessed and, in many instances, completely overthrown.

This transformation, which would have such an immense impact on English departments in both America and the United Kingdom, actually began in France in the years after the Second World War. In a nation that had first been shattered by war and occupation and later

by civil unrest, political instability, and bloody rebellions in the remnants of its colonial empire in south-east Asia and northern Africa, it is not surprising that many intellectuals were dissatisfied with the old orthodoxies and looking for new ideas. Marxism, psychoanalysis, and existentialism were just three of the intellectual currents stirring in France at that time, but one of the most influential was structuralism, which originated in the early years of the twentieth century with the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and eventually became the point of contact for many subsequent theories. "The secret of these dangerous and strange liaisons, this hold-all capaciousness of Theory, is, of course, embedded in the truly versatile resources of Ferdinand de Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale*," Valentine Cunningham notes in recognition of Saussure's importance (19). Reacting to the historicizing tendencies of nineteenth-century philology, Saussure instead suggested that language be viewed as an arbitrary system of signs organized into opposing binaries—the *significant*, or "signifier," and the *signifé*, or "signified." This relatively straightforward concept would have revolutionary consequences in the future, when Saussure's structuralist and post-structuralist descendants explored the full implications of his theories and came to the conclusion that almost anything could be viewed—and deconstructed—as a system of signs that only existed in reference to each other. "Signs are arbitrary, said Saussure, and have little necessary link to what they denote—which has some truth in it: cat could easily be dog, to start with anyway—but quickly all of language, writing, meaning, were being declared to be arbitrary, not grounded in any reality, a mere illusion of language," Cunningham continues (20). The basic ideas behind structuralism proved to be enormously attractive, and before long people like Jacques Lacan were applying this once-obscure development of linguistic theory to psychoanalysis, Claude Lévi-Strauss to anthropology, and Jacques Derrida to philosophy and literary criticism.

The protective façade English studies built around itself prior to the 1960s proved unable to hold the line against this new wave of raucous theories. In fact, it often seemed as if the excessive isolationism of the New Critics had ultimately accomplished little more than the complete opposite of what they originally intended, particularly when literary theorists explored the inter-disciplinary possibilities of the field

with such a vengeance that many people came to question the very existence of English as a discrete subject of study. To those who still advocated the liberal humanist vision of English education, the situation was deeply disturbing; from their point of view, the barbarians had not only stormed the gates, but in the years since had taken over the whole castle: "During the 1960s and 1970s the advent of French theory in the humanistic departments of American and English universities had brought about a severe if not crippling defeat of what was considered traditional humanism by the forces of structuralism and post-structuralism, both of which professed the death of man-the-author and asserted the pre-eminence of anti-humanist systems such as those found in the work of Lévi-Strauss, Foucault himself, and Roland Barthes" (Said 9). Even more disturbing to the humanists were the broad political interests of this new generation of theorists, most of whom were not so much motivated by a desire to "learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world" as to redress past discrimination and acknowledge the achievements of once-marginalized peoples. This was in keeping with the spirit of the era, when the free speech movement, antiwar protests, and campaigns in support of civil rights for women and minorities politicized college and university campuses to a degree they had never been before. The environment at many schools became so intense that some, such as Columbia University in New York and the University of California at Berkeley, were virtually paralyzed by conflict. "The whole sensibility of society had undergone one of its periodic transformations," Terry Eagleton observes. "We had shifted from the earnest, self-disciplined and submissive to the cool, hedonistic and insubordinate. If there was widespread disaffection, there was also visionary hope" (24).

The situation in many English departments mirrored the turmoil outside, a factor that certainly contributed to the eventual dissolution of the liberal humanist consensus. "To promote faculties into the cause for the death of academic liberalism circa 1970 is strong hindsight but partial history," Carl Woodring states in *Literature: An Embattled Profession* (1999). "Somewhere near the mean among professors of literature a peripatetic, liberal, uncertain individual leans upon a firmer system of liberal tradition for support. It can be more accurately said that fence-sitting by humanists, whether from individual character or

a blending with peers, contributed its bit to the death of academic liberalism ca. 1970" (60-61). The politically active men and women who appeared in this era were thus able to extract more and more concessions from the vacillating old guard, until the moment finally arrived when the humanists looked around them and realized they no longer set the agenda or determined the curriculum. Woodring notes that a similar transformation also occurred in the Modern Language Association and other professional organizations where "many older professors, by withdrawing from membership or ceasing to attend meetings, made way for the underemployed" (94). In the United States and United Kingdom during the 1980s, this process was accelerated by the sense that the conservative supporters of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher had seized the major apparatuses of overt political power, necessitating a liberal retreat to their redoubt in academia. "Cultural theory was cut loose from its moment of origin, yet tried in its way to keep that moment warm. Like war, it became the continuation of politics by other means," Eagleton writes, charting the origins of the so-called "culture wars" that broke out in these years. "The emancipation which had failed in the streets and factories could be acted out instead in erotic intensities or the floating signifier" (29). By the 1990s and the dawn of the twenty-first century, the revolution was complete: Theory now dominated English studies, and to an increasing extent the humanities as a whole. But what did the theory revolution actually accomplish?

Few who criticize theory today do so without also acknowledging its great achievements. Valentine Cunningham, for one, bluntly states that "there is no doubt in my mind that Theory has really revitalized the study of literature since the Second World War" (38), while Eagleton, no doubt thinking of the aristocratic bias of Arnold and Eliot, notes that "the whole idea of cultural theory is at root a democratic one" (77). Eagleton's observation alludes to what may be theory's most important achievement: the broadening of the traditional literary canon to include a much greater range of authors and texts. Quite simply, English as a whole is an immeasurably richer and more vibrant subject of study than it was half a century ago. "Who would not be happy with the way Theory has not just given a voice to former marginal interests and persons in texts, but has given an affirming

voice to critics from, or identifying with, those margins?" Cunningham asks, and it would indeed be difficult to reply in the negative (53). In the United States, a greater range of authors means the inclusion of women and minority (particularly African-American) writers, while in the United Kingdom, it also involves the recognition of postcolonial literature written by those who hail from countries that once belonged to the far-flung British Empire. More recent and contemporary authors also became acceptable, as did "lowbrow" genres like science fiction, horror, and romance. In fact, many cultural theorists claimed that almost any sort of textual document, from journals and diaries of historical figures to commercial advertisements, were now suitable subjects of study. The traditional hierarchy of literary taste and value, with the poetry of Dead White European Males firmly stationed at its apex, has been substantially overturned as well. This allows for the discovery of a wider variety of texts than was possible in the past, when critics like T.S. Eliot tended to dismiss the value of "popular" literature and entertainment. Elitism of this sort is complicated by the fact it ignores the process by which literary works were traditionally accepted as serious subjects of study. "Publishers and theater proprietors made Shakespeare popular before he became an academic subject," Woodring observes, and what is true for Shakespeare is also true for many authors before and since (86).

Closely associated with the acceptance of a broader range of authors and texts is a much greater tolerance of diverse readings and interpretations. In the words of Eagleton, theory "has disabused us of the idea that there is a single correct way to interpret a work of art" (95). The essentialist notion that the meaning of a text will simply present itself to the reader if he or she contemplates the text without any outside interference has receded far into the distance, replaced by a multiplicity of interpretations that are not so much democratic as potentially anarchic. This is a direct consequence of theory's emphasis on the constructedness of a text, for such an idea immediately leads to the question, if a text is constructed, who constructed it and why? Similar ideas had occurred to earlier literary scholars, of course, but what distinguished this new generation of theorists was a willingness to push this concept into political and ideological directions that had once been considered *verboten*. The scope of cultural theory was thus

much wider, accommodating a far greater range of readings and critical interpretations than once thought possible. "John Bunyan thought Mr Facing-Both-Ways a bad thing, and wandering into Bypath Meadow a dangerous temptation to Christians, because true pilgrims should look and go in only one heavenward direction, be unflinchingly monovisual, and remain all undistracted," Cunningham remarks. "But Theory has massively enriched reading by precisely inducing readers to pursue its multi-directional potentialities, to relish the gumbo. We're all Mr and Mrs Facing-All-Ways nowadays" (39). Greater attention is thus paid to the context of a particular text, the unique confluence of historical, political, social, and other circumstances in which it was produced. This allows readers today an unprecedented level of freedom compared to their predecessors, whose judgments were largely restricted by the dictates of formalism and its desire to avoid any "outside" considerations. The world created by this freedom is instead dominated by a postmodern/post-structuralist *jeu de signifiants*, the free play of signifiers or ideas, which is actually "far truer to the reinterpretable nature of serious and classic writings" than the old approach (Cunningham 40).

It is the issue of play that has received the most attention from theory's critics. The very word suggests a certain degree of levity and spontaneity, neither of which one would immediately associate with traditional literary scholarship. If there no longer is a center or an author, if we are indeed trapped by language and its constantly deferred and shifting signs, if there is no absolute truth or a universal human nature, then on what basis can one claim that one's interpretation of a text is any more valid than the next? At what point has one "read" too much into the text? Is such a thing even possible? The theorists and those who follow them have apparently collided with the same problem faced by existentialists who dispose of God or any semblance of essentialism: they have thereby given themselves infinite freedom, but the very nature of this freedom denies them the possibility of validating their existence or value system in any certain terms. This has not prevented many theorists from engaging in political advocacy of all sorts, of course, but some are questioning if this pervasive skepticism about knowledge and certainty is washing away the very ground on which they stand. "Entire Ph.D. programs are still running to make

sure that good American kids are learning the hard way that facts are made up, that there is no such thing as natural, unmediated, unbiased access to truth, that we are always the prisoner of language, that we always speak from one standpoint, and so on, while dangerous extremists are using the very same argument of social construction to destroy hard-won evidence that could save our lives," Bruno Latour declared at the 2003 Chicago conference, referring to the efforts of many conservatives to sow seeds of doubt among the general public about the causes of global warming (227). His dissatisfaction and unease is mirrored by many critics who feel that the time has come to ask whether what Cunningham calls "the hermeneutics of suspicion" has gone too far. After all, according to Eagleton, "if true loses its force, then political radicals can stop talking as though it is unequivocally true that women are oppressed or that the planet is being gradually poisoned by corporate greed" (109).

One of critics' chief charges is that theorists have elevated ideology over the text, creating a situation in which theoretical readings are no longer lively and engaging but predictable and boring. Cunningham is one of the most vocal (and repetitive) supporters of this particular charge. "Theory, quite evidently, distorts reading," he declares. "Theory does violence to the meanings of texts. Theory's reading record is, simply, bad. Theorists provide endless bad examples of textual handling" (88). He goes on to illustrate many such examples, including Edward Said on Joseph Conrad and Terry Eagleton on Shakespeare: "Only a Theorist who confuses a liking for jest with the stricter necessities of historical and semantic truth, would outrageously suggest, as Terry Eagleton does in his book on Shakespeare, that 'There is some evidence that the word "nothing" in Elizabethan English meant the female genitals,' when this is patently not the case" (94). If the theory revolution has enlivened the study of literature, it has also created greater opportunities for misdirected or outright silly interpretations of texts. Most of these poor readings, according to their critics, arise from the greater emphasis today on the promotion of certain political or ideological agendas rather than on what they consider to be simple elucidation of the text. Instead, these are "readings done primarily to illustrate the role of such texts in the greater narrative of socialism, psychoanalysis, deconstruction, or whatever"

(Cunningham 89). Eagleton would no doubt respond, as he does in *After Theory*, that "without some sort of critical language at our disposal we would simply not know what to look for," but the issue for theory's critics is the sense that preoccupation with "critical language" has become the primary focus of literary studies in recent decades (94).

Another claim is that the theorists' vision of a free play of ideas has instead led to a circus of empty relativism. At its worst, theory's broad tolerance of a variety of topics has spawned the impression that the current state of the humanities is such that "departments of English are gradually becoming places that offer courses on Barbie dolls, rock stars, and the Disney empire, while seekers of truth desperately pine for the courses in Milton and Wordsworth the department no longer offers" (Bérubé 26). Nor is this issue isolated to departments of English; for many journalists, it now seems as if the annual meetings of the Modern Language Association have become, according to Joseph Epstein in a recent article for *The Weekly Standard*, occasions for "comic pieces featuring the zany subjects of the papers given at each year's conference. At these meetings, in and out the room the women come and go, speaking of fellatio, which, deep readers that they are, they can doubtless find in Jane Austen" (39). Though certainly an exaggeration, this idea has gained wide currency among a large section of the public and inspired many conservative commentators to issue a steady stream of jeremiads about the decline of the humanities in general and English in particular. One of the most visible of these is Harold Bloom, a professor at Yale University who appears to have a rather romantic vision of himself presiding like a sentinel over the final days of his beloved profession. "After a lifetime spent in teaching literature at one of our major universities, I have very little confidence that literary education will survive its current malaise," he writes in "Elegiac Conclusion," the epilogue to *The Western Canon* (1994). "Finding myself now surrounded by professors of hip-hop; by clones of Gallic-Germanic theory; by ideologues of gender and of various sexual persuasions; by multiculturalists unlimited, I realize that the Balkanization of literary studies is irreversible" (225). Bloom's pessimism notwithstanding, the question still remains: If we jettison the traditional *raison d'être* of English studies, can departments of English survive much longer

without a radical institutional transformation to match the ideological one that has occurred since the 1960s and 1970s? Or are they doomed, as Bloom, Scholes, and many others believe, to go the way of Greek and Latin?

This question directly leads to what is often identified as theory's chief failure, for if one of its main objectives was to ensure literary study's direct relevance to society and, by extension, its continued existence, it has not prevented the current crisis in the field of English. In the media this crisis is often described in reductive terms as the "culture wars" or the battle to prevent "the decline of the humanities," which in turn spurs some within the field to make the defensive claim that there is nothing wrong with English today. The reality, however, is that by most measures, the humanities in general and English in particular are in a state of long-term decline. Although the body of students enrolled in English and other humanities departments across the country is more diverse than ever, the actual percentage of these students compared to the overall student population has declined since the 1960s. Even worse, this has occurred during an era when attending college has become *de rigeur* for virtually everyone with the means to do so. "As the number of B.A. degrees overall has more than doubled (from 1966 to 1993), the proportion in the humanities has steadily dropped from just over 20 percent to a low of about 10 percent in the mid-1980s, increasing only to 12 percent in the early 1990s," Lynn Hunt writes (24-25). The problem is further exacerbated by the increasingly brutal job market faced by those seeking employment as teachers and professors of English. "Graduate students will learn about capitalism, all right," Bérubé comments, "not by having their collective consciousness raised in the Marxist graduate seminar, but by working in academe's salt mines until middle age or thereabouts, whereupon they will find that they are the owners of a postgraduate degree that is practically useless" (82). As student enrollment declined, so did the demand for instructors, leading to the situation today in which consistently more Ph.D.s are awarded every year than are warranted by the number of available jobs. Instead, many find themselves forced to accept lower-paid and less secure non-tenure track positions teaching introductory English classes: "At the moment, English departments may be placing fewer than 20 percent of their

Ph.D.s in tenure-track jobs; the other 80-plus percent are unemployed or employed in temporary positions at starvation wages without benefits" (Bérubé 81). It is not surprising then that Bérubé detects "an extraordinary level of cynicism in the industry these days," an industry that now features "eight superstars drawing people to conferences and eight thousand adjunct instructors teaching bread-and-butter survey courses" (100). Bérubé, Scholes, and Said all acknowledge that dramatically reducing the number of incoming graduate students, particularly at the doctoral level, may be the only immediate way of combating this problem.

However, declining enrollment figures and a depressed job market may be symptomatic of a deeper issue faced by English departments today: a lack of consensus about their underlying purpose or mission. The decline of the old humanist sense of their mission has not been matched by the emergence of a coherent, pervasive theoretical one. Instead, there has been a fragmentation of purpose that reflects how diverse the field of English actually is. Rhetoric and composition teachers are concerned with improving their students' writing ability, for instance, while those who specialize in women or African-American writers promote their students' interest in them and the issues they address. In the absence of a single comprehensive mission, many have noted that the gap between those who merely take English classes and those who are English majors has grown into a chasm, accelerating the marginalization of the entire discipline. "Service courses, like the service entrances of mansions, are for those benighted folk who are not permitted to use the front door," Scholes writes. "In our case that means we distinguish sharply, and on a basis very close to social class, between those who seek to become like us (our English majors) and those with whom we must deal as lesser breeds whom we agree, for a price, to 'silivize' — which makes us the Aunt Pollies of American education" (85). The elitism of Arnold and Eliot thus survives in a form that is not often acknowledged but which nevertheless plays an important part in the function of English departments across the country. Even more worrisome, perhaps, is the curriculum for those who actually are English majors. "The traditional English major is designed for young people entering the loop of English teaching, in which English teachers teach future English teachers of future English

teachers," Scholes continues (85-86). This is further evidence of the struggle within many English departments to articulate a clearer sense of purpose, in the absence of which the mentality of simple self-preservation takes over. But what, if anything, can be done to alleviate this situation?

The "fortress" school, perhaps best represented by Harold and Allan Bloom, pines away for the return of traditional humanism, though they acknowledge (with an appropriate level of despair) that this is not likely to occur. Instead, they advocate the dissolution of English departments as we know them into departments of Literature (in its most traditional sense) and departments of Cultural Studies where, according to Harold Bloom, "*Batman* comics, Mormon theme parks, television, movies, and rock will replace Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, and Wallace Stevens. Major, once-elitist universities and colleges will still offer a few courses in Shakespeare, Milton, and their peers, but these will be taught by departments of three or four scholars, equivalent to teachers of ancient Greek and Latin" (226). The death of today's English departments should not be lamented, according to this school of thought, because it will free those who truly love literature to pursue their studies without any direct interference from the hip-hop professor or lesbian feminist next door. This rather defeatist approach is informed by a sense of resignation Said is happy to diagnose: "What [Allan] Bloom and his predecessors shared, in addition to a common dyspepsia of tone, was a feeling that the doors of humanism had been left open to every sort of unruly individualism, disreputable modishness, and uncanonized learning, with the result that true humanism had been violated, if not altogether discredited" (18). Of all the solutions proposed by commentators today, that of the "fortress" school is perhaps the most untenable, since it is premised upon the same elitist, undemocratic (and condescending) attitudes that Arnold and Eliot expressed in their day.

In contrast to the elite humanism of the past, Edward Said and others suggest a revival of a new, more democratic humanism. According to Said, this is humanism as it was originally conceived, not as it was co-opted and corrupted by elitists in their attempts to stave off the rising tide of bourgeois philistinism. "The core of humanism is the secular notion that the historical world is made by

men and women, and not by God, and that it can be understood rationally according to the principle formulated by Vico in *New Science*," Said declares, "that we can really know only what we make or, to put it differently, we can know things according to the way they were made" (11). The constructed world of texts and language is thus not as remote or impenetrable as is often presumed by postmodernists. One of the more attractive features of Said's new formulation of humanism (for Americans, at least) is his assertion that, as a multiracial society with a strong foundation in Western culture, the United States is perhaps best situated to give birth to it. "I would say no," he continues, responding to the impression that humanism must always be an exclusionary affair, "since to understand humanism at all, for us as citizens of this particular republic, is to understand it as democratic, open to all classes and backgrounds, and as a process of unending disclosure, discovery, self-criticism, and liberation" (21-22). Here we see the philosophical foundation for what may be a fascinating synthesis between the old humanist conception of English and the theoretical approaches that have more recently come to dominate the field. Unfortunately, Said's death in 2003 has left the responsibility for further developing his vision of an inclusive humanism for those bold enough to follow him.

Scholes gives us an example of what a curriculum based on this sort of philosophy may look like. "I propose to go back to the roots of our liberal arts tradition and reinstate grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric at the core of college education," he writes. "To envision such a thing, we need only to rethink what grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric might mean in modern terms" (120). Scholes would thus place a canon of methods or ideas at the center of the curriculum, rather than a canon of texts admired and studied simply because they are there. The emphasis here is on equipping students with intellectual tools they can employ to effectively analyze language in all its manifestations, including "media that are only partly linguistic" (120). Gerald Graff, thinking along similar lines, argues in "Disliking Books at an Early Age" (1992) that criticism should be considered essential to enjoying a work of literature, not an obstruction. "It was only when I was introduced to a critical debate about *Huckleberry Finn* that my helplessness in the face of the novel abated and I could experience a

personal reaction to it," he affirms (45). Expecting students to analyze a work of literature without first teaching them what Graff calls "critical language" is a classic example of putting the cart before the horse, and his remedy for this situation is that we should "teach the conflicts" as a means of engaging students with the text. Graff's approach has a number of interesting parallels with Scholes, not the least of which is foregrounding the conversational nature of literary study rather than creating the impression that interpretations of a text are carved in stone and then handed down from on high.

Between these traditional and progressive forms of humanism lies a group that appears to be more concerned with curbing theory's excesses than of disposing of it entirely — the "let's go out and reign in those mischievous children before they do us any further harm" school. Terry Eagleton's main charge against theory, for instance, is that it suffers from the same narrowness of vision that ultimately constrained New Criticism. "Cultural theory as we have it promises to grapple with some fundamental problems, but on the whole fails to deliver," he states. "It has been shamefaced about morality and metaphysics, embarrassed about love, biology, religion, and revolution, largely silent about evil, reticent about death and suffering, dogmatic about essences, universals, and foundations, and superficial about truth, objectivity, and disinterestedness. This, on any estimate, is rather a large slice of human existence to fall down on" (101-2). In other words, he agrees with Cunningham that theory suffers from a deficit of humanity and an unwillingness to address precisely those Big Questions about Life, the Universe, and Everything (as Douglas Adams has put it) that have shown no signs of waning despite all of the recent emphasis on micronarratives, floating signifiers, and the procession of simulcra. "But then the human has been at the very heart of Theory's attacks upon authors and reference and logocentrism," Cunningham remarks. "Humanism and the subject — the 'subject' considered as both human being so to say in the street, and as human objects of attention in writing — became dirty words, outlawed interests, deplored literary connections in Theory's heyday, allowed in only to be jeered at, considered viable only as old-fashioned concerns now all undone, unravelling, 'decentered'" (142). His prescription involves a revival of close reading, that is, reading and

interpretation which can take into account the issues of race, class, and gender theorists emphasize, but does so with "tact," or "respect for the primacy of text over all theorizing about text" (169).

Eagleton does not appear to be quite so interested in reading strategies in *After Theory*, but he does suggest that we rehabilitate some forms of essentialism. "Essentialism does not mean uniformity," he writes. "Essentialism does not involve ignoring the difference between natural and cultural phenomenon" (121). This, in turn, leads to the recognition that theorists have also been hard at work attacking a straw man's version of truth: "The claim that some truth is absolute is a claim about what it means to call something true, not a denial that there are different truths at different times" (108). In due order, Eagleton addresses traditional humanist subjects such as morality, foundations, death, and evil, trying to illustrate why the common perception of each held by theorists and postmodernists is either misguided or incorrect. "The problem is that the bracing scepticism of some postmodern thought is hard to distinguish from its aversion to engaging with fundamentalism at the kind of 'deep' moral or metaphysical level where it needs to be confronted," he concludes. "Indeed, this might serve as a summary of the dilemma in which cultural theory is now caught" (191). Eagleton does not offer many prescriptions beyond a need to recognize the shortcomings of theory and redirect its critical efforts towards a greater range of human experience, but this is in accordance with his stated goal to initiate a discussion about the future of literary study.

It appears that there is little consensus about the future of English studies apart from the growing sense that some sort of change is going to occur. Of course, all of the grumbling about the need for a post-theoretical world obscures the fact that the changes which have occurred since the 1960s are here to stay, if for no other reason than that three generations of English students have been educated in the environment created by the theory revolution. Nor is it possible to ignore the various achievements of the great theorists, who have collectively made all those who follow them much more conscious of their assumptions and the impact of race, class, and gender on our thinking. It is clear, however, that theorists have not been completely successful in solving many of the fundamental problems, both

philosophical and practical, faced by English departments today, including the often highly exaggerated specter of extinction. Said, Eagleton, Cunningham, and other critics of theory also seem to be rather short on actual solutions, as well as a little blasé about the inherent contradictions or complications arising from their arguments. Eagleton will probably be forced to write another book squaring his Marxism with many of his statements in *After Theory*, for instance, while Said seemed a little too confident about the ease with which humanism can accommodate the concerns of theory. The presence of more people like Robert Scholes, who actually gives us a practical sense of what a viable new English curriculum may look like, would greatly enrich the present debate about where to go next. If the past is any indication, theory will indeed evolve to meet these new challenges or be reduced to "one of the little narratives of which it has been so fond" (Eagleton 221). The question remains when, and in what form, these changes will occur.

Works Cited

Arnold, Matthew. "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," in Lionel Trilling (ed.), *The Portable Matthew Arnold* (Viking Press, 1949), pp. 234-267.

Baldick, Chris. *The Social Mission of English Criticism 1848-1932* (Clarendon Press, 1983).

Bérubé, Michael. *The Employment of English: Theory, Jobs, and the Future of Literary Studies* (New York University Press, 1998).

Bloom, Harold. "Elegiac Conclusion" in David H. Richter (ed.), *Falling Into Theory* (Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000), pp. 224-233.

Cunningham, Valentine. *Reading After Theory* (Blackwell, 2002).

Eagleton, Terry. *After Theory* (Basic Books, 2003).

Epstein, Joseph. "Civilization and its Malcontents Or, Why Are Academics So Unhappy?" *The Weekly Standard* 10:32 (2005), pp. 35-40.

Graff, Gerald. "Disliking Books at an Early Age," in David H. Richter (ed.), *Falling Into Theory* (Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000), pp. 40-48.

Hunt, Lynn. "Democraticization and Decline? The Consequences

of Demographic Change in the Humanities," in Alvin Kernan (ed.), *What's Happened to the Humanities?* (Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 17-31.

Latour, Bruno. "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30:2 (2003), pp. 225-248.

Lipman, Samuel (ed). Introduction to Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* (Yale University Press, 1994).

Said, Edward. *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (Columbia University Press, 2004).

Scholes, Robert. *The Rise and Fall of English* (Yale University Press, 1998).

Woodring, Carl. *Literature: An Embattled Profession* (Columbia University Press, 1999).