

Symposium

Interpretation in the University/

Interpretation of the University

Introduction

Peter Brooks

To inaugurate the signing of an agreement for cultural exchange between the Università degli Studi di Bologna and Yale University, representatives from the two universities celebrated in the most academic of manners: with a symposium. Entitled "Interpretation in the University/Interpretation of the University," the symposium both furthered scholars' and teachers' traditional preoccupation with the interpretive disciplines, and addressed itself to an issue that has been forced on academics' attention with new urgency in recent years, both in Europe and the United States: How is the university as an institution to be interpreted, not only by its insiders but also by the public at large? What is the place of the university in postmodern culture and society? And how do we mediate between external views of the university, which in their most publicized forms have been largely negative, and the conception of the university's mission and procedures as developed by those within the academy?

The symposium began with Umberto Eco's lecture, "The University and the Mass Media," which was followed by two panel discussions. The first, "Old Universities, New Interpretations,"¹ focused on the place and play of new interpretive ideas and attitudes—in the humanities and in the law—within two universities which, in their respective contexts, must be considered ancient (Bologna 900 years old, Yale approaching 300) and important conservators of tradition. The second panel, "The Quarrel of Order and Adventure,"² took its title from Guillaume Apollinaire's poem *La jolie rousse*, where the poet *par excellence* of modernist experimentation claims to weigh the competing claims of tradition and innovation:

*Je juge cette longue querelle de la tradition de l'invention
De l'Ordre et de l'Aventure . . .*³

That Umberto Eco, in his inaugural lecture, chose to address the question of the university and the mass media put the symposium on the track of certain ideas which, in various permutations, returned again and again over its course. When Eco speaks of the "migration" of ideas from the university to the media, and asks whether or not we should mourn this phenomenon, he speaks to a problem of the greatest current concern to academics, especially in the United States. The presentation of interpretation *within* the university in public interpretations *of* the university has left many of us in despair. It has seemed a mélange of misinformation, ideological bias, and deep *ressentiment*. When the *New York Times* publishes its annual article on the Modern Language Association's convention, one begins reading with a shudder, in full knowledge that one will find one's profession mocked and belittled. Not that the MLA convention does not lend itself to easy satire; alas, it does. But the real issues of interpretation, the questions of what validly lies within the conspectus of scholarship, what is truly new and what simply novelty, never are addressed. And one could cite countless treatments by the media of such subjects as deconstruction, new historicism, feminism, cultural studies, all of which have been treated as frivolities as well as signs of the decline of Western civilization, undone by its mandarins. On the one hand, there seems to be a need to reassure the public, and perhaps journalists themselves, that academia for all its jargon is really *nil novo sub sole*. On

1. The panel was chaired by Dean Guido Calabresi. The panelists were: Harold Bloom, Richard Brodhead, Vita Fortunati, Geoffrey Hartman, and Giuseppe Mazzotta.

2. I chaired this panel. David Bromwich, Giovanna Franci, Paul Fry, Cyrus Hamlin, and Paolo Valesio were the panelists.

3. "I am here to judge the long debate between tradition and invention / Between Order and Adventure." The translation is taken from *Calligrammes: Poems of Peace and War (1913-1916)*, trans. Anne Hyde Greet (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California, 1980), 343.

the other hand, we are warned of the dangers of a cultural élite messing with the traditional values of Western civilization.

“Going public” has always, as Eco suggests, been easier for academics in the European than in the American context. As his report of the Italian newspaper accounts of his Charles Eliot Norton Lectures at Harvard well indicates, there continues to be in Europe an abstract respect for Culture of a type that, as David Bromwich argues in these pages, America never really has had, and which American journalism regards with real suspicion. (The American journalist retains something of the hard-bitten Bogart image: the city desk editor schooled in exposing local corruption.) American academics who have attempted to go public in debate on the topical issues of canon and curriculum, on the place of feminism and poststructuralism in current studies, to take two examples, have found themselves shunted into media byways, while the main stage has been claimed by journalistic cheap shots, such as Roger Kimball’s *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Have Corrupted Higher Education*, Charles Sykes’s *Profscam: Professors and the Demise of Higher Education*, and Dinesh D’Souza’s *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus*. There is, to be sure, the notable exception of Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind*, the best-seller written by an academic philosopher. But Bloom’s apocalyptic rhetoric, his predictions of the “suicide of the West,” his claim that the new ideas of the academic literary critics presented a program of social revolution, lent themselves to media exploitation by those who never opened his book.

Of course, the distortion of the work of the academy in the American media over the past decade or so must be seen as a response to a particular cultural situation, in which a born-again Right saw its principal crusade as cultural-political rather than political in the strict sense. The university was particularly vulnerable because it had taken on—perhaps overextending itself in the process—some of the problems of a de-consensualized American society where questions of gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and the like had become newly contentious in ways that the society at large was not yet ready to recognize. As Giovanna Franci notes in her contribution to the symposium, debates on the university curriculum must be seen as a theater on which society dramatizes its contradictions.

It is notable that public criticism of the universities has centered almost exclusively on the humanities, and within the humanities, on the interpretive disciplines, especially literary studies. Why have the fields in which the least would seem to be at stake, in any practical sense, borne the brunt of the attacks? Precisely, no doubt, because their insulation from the practical makes them the areas in which society invests its aspirations and contradictions, its thirst for values.

Scientists and even social scientists may be free to pursue their fields wherever their research may take them. But let the humanities remain the realm of the good, the true, and the tested. This should be a peaceful place of unperturbed cultural transmission, an affirmation of consensual values.

Charles Taylor in his far-ranging recent book, *Sources of the Self*, writes eloquently of the force of “civic humanist thought,” particularly well-expressed in Matthew Arnold’s theory of culture. A key component of the public, civic notion of culture worked out by the Victorians was what Taylor calls “the Romantic ideal of self-completion through art.”⁴ The Victorians, that is, responded to the large historical movement toward secularization by investing culture—high culture—with the transcendent and redeeming force drained from religious belief. As Wallace Stevens puts the extreme form of the case: “After one has abandoned a belief in God, poetry is the essence which takes its place as life’s redemption.”⁵

There are probably not many professors of the humanities today who would want to subscribe publicly to such a view: in our postmodernist, post-Freudian, post-Foucaultian moment, both “self” and “art” have been deconstructed, becoming simply the points where certain codes intersect in a mirage of inwardness and self-realization. A characteristic of the postmodern condition, according to Jean-François Lyotard, is the decline of those “grand narratives” that sustained Western culture for decades, in particular the grand narrative of emancipation.⁶ The humanities may be suffering from the decline of a “grand narrative”—not so much “emancipation,” though that was always part of the story, as redemption by way of culture itself. We no longer have much confidence that we know what the purpose of culture is, and what kind of self-realization it is supposed to promote.

And yet, I’m not so sure that Taylor is wrong in calling the chapter of his book from which I have quoted “Our Victorian Contemporaries.” We haven’t really found any vocabulary for the self or the role of art that supersedes that of the Victorians. Poetry, as Paolo Valesio’s eloquent contribution to the symposium suggests, remains in some essential sense the question. Despite everything that has decentered the notion of the human and its expressive products, we tend to go about our everyday affairs as if the business of culture were somehow of civic importance, and as if our understandings of art did matter to our self-fulfillment. More than politics in the usual acceptation, cultural politics define the place in which society’s values are fought over. In this, we are not so far from the Victorians, and clearly not ready to

4. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 418, 409.

5. Wallace Stevens, *Opus posthumous* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 185.

6. See Jean-François Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1985).

jettison culture, including the ways in which it is defined, analyzed, and transmitted in the universities.

When the sphere of high culture no longer offers the promise of reconciliation of a society's contradictions and conflicts, when it is itself a place of contestation, observers of the university are troubled. I think there is much truth in Terry Eagleton's recent assertion—in his inaugural address as Wharton Professor of English at Oxford—that literary and cultural studies have become a battleground, within the university and without, in part because they have taken up vital questions which other disciplines, in their professionalization, have for the moment abandoned. Writes Eagleton: "For the great speculative questions of truth and justice, of freedom and happiness, have to find a home somewhere; and if an aridly technical philosophy, or a drearily positivist sociology, are no hospitable media for such explorations, then they will be displaced onto a criticism which is simply not intellectually equipped to take this strain."⁷ Ill-equipped, to be sure, but as Eagleton also notes, great moments of literary criticism tend to be those when, speaking of literature, criticism is speaking of that and more—"mapping the deep structures and central directions of an entire culture." And it is notable that now other disciplines—including the law—tend to look to literary criticism in the search for new interpretive paradigms.

I think it is useful to recall that during the 1960s, critiques of the university from the Right and from the Left converged in important ways. Both Right and Left feared that the university was in danger of losing its soul to the demands of postindustrial society for the training and certification of its technical élites. The common enemy was Clark Kerr's concept of the "multiversity," blandly celebrated in his *The Uses of the University*: a training institute open to all purposes and demands, gladly servicing the demands of the knowledge industry in all sectors of society and government. Both Right and Left urged a return to a more austere, quasi-monastic, and Socratic notion of the university: a place dedicated to the study of fundamental issues of knowledge and value, and to the examination of the "great speculative questions" mentioned by Eagleton. But then things diverged: the Right sought refuge in a reaffirmation of "intellectual authority" (the key phrase in William J. Bennett's much publicized National Endowment for the Humanities Report in 1984, *To Reclaim a Legacy*), in an insistence that salvation was to be sought in a traditional canon of great books and the Western values they inculcated. Meanwhile the Left was busy creating some new interdisciplinary amalgam—when it wasn't simply a bouillabaisse—from new work in the "sciences of

7. Terry Eagleton, *The Crisis of Contemporary Culture* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 16.

man," largely imports from Europe, and attempting, in its best moments, to address large questions about the structure and function of writing. "Custodianship" and "criticism," to use Paul Fry's valuable terms, grew farther apart and seemed to lose their dialectical relationship.

Many of the talks presented at the symposium—those of Giovanna Franci and Franco Ferrari most explicitly, but also Geoffrey Hartman's and Vita Fortunati's—make in their different ways a plea for a new "comparatism," a confrontation of different interests, traditions, and canons whose claims can be adjudicated only through interpretation, in a continuing hermeneutic process which has no fixed basis in "intellectual authority," and is instead, dialogic and open-ended. In insisting upon comparatism and dialogue, the university will always run the risk of appearing to the media, and to the outside world in general, as excessively relativistic and even subversive of "values." But only by maintaining this openness can it make good on the claim that Umberto Eco urges: the university remains some twenty years ahead of the media, and when the media catches up, the university has moved on. This gap between interpretation in the university and interpretation of the university will always be the space of misunderstandings, but it is also the space of creativity and freedom.