

James J. Sosnoski  
Department of English  
Miami University of Ohio

[Published in *Associated Departments of English Bulletin*. 104. NY: Modern Language Association, 1993, 26-28]

### **Requiem for a Noun**

Things change. For instance, classrooms. My last one had no windows, no doors, no chairs, no blackboards, and no teachers or students. Last semester I team-"taught" a seminar in literary theory by corresponding extensively through e-mail with graduate students at another university. I became a virtual presence in David Downing's classroom thanks to telecommunication. Times change too. We hoped to form research groups based on problems students identified rather than on ones that concerned us. So, we asked participants in the seminar "what bothers you most about graduate school?"

Though each student answered the question differently, two collaborations emerged from our discussions: one called the "Pedagogy" group and another called "The Big Names in Literary Theory Reading Group." Our vehicle of communication was *Cycles*, a kind of "electronic Newsletter" whose protocols allowed the seminar members to correspond without fear of hurtful critiques from other students or teachers. One of the letters I received was from a young woman in the "Big Names" group. She wrote:

On some level, I feel that I am trapped between those evil, oppressive theorists who make me feel ignorant and the attitude that these theorists can simply be ignored. While I agree with the later reaction, it is simply not a practical attitude for me to take at this point in my career. As a PhD student, I am part of the discipline and that is a decision I made. There are going to be many theorists that I am not always going to be in a position to ignore.

Margery was not alone in her experience of oppressive theorists. One of her colleagues wrote:

Derrida was introduced to me by the institution. If it wasn't for "the university" (ultimately one of the objects of Derrida's critique) Derrida would be just another obscure name to me. But this name ...would just not go away. It would keep coming up again and again. It would be used to mock me in my ignorance. "Well, Steve, in response to your point, Derrida would say .. ." or "Interesting point, Steve, but Derrida would argue .. ." ...The same goes for a lot of the other theories and theorists. Names like Foucault, Bakhtin, and Lyotard come to mind.

Later in her letter, Margery explained her decision to learn more about theory:

I have allowed myself to be intimidated by theory and theorists simply because I have had minimal experience with it. This is why getting a basic understanding of

theory is so important to me. Because theory can be used to silence and oppress specific agendas, it seems the only way to prevent this from happening is to learn the discourse.

Steve offered the same explanation of the situation:

There is a definite power/fear relationship between us and these theorists/theories. If we acknowledge the premise that there is power in knowing about these theories ... then we acknowledge our fear that power might be denied us or might be used against us by others to cause us pain. ...many feel that Derrida provides the power to scrutinize or be scrutinized, to frustrate or be frustrated, to threaten or be threatened. Derrida puts a gun in our hand instead of a stick.

Steve's analogy reveals the lesson he has learned from us--theory is a weapon.

The "Pedagogy" group was not concerned with theory. They were stirred by a letter from Ann Ott which begins:

Maybe I should start with the room the class met in a basement room with a large table around which graduate students at an eastern university sweated out this seminar in American literature. I never wanted to go in that room after the course was over, even years later, fearing it had absorbed the dynamics, thoughts, and feelings from that class and could infect me with sorrow and disappointment.

My efforts to get perspective by talking about it with friends were unsatisfactory. One commented, "Oh yes, graduate courses are sometimes ridiculously demanding." I thought I had put it behind me, filed it in the category "Some Classes Are Memorable Because They're Awful" until I ran into Martha in the hallway during a class break last semester. "Weren't you in that seminar?" she asked. Then a flood of memories and I am tearing up and notice she is, too middle-aged women with grown children. I am back in that basement room with its windows so high up no natural light can fall on the subject....

Ann then describes her professor's unrealistic demands. Her letter was a magnet. She had described a problem other students easily recognized. Yet, as they discussed similar experiences, they found themselves merely piling up anecdotes. They had difficulty extrapolating a research project from their experiences. The "Big Names" group, by contrast, quickly formed their agenda. They listed key works of major theorists and set up a reading schedule.

These differing reactions to the question, "what bothers you most about graduate school?," reflect the state of theory in literary studies. The "Big Names in Theory" group, feeling the pressure to succeed, mirrors the competitive star system we hold up to them. Despite strong feelings of ambivalence, they were eager to learn more about theory in order to become competitive within their profession. The "Pedagogy" group

seemed less ambitious, expressing no burning desire to learn theory and preferring to work with concrete experiences. However, when confronted with the task of articulating the problems underlying their experiences, they found themselves confused. They had no notion of how to proceed.

These two groups seem to me typical poles in the state of contemporary reactions to literary theory. On one side, critics avidly pursue the "Big Names in Literary Theory." On the other, they pursue concrete experiences rather than abstractions. The spectrum of attitudes in between reflects different degrees of the same polarity. Theory is divorced from critical work whether construed as interpretations of texts or as critiques of cultures. No matter which side of the divorce you choose, the same separation pertains. In this state, critics do not learn how to theorize the problems troubling their work.

To put the matter bluntly: we produce students who do not know how to theorize. Therefore, they rely instead upon the theoretical concepts in fashion. The "Pedagogy" group could not connect their experiences. They lacked the wherewithal to formulate a problem from experiences they deemed similarly problematic. The "Big Names" group exhibited the same trait. For instance, Margery wanted to work with Julia Kristeva's *Desire in Language* and "Women's Time." Her intention was to generate "a vocabulary list" so that her group could learn "the Kristeva 'jargon' without having to read all of her work." What would help Margery most in this project is a "*A Dictionary of Theoretical Literacy*" edited by E. D. Hirsch, Jr.. Margery's group wanted information about the theories of big name theorists but felt no discomfort that their desire had not sprung from any work whatsoever. Their desire for a theory preceded any reason for needing one (except for the motive of maintaining a competitive edge). They were not divorcing theory from practice. Quite to the contrary, they had every intention of practicing their theories on texts. Rather, the hallmark of their group was a divorce of work from theory, the same lack of connectivity I noted in the "Pedagogy" group.

When it comes to theory, we put the cart before the horse. We give students theoretical problematics instead of teaching them to theorize problems. We provide prefabricated architectonics so students have no need to become architects on their own. As a result (assuming Margery and Steve are representative instances), students believe we prefer pre-fabricated connections between theory and practice because that's what we insist they learn.

Gerald Graff's critique of the field-coverage principle for organizing our work pertains here. We cover theory as a field. Once theory is established in the curriculum as a field, students want information about it. As Steve says, if the institution of criticism hadn't made him aware of deconstruction, Derrida would be just another name. He is affected by our advertizing campaigns. Our brochures say: come to Carnegie Mellon and you'll get a post-structuralist curriculum. Our catalogues list courses on postmodern topics and our course descriptions list featured theorists. Histories of Criticism chronicle key authors and their schools. Schools and their quarterbacks are matched against each other. Competition ensures the emergence of new stars. Paul de Man displaces Cleanth Brooks,

Patricino Schwichardt displaces Wolfgang Iser, Andrew Ross displaces Fredric Jameson. Yet, the rate at which theories continue to rise and fall is hardly conducive to sustained work. Moreover, when literary theory is treated as a field, its texts become the objects of study. This distorts the relation between work and error. Usually, if things go wrong with your work, you reflect upon what you are doing in order to detect errors in the assumptions you are making. This reflexive form of inquiry is theoretical and leads to theories or hypothetical models of work. To give the author of such hypothetical models the same status as the author of the works being studied distorts the relation between the two activities. It's a bit like identifying a spell-checking program as the text on which you are at work rather than a tool which aids your work. Indeed, programs are texts but in quite a different register of meaning.

Whereas it makes some sense to organize the study of literature around key authors, it makes little sense to organize theory in the same way. If theory concerns the governing assumptions of our work, then it makes more sense to organize the study of theory around the "assumptions" in question--for example, around key conceptions of texts, intertexts, contexts--internal and external, historical and sociological. But, courses in theory are usually organized around key writers: Derrida, Foucault, Althusser, or Richards, Ransom, Shklovsky, depending upon which school of thought is featured. It's not that Derrida's concepts are irrelevant to critical work but that graduate students understand less and less about the issues underlying their work even though they know more and more about conceptions of their work. It's like studying to be an auto mechanic by taking courses in physics. It's not the most efficacious way of learning how to fix a carburetor. In short, theoretical concepts have been detached from the critical work to hand.

How much information do literary critics need about Lacan for their work? If you are building a house, do you need to know geology? To teach undergraduates to write or read, do I need to know Lacan? To clarify a paragraph, how much do I have to know about *Ecrits*? To teach paragraph coherence what assumptions in Lacan help? When I teach writing, I avoid Lacan. This example raises the question of our priorities. Which should go first the problems readers and writers have with texts or the concepts theorists have had about texts in general?

In his letter of invitation to address you this morning, David Laurence wrote that: "Many departments ... are struggling to work out what role theory ought to have in teaching and curriculum and in the general idea of literature their departments convey and stand for." He describes departments in ways that seem to reflect the ambivalence toward theory my correspondents express:

There is more or less ...willingness to explore what might result were [theory] to be taken seriously as a basis for curriculum at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. But there is also hesitancy, ...and both anger and fear (as well as some glee) at the possibility that common reading and even literature itself stands under threat from these concepts, tools, and arguments."

Let me pose the dilemma departmental administrators face as a starkly practical question: how much theory should be put in a literature curriculum?

This is not an easy problem to solve. No matter how much you, as administrators, might agree with my correspondents about the harmful effects of theory, no matter how many more you might add to the complaints I've mentioned, nonetheless, to remove literary theory from your literature programs is a very risky venture. Hoping it will be helpful, I'll conclude by indicating what I did about "the theory problem."

I have taught Literary Criticism for many years using ConDavis' & Schleifer's *Contemporary Literary Criticism* which includes essays by Derrida, Foucault, Jameson, Spivak, Cixous, Kristeva, and Lacan among others. I no longer use textbooks based on the "Schools and Movements" principle of selection. They undermine my teaching. Students all too readily construe a theory as a method and bulldoze texts into plots on which they can assemble critical prefabrications. My previous courses in criticism were never intended as methods courses. But students feel a need for approaches to texts that produce readings their teachers want so if I present them with Barbara Johnson's reading of *Billy Budd*, they mimic her deconstructive method in their papers. My goal was and still is to teach my students how to make connections among the cultural texts to which they are an audience rather than to provide information they can convert into critical prefabrications. So I no longer teach Derrida as *Derrida* or Barbara Johnson as an exemplary deconstructive critic. Instead, I try to show when centering or decentering texts are perspicacious reading strategies dependent upon difficulties our work presents to us.

Theory works more efficaciously as an activity, as a verb. Nominalizing this activity allows us to think theory is information, an ill-fated moment. The mass for the dead intones: "*dies irae, dies illa calamitatis et miseriae.*" But in the end it advises "*requiescat in pace.*" It's time to sing a requiem for theory as a noun. Let it rest in peace and let us celebrate theorizing at its wake.