

Postmodernism, Theory, and the End of the Humanities

by E. Christian Kopff



For more than a decade now, Christopher Norris has been writing clear and informed discussions of where deconstruction and other versions of critical theory in the humanities are headed. The clarity of his accounts has been a public service, since few of the philosophers and literary and cultural theorists he discusses write clearly. Stanley Corngold actually praised “Sartre’s deliberate antibourgeois refusal to write well . . . that has proven congenial to [Yale’s Paul] De Man.” They could write well if they wanted to, but that would mean giving in to the false standards of Western civilization, the capitalist, colonialist, totalizing oppressor that has given them tenure. For years Norris defended the leading writers of Critical Theory from accusations that their deconstructions of logocentric (or phallogocentric) texts from Plato to Husserl were trapping reader and text and the humanities as a whole in a Skinner box of language from which there was no escape and into which ethics and politics appeared only to be revealed as an illusion created by a specter which called itself the Will to Truth, but was in fact Nietzsche’s Will to Power. As the years went by and as each generation, lasting about two or three years in this rapidly changing world, advanced by deconstructing the hidden premises of the previous generation, it became clearer and clearer that “that way madness lies.” In a series of recent books, of which the latest is *Truth and the Ethics of Criticism* (1994), Norris has denounced the latest manoeuvres of the “Deconstructive Turn” to which he devoted so many informative books. Like Daddy Warbucks in *Mad* magazine’s parody of

Little Orphan Annie, our hero may have shown up “just after the nick of time.”

Theory triumphed in the humanities. Position after position, even entire departments, like Duke’s English faculty, went over to the new way of thinking. Deconstruction and feminism turned their back on philological method and archival research. Even the nod proffered these scholarly tools by the neo-Marxist New Historicism was largely, well, theoretical. The effect on the humanities in America’s colleges and universities has been impressive. In the last 20 years, majors in English and Classics have declined by about 30 percent. (History has lost 45 percent of its majors over that period.) Classics majors once scored an average of 50 points higher on the Graduate Record Exams than English majors, but no longer. (Classics’ numbers declined; English’s numbers have remained the same.) When positions in the humanities become available, deans often give them to departments in the physical or biological sciences, or to trendy social science departments, such as Ethnic Studies or Women’s Studies.

This lemming march to destruction affected not only the numbers of majors (after all, we are still teaching nonmajors English Composition and Greek Mythology), but also the moral basis of the humanities. In every society we make sense of our lives by telling not only our own story, but the story or stories of our group, our nation, our culture. The Postmodernists denounced this cultural necessity as indoctrination into an oppressive and illusory “Meta-Narrative.” They insisted that language has no relation to any sort of real world, where we live and move and have our being. We are all trapped in the fun-house of language, which shapes what we think or can think.

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The highest moral command, perhaps the only one, is to respect the Otherness, the alterity of every Other in the world. Imposing our metanarrative on others is intellectual colonialism, as bad as, no, worse than the literal colonialism of the European empires of the 19th century. A passion to show up each earlier generation's metanarrative, its indifference to alterity and the Other, became a feeding frenzy. The intellectual waters turned red with the Oedipodean slaughter of the textual fathers.

The early promise of the first generation of heroes, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man, was to be fulfilled in the abolition of Platonism, capitalism, and patriarchy, the disappearance of the subject and the author. In 1989, however, it was Soviet communism that disappeared. A profound cultural despair filled the European scene. One by one, the intellectual heroes were found with feet of clay. A diligent Belgian archivist showed that De Man had written 170 articles for the leading newspaper in Brussels during the Nazi occupation, including a major piece for their anti-Jewish issue. Foucault turned from intellectual archaeology and genealogy to a study of the social construction of sex. It was no purely intellectual breakthrough. When he visited homosexual bathhouses in San Francisco, he indulged himself as he did not dare to do in Paris. Norris laments that he died just as his work was beginning to show an appreciation for the critical evaluation of evidence. The knowledge that a man is dying of AIDS concentrates his mind wonderfully. Barthes also passed on, leaving for posthumous publication what his editors called his linguistic studies in North Africa, page after page of which recorded what little Moroccan boys said while he was having sex with them.

Paul de Man had declared that history, and presumably biography as well, is only "a written text." The postmodernists ignored the moral context in which their movement thrived and concentrated on showing that our pride in the accomplishments of science, technology, democracy, literature were fatally flawed by our failure to appreciate the unique specialness, Otherness, absolute alterity of other cultures and other people. Eighteenth-century Enlightenment Europe thought it could not only dominate the world politically, but also understand it intellectually. The second was a worse ambition than the first. The suicidal insanity of the two world wars and the Cold War that followed ended Western schemes for world domination. (At least for public consumption. America still seeks to be a world leader and to impose its presence by means of gunboat humanitarianism from Somalia to Haiti.) We still think that we can explain the rest of the world. Palestinian scholar Edward Said argued in *Orientalism* and other books that we had merely turned the East into an Other, constructed out of what we were not, not out of the facts. Feminists argued that scientific statements about women were similarly constructed out of male confusion of the desire to know with the desire to dominate. Foucault spoke of power/knowledge.

Foucault wrote passionately of the suppression of the Otherness of the mad or the criminal. Feminists like Julia Kristeva sought a fuller life for oppressed women. Edward Said showed that colonialism's oppression of the Easterner was not just the result of this or that corrupt regime or mistaken policy, but rooted in the Western Enlightenment's delusion of a universally valid knowledge, that ended up amounting to self-aggrandizement. But if we are trapped in the closed box of language,

with no objective reality to correct, falsify, or confirm our notions, on what basis do we condemn or approve? The Deconstructive Turn was good at showing up false certainties in science, progress, and other Western accomplishments. On what basis did it condemn the West for being trapped in its own linguistic conventions, when that is the human condition? If there is no objective reality, physical or moral, how can we denounce, or even criticize, the Holocaust Revisionist for his denial of the gas chambers, or Israel for her treatment of the Palestinians, or men for their subjection of women?

Norris has worked hard to find evidence that some leaders have refused to follow the dogma of the sovereignty of the linguistic all the way to the end of its barren cul-de-sac. The bloody ethnic conflicts of the last few years have shaken Edward Said. Julia Kristeva has declared in her recent books on the immigrant as Other that we all have an Other inside us, which we must confront and understand, and if we can do that with ourselves, why not with more conventional Others, North African immigrants or women? She has even gone so far as to declare that Nazi Germany went wrong not through obsession with Enlightenment ideals of general humanity, but through too great an insistence on the reality of the local self and the Other. The paragraph in which she ventured this view sent shockwaves through the critical establishment. Although true believers in the linguistic Iron Curtain between "reality" and language have long since moved beyond oppressive bourgeois morality on almost every subject from plagiarism to buggery, there remains one moral certainty: Nazi Germany was evil. As Leo Strauss pointed out, the *reductio ad Hitlerum* has become the facile refutation of choice. When Kristeva played the Nazi card, she was challenging the rest of the players to fold then and there.

She was at least partly right. German intellectual life was influenced by historical visions that insisted on the profound differences between cultures. Many of today's cries against the unfairness of judging other cultures by our standards can be traced back to Spengler's *Decline of the West*, where he attempts not without success to show that even so seemingly objective a science as geometry functioned differently in antiquity and the modern Western, or Faustian, culture. Still the great totalitarian regimes, German National Socialism, Russian Communism, and American Liberalism, each took from the Enlightenment an ideal of objective truth by which they could judge the world. For Hitler's government, that truth was found in biology, and those judged unworthy by the standards of that objective science could be killed. The Marxist took economics from the Enlightenment, and so the small landowner had to die. In each case, we can see that the Nazi killing the Jew and the Marxist killing the small farmer was killing the refutation of his theory. Liberalism believes in the individual, whose natural or human rights trump all other suits. There is no more complete refutation of that vision than the family and within the family the pregnant woman, an individual filled with new and different life, a true Other, by yet another Other. So Liberalism proclaims the killing of the unborn baby as a basic human right. The nonliberal, fresh from seeing the Nazi and the Jew, the Communist and the small farmer, sees the Enlightenment ideologue killing the refutation of his theory. The feminist denounces the death camps before walking into the abortion clinic. Kristeva's vision of the Other inside each one of us is a brilliant theoretical insight. She does not profane it by confronting it with the Other that lives inside every pregnant woman.

Christopher Norris was awakened to the implications of Critical Theory by the Gulf War, or rather by an article on the crisis written by a leading postmodernist, Jean Baudrillard, in the leftist *Guardian* a few days before the war broke out. (See his *Uncritical Theory: Postmodernism, Intellectuals and the Gulf War*, 1992.) We live inside language, according to the tenets of the faith, and there is no outside, no reality, no facts outside of the language games we play. “We do not have a language,” Heidegger wrote. “Rather, language has us.” There is a profound insight there, but it is not the whole truth. Baudrillard explained that the crisis that accompanied the Iraqi invasion of

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Kuwait was a game played by the Powers That Be. There was no There there. When the war was over, along with the massive bombings and killings of soldier and civilian from hostile and friendly fire, the environmental pollution, the massacre of the Kurds who heeded the American call for an uprising against Saddam Hussein which we had no intention of backing, the massive media cheerleading, the putative lessons of Vietnam gone up in smoke, Baudrillard wrote another article (in the communist *Libération* for March 29, 1991), congratulating himself on being correct. We know, says the French intellectual, of the saturation coverage of the war by CNN, so, granted the presence of some or much disinformation, we may doubt the saturation bombing of Iraq. “If we have no practical knowledge of this war—and such knowledge is out of the question—then let us at least have the skeptical intelligence to reject the probability of all information, of all images whatever their source.” Of course, he is right to point out that our knowledge of the war came from words and pictures carefully crafted to produce an effect on the uncritical. Do we really therefore know nothing of the war? How did theory end up in this absurd position?

Early in this century, a brilliant Swiss linguist named Ferdinand de Saussure gave lectures that were published after his death. In these lectures, he made a simple but important point, that there is no necessary connection between the sounds of a spoken word, the sign, *le signifiant*, and what the word refers to, the signified, *le signifié*. “Book” in English and

“libro” in Italian, for instance, both refer to the same object. The words function in the systems of English and Italian with no special significance attached to what sounds evoke the relevant object. From this simple but true insight, the denial of which was mocked by Plato in his *Cratylus*, the postmodern theorist extrapolated an intellectual nightmare. There is no necessary connection between signifier and signified, spoken word and object. So language is a closed system which has no necessary connection to any putative outside reality. Words do not refer to an extralinguistic reality, and sentences are logical constructs in closed systems, which tell us nothing about the outside world.

The extrapolation from phonetics to semantics, and from linguistics to ontology, is not legitimate. It is refuted by, among other things, the reality of translation. The languages of Europe and the rest of the world are systems, certainly, but they also reflect and uncover a common reality, despite their many differences. We can speak of books and dictatorship and love in many tongues. As those who had sex with Michel Foucault learned to their cost, the fact that English calls it AIDS and French calls it SIDA does not make it any less communicable or deadly. It may be significant, however, that many of those for whom these ideas are important are monoglot theorists in the United States, dependent on translations of authors they cannot read in the original. I know of a university where the debate over the future of the program in Comparative Literature was split between those who felt that to compare literatures one had to be able to read the languages the literatures were written in, and those who insisted loudly that important work in Comp. Lit. was done in English and anything important from abroad got translated. These are the people trapped in the funhouse of language. Is it any wonder that fewer and fewer students are choosing to study with them?

Norris tries to show that Jacques Derrida is aware of all this, and he cites an early article by Derrida on one of the high priests of absolute alterity, Emmanuel Levinas, in which Derrida insisted, against Levinas’s influential demand that we respect absolutely the absolute Otherness of the Other, that we can have no understanding or communication with another except as an *alter ego*, different from us, yes, of course, but also like us in at least some important respects. The point is well taken and true. In a later essay, however, Derrida looked more favorably upon Levinas’s demands for absolute alterity. It is a symptom of Norris’s dilemma. He insists on a few recent paragraphs from Edward Said and Julia Kristeva that contradict or modify their earlier influential stands, and then he must basically ignore a later essay by Derrida, which is very sympathetic to Levinas.

Is there a way out for the humanities, which will preserve contact with language and text and yet will be theoretically sophisticated? We have seen how recent the fall into relativism has been, with most work done since the 1960’s and only a few nods to earlier figures, especially Nietzsche and Heidegger. Recently scholars in literary studies, repulsed by the directions the Modern Language Association has taken, have founded a new Association of Literary Scholars and Critics. Like the Back to Basics movement in elementary education, they seem to think that going back to the 50’s will suffice to salvage literary studies and the humanities, without acknowledging that the 60’s were the child of the 50’s. The organization avoided words like “text” and “philology,” which were claimed by Paul de Man and his admirers.

The establishment and explanation of texts, philology in the old sense, is the oldest and most theoretically sophisticated area of literary studies. Its history goes back to the royal librarians of Ptolemaic Alexandria in the third century, B.C. Americans like the late Fredson Bowers and disciples and critics from G. Thomas Tanselle to Hershel Parker have continued to explore the theory of editing and actually to edit texts. Literary theorists write essays and collect those essays into books, but they do not edit texts or write commentaries. Recently Josephine M. Guy and Ian Small, in *Politics and Value in English Studies: A Discipline in Crisis?* (1993), have noticed that the theory and practice of editing may provide for English studies, and the humanities as a whole, a way out of linguistic solipsism and theoretical aporia and a return to that fruitful interaction of theory and practice which is typical of creative periods in all disciplines. As Norris has shown about Baudrillard and other important postmoderns, theory has often been a way for the literary intellectual to talk his way out of matters he does not care to confront. One of the strong cases for textual studies as editing and commenting on texts is that, with all the theoretical disagreements and practical problems, there is no way to avoid re-

al problems. *Chronicles'* Theodore Pappas has shown in excruciating detail how the editors of the Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to avoid the implications of King's plagiarism, as theorists have avoided the implications of De Man's Nazi past and Foucault's exploitation and virtual murder of his American disciples. There is one important difference. Editing forms part of a millennia-long tradition, and the King editors eventually did their job. They verified and confirmed the massive plagiarism of M.L. King, while their literary critical colleagues were covering up and avoiding the ethical reality that lies behind the history of postmodernism.

It is said that one bright young theorist told his friends as he lay dying of AIDS, "I die happy, because I was infected by Michel Foucault." Those words could be, may yet be, the epitaph of the humanities in the United States. Unlike AIDS there is a cure for postmodernism. It will not come from quoting a few paragraphs of Derrida, or Said, or Kristeva out of the context of their entire careers. It must come from returning to the rich and lively and essential traditions of editing and commenting on the texts that are the basis not only of literary studies, but of our civilization, from antiquity to the present. e

A Pregnant Teen

by *Harold McCurdy*

When Mary with Joseph entered Bethlehem
To register for the tax, and drop between
An ox and ass what God had promised them,
The Queen of Heaven was a pregnant teen.

Fierce moralists and politicians now
Decry teen pregnancy as a thing obscene
(And costly to the State), forgetting how
The Queen of Heaven was a pregnant teen.

If history were controlled by governments,
And governments alone, they'd keep it clean,
Decree it was a capital offense
The Queen of Heaven was a pregnant teen.

Nevertheless, despite the paradox,
Before stunned shepherds blundering on the scene
Found very God between the ass and ox,
The Queen of Heaven was a pregnant teen.