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Teaching Theory

> . . . theory, whatever in addition it may be, is another technique of trouble, a device to make trouble for ourselves.
>
> — *Denis Donoghue*

> Theoretical books are difficult to read; they usually assume that their readers possess knowledge that few have who have received a traditional literary education; they often require massive reassessments of language, meaning, and the world; they seem to draw their life from suspect branches of other disciplines: professional philosophers usually avoid Derrida; psychoanalysts dismiss Freud as unscientific; Lacan was excommunicated by the International Psycho-Analytical Association.
>
> — *Michael Payne* and *Harold Schweizer*

> It is easy to disparage theorists for being ingrown and esoteric, but it is hard to think of any field from Chaucer to Pynchon studies that is not ingrown and esoteric if viewed from the lay point of view. To most lay observers, the difference between the publications of deconstructionists and of orthodox historical scholars and explicators would probably be hardly discernible.
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> — *Gerald Graff*

In this short position paper I want to do three things: 1) look at the way in which a theory course can be taught in a small English department by means of paralleling it to another problematical course; 2) look at a specific difficulty which inevitably arises in theory courses; and 3) offer a not very happy model of the kind of mindset appropriate to the teaching and reading of theory. There may be points of contact among the three.

I

At Acadia University, everyone, from the administration down to instructors in different departments, acknowledges that composition skills should be taught to incoming students; everyone recognizes the significance of these skills, but no one can agree on the best way to go about inculcating them. For various complex reasons—philosophical, pedagogical, budgetary—the upshot of this agreement/disagreement is that a single composition course, taught by the English Department, has been instituted. And the result is not very satisfactory. Taking one course devoted to writing skills is a bit like taking a penicillin tablet for a strep throat—not at all effective. In a sense, the course becomes unteachable because it cannot achieve its desired effects. (I realize I am overstating the case here.) Another problem, at least here, is that no one wants to teach the course and when strong-armed into doing so the anonymous no one generally turns it into a clone of an introductory literature course.

I have only touched on the problems involved in devising and teaching composition courses, but I hope the drift of my argument is becoming clear and can be somewhat anticipated. It seems to me that teaching theory in a small university is very much like teaching composition. Everyone (well, nearly everyone . . .) agrees that it should be taught, that students should be exposed to theory during the years of their major or honors degree. But if this exposure to theory is reduced to a single upper-level course, as it so often is, then it fails even before it has begun. It is like an isolated first-year composition course, "unteachable."

Instituting a single theory course is, paradoxically, a form of resistance to theory. The institutional act reifies it, locates it in the canon, and marginalizes it all at once. Yet as the Quaker Oats ad has it, it seems "the right thing to do." It also sets up, or can set up, a radical disjunction between the theory course itself and many, perhaps most, of the other courses offered by the department, often putting the student who takes it

in an illogical quandary: the student is exposed to new attitudes, new concepts, new methodologies, new terminologies (more about that later) but may be penalized if he or she uses them in theory courses. (For instance, can he or she attempt to write a paper applying, say, Barthes's Five Codes to Chaucer or Shakespeare or Milton or Milton Acorn if the instructor has never heard of the Five Codes?) If the student is at all pragmatic and wishes to stay sane and get the degree, then he or she will also "do the right thing": the theory course will be separated out from other more conventional literature courses and be regarded by the student as an anomalous, even a maverick course. Instead of holistically informing the student's attitudes and approach to literature, the theory remains single and separate. It is encapsulated into a pill—to be swallowed, digested and then, of course, eliminated.

II

Now I want to move on to my second point, and examine the idea of theory and resistance from a different and more specific perspective. Last year I taught a half-course in theory as an adjunct to a preceding half-course in linguistics, and the text I used was David Lodge's *Modern Criticism and Theory*. For one particular session late in the term the class was asked to read an essay by a feminist critic, Juliet Mitchell. In his introduction to Mitchell's essay, Lodge characterizes it as clear, sane and straightforward, citing the essay's "appealing directness and lucidity" (425). The class's response to Mitchell was totally at odds with Lodge. Why? This is an interesting and important question, because finding an answer to it will offer a partial explanation for the resistance to theory which still pervades small departments. (I realize that these remarks may be irrelevant or even totally wrong for universities with larger departments.) It is all to do with language and context. If, like David Lodge, you have a considerable background in theory then much of what Juliet Mitchell says really is clear, sane and straightforward; and it is a relief to read a theorist with her clarity of mind and expression. But, if you do not specifically know something about Freud, Lacan, Bakhtin, Kristeva, Showalter, Cixous, and a few other feminist critics, then very little of what Mitchell says will be clear, straightforward or even sane to you, whether you be undergraduate, graduate or teacher.

Let's make a simple, sane and straightforward analogy: instructors who regularly teach Shakespeare will find his language and world view for the most part untroublesome, will slip easily into Shakespeare's register, will move among the possible meanings of the text so comfortably that they will often fail to realize the manifold difficulties experienced by students. But if you take these same instructors, who for the purposes of this analogy, are not well-versed in theory, and expose them to the writings of Jakobson, Foucault, Lacan, Derrida, et al. they will surely find themselves experiencing the same kind of difficulties as those experienced by the second-year Shakespeare student: they will be flummoxed by the language and feel adrift in a vacuum of context. In the case of the neophyte wandering in the thickets of theory, I think the sense of disorientation is more profound because Shakespeare is one and theorists are many; there are too many competing and conflicting theories, too many registers and, I regret to admit, too much willful obscurity.

The crucial point here, I think, is that in order to teach one theory course successfully *as a theory course* the course needs to be taught within a wider context of numerous upper-level English courses in which theory is introduced and used on a regular, or at least a semi-regular, basis. If we as English teachers do not make an attempt to familiarize the student with a least some theory in most of our courses then setting up a single theory course won't do much. We are back to the pill bottle, with only one pill in it.

III

I will quickly move to my final point: the kind of mindset necessary to avoid resisting theory. In Paul Bowles's strange novel *The Sheltering Sky*, which is set in North Africa just after the end of World War Two, there are three protagonists: Port, Kit and Tunner. Port is a know-it-all solipsist who is satisfied only if he understands everything about any person or idea. Then, of course, he is not satisfied. Failing to comprehend that life is incomprehensible, Port opts out and more or less commits suicide by willing himself to catch typhus (I would like to be able to say he took a pill). Kit, Port's wife, is an over-emotional being who in accepting other people's readings of the world ultimately negates herself. On the last page of the novel she walks behind a tram and simply disappears. Perhaps she has gone to look for the pill bottle. Tunner, the one surviving protagonist,

has been fascinated by Port and Kit from the beginning. Quite early on in the novel we get this characterization of Tunner, offered by Bowles with more than a whiff of condescension:

> Tunner himself was an essentially simple individual irresistibly attracted by whatever remained just beyond his intellectual grasp. Contenting himself with not quite being able to seize an idea was a habit he had acquired in adolescence, and it operated in him now with still greater force. If he could get on all sides of a thought, he concluded that it was an inferior one; there had to be an inaccessible part of it for his interest to be aroused. (62)

Port and Kit are infinitely more interesting characters than Tunner, but all three are relevant here as exemplars of different undergraduate responses to theory. Port might stand for the philosopher-king student who drops a theory course after three weeks of reading stuff he or she is not willing to admit to even a partial failure in comprehending. Kit, and I am aware of the gender-bias here but cannot think of a better trio of fictional exemplars, might stand for the student who drops the course after the initial enthusiasm for "new" ideas has worn off. But Tunner is the character most illuminating. It seems to me that one cannot approach theory with either the intellectual arrogance of a Port or the emotional enthusiasm of a Kit. One must accept that theory is difficult stuff and that repeated readings will often fail to yield full comprehension. Along with Tunner, one has to be fascinated by half-grasped ideas—or better, half-grasping ideas and being prepared to wait a long time for them to germinate. One has, like him, to be prepared continually to fall short of controlling language and text and still to remain fascinated.

I am quite prepared to accept myself as a Tunner and even to recommend the Tunneresque frame of mind, but one thing troubles me. I should have mentioned earlier, for those of you who may not have read the novel or seen Bertolucci's film of it, that Tunner is a real pill.

WORKS CITED

Bowles, Paul. *The Sheltering Sky*. 1949. New York: Vintage, 1990.
Lodge, David. *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*. London: Longman, 1988.