

THE EMPEROR IS PARTLY CLOTHED

Theory's Empire: An Anthology of Dissent, Edited by Daphne Patai and Will H. Corral, Columbia University Press, 736 pages, \$29.50

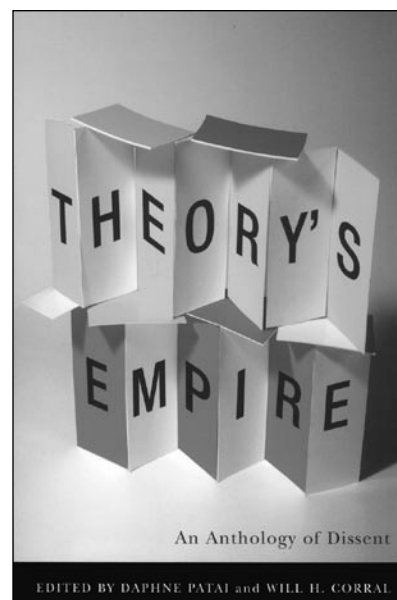
Reviewed by Michael Bérubé

THIRTY YEARS AGO, literary theory was an exciting new thing, involving all manner of translations and speculations. It was as if a half-century of French, German, and Russian thought became available in English overnight, and volumes of the work of Roland Barthes, Walter Benjamin, and Roman Jakobson were suddenly deposited on your doorstep. Twenty years ago, literary theory had polarized literary study: one was either for it or agin' it, and just as I reached graduate school, the "for"s were beginning to carry the day. Ten years ago, the world of Theory (now without the "literary" qualifier) had produced its own weird academic subculture of stars and superstars, a group that had a symbiotic relationship (or perhaps it was mutual love-hate) with the journal *Lingua Franca*. Today, Theory no longer inspires such great ambitions or great resentment: to many observers, capital-T Theory looks exhausted, and small-T theory is just one of the various enterprises undertaken by Academic Literary Study, Inc.

And yet theory has been institutionalized, in the sense that it has spawned countless *Introduction To* volumes and (in 2001) a large *Norton* anthology of its very own. *Theory's Empire* thus appears at a curious time—not at the moment of Theory's ascendancy but, instead, in the wake of its Nortonization. For the editors of *Theory's Empire*, Daphne Patai and Will Corral, Theory's Nortonization implies that Theory has now become dogma. Thus, in their introduction's

opening pages, they object to one scholar's remark that students might need help in order to become familiar with theory and criticism: "why suggest that students need only become 'familiar' with (and not also critical of) the 'new discourse' they are being taught?" As a teacher, I might reply that familiarity with a subject should never preclude criticism of it but should always be a prerequisite for it; but since Patai and Corral believe that the *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* will not foster the kind of criticism they have in mind, they have compiled this anti-*Norton* consisting of 47 essays designed to familiarize students with criticism of Theory.

Patai and Corral waste no time and pull no punches: "from frequent journalistic reports and our own and many of our colleagues' observation of the prevailing modes of instruction and critical writing in the humanities, it is evident that today's theoretical vocabulary has led to an intellectual void at the core of our educational endeavors, scarcely masked by all the posturing, political zealotry, pretentiousness, general lack of seriousness, and the massive opportunism that is particularly glaring in the extraordinary indifference to or outright attacks on logic and consistency." My stars! One wonders how in the world such worthless stuff could have infected so many disciplines. Did interpretive theories catch on in literature, history, anthropology, geography,



and Continental philosophy because they were compelling, productively speculative, or intellectually engaging? Not really, say Patai and Corral: "claims to postmodernist relativism notwithstanding," they explain, "the Theory world is intolerant of challenges and disagreement, which is perhaps why its rhetoric has been so widely parroted in the academy." But surely, you imagine, theorists aren't just a bunch of bullies; surely their influence isn't simply a matter of coercion. Patai and Corral are here to tell you that you imagine wrong: "far from responding with reasoned argument to their critics, proponents of Theory, in the past few decades, have managed to adopt just about every defect in writing that George Orwell identified in his 1946 essay 'Politics and the English Language.'" And yet somehow 'Theorists' influence has only grown with all their posturing, pretentiousness, and defects in writing, because "the rhetoric of Theory has been successful in gaining the moral and political high ground, and those who question it do so at their peril."

This account should give us pause. For it is a curious intellectual phenomenon, I think, that one can gain the moral and political high ground in institutions of higher education by being vacuous, contemptuous of argument, and dismissive of critical interlocutors. Indeed, in Patai's and Corral's rendering, Theory is even more curious than this, because students and professors who find it stimulating are merely parroting the party line, whereas "alert students" and "independent-minded students" have "realized the arbitrariness of readings based on the theorists they study" and "can sense that something is amiss with these shifting applications of theory to literary works." The camp followers may be chanting the Theory mantra of the day, but the alert students know better: they know a naked emperor when they see one, even if he is presiding over a singularly evil empire. And *Theory's Empire*—a self-proclaimed "anthology of dissent"—is here to jump-start the rebellion.

I read *Theory's Empire* not as a knee-jerk defender of Theory, but as a literature professor who finds some areas of theory to be exciting (the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, Raymond Williams, and Ludwig Wittgenstein, for instance) and some theorists to be empty vessels (such as Jacques Lacan and Louis Althusser). Additionally, I am just old and cantankerous enough to find many aspects of my profession annoying or wearying—the rancor, the cliquishness, and the tendentious lefter-than-thou moralizing that so often takes the form of claiming that anyone who does not declare himself or herself opposed to X (and many of those who do!) are complicit in every malfeasance associated with X. (Richard Levin's essay "Silence is Consent, or Curse Ye Meroz!" is particularly good on

this count.) So I read a fair number of the essays in *Theory's Empire* with sympathetic curiosity, finding their forms of "dissent" from business-as-usual to be bracing; I'll even admit that when I came across Kwame Anthony Appiah's gentle rebuke of the "*soi-disant bien-pensant*" mode of criticism, I wished I'd coined the phrase myself. And some of the essays whose arguments I initially resisted—like John Searle's "Literary Theory and Its Discontents" and Stephen Adam Schwartz's "Everyman an Übermensch: The Culture of Cultural Studies"—I now regard as challenges that people affiliated with "theory" and "cultural studies" are obliged to engage as salient contributions to theoretical debates.

But on the whole, I found *Theory's Empire* a remarkably uneven volume. Valentine Cunningham's "Theory, What Theory?" opens the collection with a discerning, knowledgeable overview of the terrain; it is followed by indiscriminate rants from René Wellek ("Destroying Literary Studies") and Tzvetan Todorov ("Traveling Through American Criticism"), which are followed in turn by a briskly intelligent discussion of "practical criticism" by Morris Dickstein. The pattern recurs throughout the book: Alan Spitzer's judicious review of the scandal surrounding the revelation of Paul de Man's wartime articles for a Belgian collaborationist newspaper is followed by Graham Good's fast-and-loose attack on postmodernism, poststructuralism, and postcolonialism; Russell Jacoby's aerosol-spray account of the retreat from utopian thinking in the humanities (a strange account, since Theorists have given us far more utopianism than anyone could ever want, as Theory's more

reliable critics have pointed out) is immediately followed by Eugene Goodheart's circumspect defense of the aesthetic.

The anthology appears as scatter-shot as its introduction; it is as if every essay here has been chosen because it says something—anything—bad about Theory and/or Theorists in one way or another, and about half of them hit their marks. Thus, an essay that praises Edward Said at the expense of other theorists sits cheek by jowl with an essay that takes Edward Said's work as *the* example of everything that's wrong with Theory. Similarly, essays whose authors have learned much from deconstruction bump up against essays whose authors insist that a quarter cup of deconstruction will blacken your every laundry load. Even some of the finest essays in the book, like Clara Claiborne Park's wonderful piece, "Author! Author! Reconstructing Roland Barthes," are refashioned by Patai and Corral into blunt bashing instruments: as they explain in their introduction to the essay, "Park discloses how fundamentally different is the American intellectual scene [from that of France], which never (until the advent of Theory itself, we would add) granted particular literary figures such imperial influence over language and its products." That brief parenthetical remark is simply astounding, for Patai and Corral open the book by claiming that Theory is responsible for all that portentous talk about "the death of the novel and the author" (actually, the "death of the novel" was announced in the 1960s by novelists like John Barth and Ronald Sukenick, but let's blame Theory for now). Here, however, they're castigating Theory for having *granted particular literary figures imperial influence over language and its products*. In other words, Theory is to blame for the dethroning of

creative writers, “whose status,” Patai and Corral write, “many theorists have been eager to usurp.” But it also venerates certain literary figures *too much*. Alternatively: Theory has attacked the idea of the author, usurping the status of novelists and poets; *and* the American intellectual scene never granted Authors the godlike status Roland Barthes rails against—until Theory came along. Any way you phrase it, this doesn’t make any dang sense—and it certainly doesn’t do justice to Park’s essay.

Undeterred by such considerations, Patai and Corral congratulate themselves for their levelheadedness in parlous times: “we have selected essayists who see the need—more urgent now than ever—to question today’s theoretical orthodoxies and to replace them with open discussion and logical argumentation. . . . [W]hat is particularly noticeable in our authors’ writings is the general lack of ad hominem attacks. . . . They concentrate not on personality . . . but instead on logic, reason, and evidence.” Well, I suppose it all depends on the meaning of the word *general* in the phrase “general lack of ad hominem attacks,” because this reader was struck by D. G. Myers calling Judith Butler “one of the great robber barons” of “academic capitalists” and Lee Siegel surmising that “[Michael] Moon has sadomasochism on the brain; I bet he faints at the slightest whiff of leather.” I was similarly unimpressed by Susan Haack’s breezy dismissal of people she dislikes—a paradoxical feature of an essay titled “Staying for an Answer”: “I won’t even *mention*,” she sniffs, “such self-styled neo-pragmatists as . . . Louis Menand, who writes that pragmatism is the view that ‘the whole force of a philosophical account of anything . . . lies in the advertised consequences of believing it.’” Since Menand’s seems to be a reasonable

WIFE SWAPPING

BY JOHN E. SMELCER

(My Indian grandmother used to tell stories about how bears would steal women for wives.)

All night while my wife and I tried to sleep in our restless bed, a bear circled our cabin, grunting and snorting and peeking into windows.

I awoke alone in the morning to find my wife’s ring and a small bouquet of wildflowers crouched on her pillow.

shorthand account of pragmatism (even if you don’t like pragmatism), Haack might well have stayed to explain why she thinks it is not worth addressing; such, at least, are the ordinary protocols of open discussion and logical argumentation.

Most of the volume’s essays are far better than these excerpts suggest, but the editors’ work, alas, is not. At one point they complain that “although the reigning ideas issuing from academic luminaries have attacked the very notion of stable identities (as well as stable meanings), this has in no way lessened those theorists’ personal prestige.” Patai and Corral call this a “glaring contradiction.” What kind of “logic” is being employed here? Quite apart from the question of how one might stabilize “identities” and “meanings” once and for all, what’s striking about this passage is its suggestion that personal prestige should *logically* ac-

crue only to those people who argue for stable identities and meanings. Yet even more unhinged, I think, is Patai and Corral’s incendiary claim that “what the languages of present-day criticism and theory *unmistakably do* [my emphasis] is undermine what should be a protected intellectual space—that of classroom teaching and learning—in which ideas can be explored and tried out with an extraordinary measure of freedom and safety.” Read that one again: utterly without warrant or evidence, Patai and Corral are accusing languages of present-day criticism and theory—and, presumably, the people who speak those languages—of violating the principles of academic freedom. There is no hesitation, no qualification: *unmistakably*, professors who speak of “undecidability” and “heteroglossia” (not to mention “heteronormativity”!) are traducing the ideals of liberal education. In the

world of open discussion and logical argumentation, people who make claims like these are ordinarily expected to support them in some way.

Time and again, *Theory's Empire* reminds me that Theory caught on in the 1970s and 1980s partly because it was so intellectually stimulating but also because so many of its opponents were so unpersuasive and indiscriminate. The cumulative effect back then, I'm sorry to say, was that too much of Theory was given a pass, and people like Lacan, Althusser, and Jean Baudrillard were listened to (by me, among others) for far longer than they deserved to be. Even today, some of Theory's weaker aspects remain embarrassments, especially when they try to challenge science by way of some half-digested citations of Thomas Kuhn and feminist standpoint theory; as Noam Chomsky puts it in his contribution to this book, "the entire idea of 'white male science' reminds me, I'm afraid, of 'Jewish physics.'" As Theory has, over the past quarter century, become routine and routinized, the effects have sometimes been salutary for literary criticism, as Richard Levin and many contributors testify, and sometimes baleful: as Goodheart points out, even the New Criticism got old and routine in its day, and "literary criticism thrives to the extent that it resists academic professionalization." Unfortunately, Goodheart goes on to complain that "what is distressing about the current situation is that a literary sensibility is not requisite for professional entry into the discipline," and I can't think of anything that would kill students' enthusiasm for literary study faster than a series of "requisite" professional exams designed to measure one's "literary sensibility" on the Goodheart Scale: *Your sensibility*

is insufficiently literary—off to law school with you! But the question raised here is a good one: How can we stave off the routinization of exciting forms of thought? And why is it that some works of literature seem to respond more fully to some approaches than to others? Figuring out why this is so—and why these approaches became routine, as well—requires something very much like a theory. With a small *t*.

And why should we bother with theories of literature, or theories of interpretation? There is a telling moment in John Searle's essay, when, in the course of ceding most of pre-Wittgensteinian philosophy to Jacques Derrida while claiming (rightly) that Derrida is at a loss when it comes to dealing with philosophy since 1953, Searle doggedly insists on speech-act theory's distinction between "use" and "mention":

Now, when Derrida speaks of what he calls *citationalité*, one would think that he is talking about the use-mention distinction, but as with *iterabilité*, he does not give a coherent account of the notion, and this leads him to say things that are obviously false. For example, he thinks that when a play is put on, the actors in the play do not use words but are only citing them. . . . This mistake reminds me of the freshman student who liked Shakespeare well enough but was dismayed to find that Shakespeare used so many familiar quotations in his plays.

Searlean wit is almost always fun, but here, it's a bit too glib for its own good. If you know anything about literature, you know that Derrida's claim is not "obviously false": when Prince Hal opens his soliloquy in *1 Henry IV* with the words, "I know you all, and will awhile uphold / The unyok'd humor of your idleness,"

the actor playing Hal is not, in fact, telling us that he is well acquainted with the carousings of his fellow cast members. He is not *using* the words in that sense. Rather, he is (re)citing them without quite "mentioning" them (he does not do the "scare quotes" bit with his fingers) while using them in a way that suspends their immediate use; and it's a good thing plays work that way, too, or we all might be indicted as accessories to murder for not telling the cops that Macbeth is planning to kill Duncan. Utterances in plays are *precisely* the kinds of things that trouble the use/mention distinction, and for all his faults and excesses, Derrida is to be commended for attending to the ways literature makes trouble for philosophers who like tidy file cabinets, just as deconstruction is to be credited for reminding us that rhetorical questions in literary works are exceptionally complex things.

And what of rhetorical questions in nonliterary works? Patai and Corral proceed as if the distinction between literary language and ordinary language is self-evident, and as if we all know what it means to read literature *as literature*. But any serious student of literature—that is, anyone who undertakes to *study* literature rather than simply enjoy it (though enjoyment is OK by me, too)—learns, to his or her delight or distress, that the task of understanding literature and accounting for interpretative possibilities is much harder than it first appears. "Theory" begins in that realization; and if theory has wandered too far afield of late, if it has given rise to all manner of cliques and claques, serious students can take some satisfaction in knowing that the fundamental theoretical questions will remain—and will remain delightful and instructive—long after Theory's empire has crumbled. ●