

# **A Defense of Theory: Interpretation as an Adventure on the Border Line**

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The discussion of the role of theory in recent critical debates on interpretation has been very lively. This has been particularly true in the United States, where, because of a mistaken sense of pragmatism, theory is often confused with ideology or methodology. In this paper I will try to expand upon my own idea of theory. I will argue for a conception of theory that frames theory as an inner tension and an incessant process of thought, one which underlies all interpretive acts and which evades not only the object under analysis in each single discipline, but also the profession of different cultural fashions and critical trends.

Every now and then I find myself forced to answer an urgent question: "Which side are you on?" I am asked; or, "Under which King, Bezonian?" as the "reactionary" F.R. Leavis provokingly entitled one of his pamphlets written in the 1930s. In *The Idea of a University* Leavis was already beginning to cope with rising problems like that of "Mass Civilization and Minority Culture." Although that time was certainly different from ours, many problems which have characterized our period were already present: the leveling down of culture with respect to mass society, the decay of tradition in the face of new forms of technological barbarism, the relationship between the elite and the majority, changes in language in a new Babel and, above all, the questioning of the didactic function of the university and the task of criticism to "scrutinize" the values of life. With regard to all these issues, the risk of dividing into "Apocalittici e integrati," roughly quoting Umberto Eco's dichotomy of some years ago, is imminent. This is particularly true for my generation which has always lived "out of time," too late or too early in relation to certain important changes. This happened to us in 1968, as opposed to the generation of eighteen-year-olds, and again in the seventies during the dreadful years of terrorism, or during the struggles of the most radical and separatist feminism (and, of course, we were not at all at ease with old-fashioned Academia). However, this contradictory position towards the difficult

relationship between a changing society and the values to be preserved, between realism and utopia, also contains positive aspects. The presence of such positive aspects is the reason why certain deconstructive criticism, or negative hermeneutics, from the seventies onward has attracted my attention. This interpretive stance was based not on final certainties, but rather on a continuous *questioning*, both in politics and in literary criticism.

How, then, does a member of the "out of time" generation describe the current historical moment? The socialist dream of setting oppressed people and women free has never come true, at least not in the ways expected or wished for in the past. The end of ideology, the actual as well as metaphorical collapse of walls, has annulled the old opposition between blocs: capitalism and communism, reaction and revolution, the right and the left, the reactionary and the conservative. In Europe the debate is now rendered in postideological terms, even with an unprecedented breakdown of political credibility in Italian politics, or, even more tragically, in the face of the terrible civil war in the former Yugoslavia. The confusion of ideas following the crisis of foundations has created contradictory phenomena that mix various aspects of the same problem. Instead of radically claiming the right to equality, as in the past, today it is the idea or right to difference that is radically claimed. Claims to difference, which made their appearance in Europe during the seventies (especially as a consequence of the influence of psychoanalysis), have now resurfaced in both Europe and America. Thus, left-wing ideas, once dead in the old continent, have paradoxically moved west into the country that was once seen as the natural center of capitalism. The inclination to generalize, to judge on the basis of the most important problems and universal categories valid for everybody, must now not only come to terms with a world characterized by the global circulation of ideas, but also with subtle changes which require that we pay attention to different realities.

At the same time, together with the ghost of the engaged artist—the organic intellectual who has returned like a phoenix rising once again from the ashes—there has reappeared in the American academic world the intellectual's sense of guilt. It is a process not unlike the process of self-negation, the negation of one's own role, which many European professors underwent in 1968. The same sense of guilt, or aesthetic original sin, emerges as the intellectual suffers from his love for poetry and art, or from his belonging to a privileged class which, having the power, dominates and manipulates culture. What develops is a sense of guilt towards exploited and marginalized people, once represented by the working class and now by the Third World and racial "minorities." Under the generic and all-inclusive label of "cultural studies," offshoots of new leftist thought have taken root again.

In the fertile soils of gender studies and ethnic studies—in short, political commitment—literature and society are grafted together.

In the face of this, Europeans live in a condition of uneasiness. Having experienced *déjà vu* with the return of old problems, we are now forced to understand and come to terms with the fact that phenomena are never the same as we used to know them, and that they often change during the voyage of ideas from one country to another, from one historical period to another. Therefore, it is now necessary to re-examine ideas and prejudices, to submit old stereotypes to a process of linguistic revision, and to reconceive those juxtaposed binary terms which have not yet acquired new meanings in our dialectic mentality and lexicon. In fact, implied in the “end of ideologies” has been the collapse of schemes and cultural paradigms that regulated our way of thinking and judging up to a few decades ago. Thus, all great critiques, including that of literary criticism, have proven inadequate to the task of explaining the complexity of new situations. This inadequacy resides in the perceived necessity to govern and regulate new complexities, as well as in the teaching of single disciplines, for which an even more specialized preparation is required. The political essence of the intellectual and the critic requires that he should do his job well. His is a profession which has always focused on the search for truth, on the search for both a “disinterested” truth and, in the words of Harold Bloom, for an *experiential* criticism, for one’s own inner paradigm.

In unquestioningly accepting so-called “cultural studies,” we run the risk of merely revising old stereotypes without subjecting them to a more thorough analysis. Now, as much as ever, one should avoid conforming to fashions that are both ephemeral and actual, or, to use the Nietzschean term, “timely.” It is not by changing *tout court* the object of study or the subject matter discussed in a course that society is changed. Substituting a course on Milton with one on Rock Culture, Madonna, or an important but unknown African-American woman writer does not transform society. Similarly, traditional culture cannot be supported by merely defending Milton instead of Rock Culture, Madonna, or unknown African-American women writers. This does not mean, of course, that we can simply ignore proposed or actual change or the inherent difficulties that attend such change. Nor should we consider the complexity of these problems an excuse for not seeking change. We must understand what engagement, change, and renewal mean today. Above all, we need to reconsider the way certain events are recorded and analyzed for us. I remember, for example, the nonconformist role which semiotics played in the 1960s as applied to popular literature. Such studies remarkably contributed to renovating a formerly conservative scenario and, paradoxically,

their ironic disengagement brought about more change than an open but already institutionalized engagement.

Now, it is certainly difficult to connect specializations with the universal and to reassemble the scattered fragments in some way without being able to count on an absolute *criterion*. However, what institution if not the university should have the appointed task of searching for, finding, and then teaching an adequate culture? The university needs to fulfill its role as *universitas*, a place which always has been and always should be the cradle of knowledge and research, of interpretation and education, always on the border line as it extends the boundaries of thought. This is a universe where the plurality of points of view in a multicultural society must be confronted by a new and revised concept of *comparatism*. As Umberto Eco noted in his inaugural lecture, the university must take a central position between the mass media and society; providing above all the research and analytical tools for the data which we are given by the world of information. More than this, the university must always be ahead of the datum, with no fear of theoretical speculations, no censorship, and no threat of scandal. It must therefore achieve that basic freedom of research and teaching that derives from the heritage of our humanistic tradition. I am conscious that this can sound somewhat naive, especially coming from a chaotic and frantic university system such as our own (Bologna has 90,000 students), in which contemporaneously we may have everything and its opposite. However, I love "untimely" proposals, as Nietzsche did, and I am also conscious that we are confronted with an epochal turning point at which we need even more tolerance, and more imagination as well.

What then is the duty of the university? The duty is not to solve directly society's problems. The current debate on curricula and canon has misperceived the role of the university, dramatizing, along with the contradictions of society, the contradictions of the university. Research should be the professed duty of the university. It should be conceived as a critical rethinking, the object of which is never taken for granted, where the *how* becomes in its development the *what*, and theory and practice continuously merge.

University as *universitas* can and must be the place where theory not only is propounded and extolled, but also becomes its essential content. A place where, in the pedagogical dialogue, the students are driven to develop their own critical sense and intellectual curiosity. These are the only elements that will prevent students from accepting uncritically the productions of mass society. Theory should not be considered as an aseptic, abstract, and separate idea, but, as an overview, a clear perception of principles, always sought for, on which the world order is based. As I discuss this point with American friends, I

find myself defending my idea of theory against a misunderstanding by which theory is often assimilated to methodology, standardized in fixed rules or crystallized in ideology. As usual, since words can have different meanings within different contexts, it is important to agree on the precise meaning that we want to give them. Theory, therefore, implies a hermeneutical stance and an incessant act of questioning which produces a dialogic tension—a difficult balance between traditional knowledge and contemporary culture displaying the courage to defend the “uselessness” of literature. As a final word, my idea of theory is based on a process of reading and interpretation which is always ready to question its own methods and tools: a serious and, at the same time, ironic doctrine of revisionism, an eternal “adventure” on the border line.

