

# *Torn Halves: Political Conflict in Literary and Cultural Theory*

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## Chapter 4 The Politics of 'The Politics of Literary Theory'

'A revolution is not a dinner party, or writing an essay...'  
—Mao Tse-Tung

### **The Politics of the Politics of**

'The Politics of ... ': what kinds of restrictions are imposed from the outset by the coupling of 'politics' with 'theory'? Such a juxtaposition constitutes a demand for a politics: and a politics involves a supposition that something will be delivered: here, that 'theory' should be able to produce a political effect, that it should realize the sorts of ends that are expected in politics.

Could such a demand be restrictive? The yoking of 'politics' to theory assumes that politics is already known, that it is self-evident what it involves, that it is positioned outside theory, so that theory can have nothing to say about it--whereas on the contrary politics can have a lot to say about theory: that it can judge it, identify it, according to protocols that have, by implication, been thought through elsewhere, somewhere beyond theory.

Its formulation thus implies that it is posed from

the outside, that the question of politics frames theory with the invocation of more powerful necessities. If the political is invoked as an outside against which theory must be judged, then it is being used in its primary meaning where 'the political' describes anything that affects the state or public affairs—something that literature, or literary theory, is not generally noted for doing. But this is how 'the political' works in practice as an objection made against theory that is not political enough.

The degree of fury attached to the question of politics and theory seems at times to be in almost direct relation to the relative political ineffectivity of literary and cultural criticism. Critics continue to entertain the fantasy that their work has the power to bring about a major political revolution—as is maintained by books with subtitles such as *Towards a Revolutionary Criticism*. The more extravagant the claim that is made, the more obvious the complete lack of relation between political utterances by literary critics and political effects becomes. The political criteria of engagement with the 'realities' of the 'world outside' that such critics bring to bear against their opponents seem often to be equally applicable to themselves. Eagleton, for instance, in his book of revolutionary criticism remarks of Derrida's apparent silence on the subject of historical materialism:

It is not certain that Marxists should be too tolerant of this stance: in a world groaning in agony, where the very future of humankind hangs by a hair, there is something objectionably luxurious about it.<sup>1</sup>

Setting aside the interesting question of exactly whose hair it is from which the world hangs, would this

objection not also apply to all literary criticism, revolutionary or otherwise? Can Eagleton, a literary critic, really pose as the much needed (Charles) Atlas who can save the whole world from dropping?

As Eagleton's Archimedean perspective here suggests, 'the political' often takes the form of a strategy of containment. Perhaps the current pressure for theory to deliver a politics itself constitutes a response to the reformulation by theory of the concept and operation of the political. As with the call for 'history', it can be used to reintroduce the very formulations that theory has been concerned to recast: the call for the political in itself seeks to reinstitute or reground the link between representation and reference that has been questioned by the semiotics of the past twenty years. If the representation of the literary text to the world becomes problematic, then that link can be reinvoked by the introduction of political criteria in criticism which re-establishes at a stroke the supposedly lost connection with ethics, action, and 'the world'. Such a move has a moral rather than a conceptual authority, but is limiting to the extent that it side-steps rather than attempts to address the theoretical difficulties that are at stake. Meanwhile, all such inferences about politics and theory assume that politics remains unaffected by any rethinking by theory of 'the political'.

And what, beyond that, is this 'literary theory' anyway that can, as an entity, possess a politics? Is there such a thing as 'literary theory' as such? It's doubtful, but this problem will have to be untied elsewhere: let us assume for now that at the very least there can be literary theory in the sense of literary theories.

## Some Clichés: 1

First cliché: ‘the politics of literary theory’. Even as a phrase, it is already not altogether obvious what this means. Does it signify ‘the political positions which literary theories enounce’, that is the political principles of literary theories—or, if they are not articulated as principles as such then the political positions which can be ascribed to them? Or does it mean ‘the political effects of literary theory’, context unspecified; or ‘the politics that go on within literary theory’ in the sense of the political affairs of literary theory and its political life in relation to literary criticism, literature, and their institutions; or finally does it mean the form or process of organization of literary theory—the science and art of its government? In practice the phrase includes all these different implications, which, together with the fact that the politics implied in each are not necessarily of the same kind, may account for its ubiquity and the ease with which it can be invoked.

What the different meanings of ‘the politics of theory’ do all share is that possessive ‘of’—meaning that literary theory whatever it is, has or possesses a politics, a politics that can be ascribed to it and for which it can be called to account. This assumes that literary theory can somehow be isolated, that its politics are intrinsic to it and not the product of any situation that it might find itself in or with which it might be confronted. On the other hand, as we have seen, the phrase ‘the politics of’ implies that politics as such are also somehow outside theory: the phrase itself could therefore be said to be self-contradictory, suggesting both that politics are essential to theory, and thus exclusively interior, and at the same time that politics constitutes a realm outside theory

which is entirely exterior to it.

In the same way, the political effects of theory apparently only take place in a realm that is outside it, that of 'the political'. But do political principles necessarily tie up with, or cause, analogous political effects? Not necessarily. If, as much contemporary criticism argues, texts do not possess an intrinsic meaning then that must also mean that they do not possess an intrinsic politics. If meanings can change historically, then so must their politics. Indeed, as deconstruction has shown, there is no text so politically determined that a clever reading cannot show how it simultaneously undermines its own strategy, thus allowing the text to be claimed for an opposing point of view. Strictly speaking, however, such a claim would be at variance with deconstructive practice which would show that the text puts forward incompatible positions, but would not claim that either one was representative of what the text 'really' said. In practice, though, deconstructive criticism tends to argue against the reading that has been institutionally validated.

For the same reasons it is obvious that no critical position can be intrinsically political either. Criticism, like literature, remains uneasily poised between subversive and repressive functions. And such forms of criticism as Marxism, feminism or deconstruction are capable of being both radical and conservative according to variations within each position. Arguments that claim that they can be generically identified one way or the other in the abstract must always be essentializing. Each critical position includes those who simply use a position in order to offer a new 'approach' to the already constituted object, Literature; but each also includes those who are trying to change that object and to produce a

new configuration, thus redefining the discipline, its activity, and its rationale. This means that in spite of its claims it is possible for 'the political' to bear little relation to political effect. Certain forms of Marxist or even feminist criticism would be a case in point; it has been widely argued that as long as they continue to address the constituted cultural object Literature then they will never achieve political effects of any consequence.

### **Some Clichés: 2**

Second cliché: 'the crisis in English Studies'. This seems to have been going on for rather a long time. It might be taken to imply that criticism has got into a state where it is in danger of running out of steam, of dying out altogether, that it is undergoing a liquidity crisis of some sort. In fact the opposite is the case: in terms of production, popularity, and the general interest that it arouses, criticism has never been so vigorous, and critics have never believed so enthusiastically in the importance of their own enterprise. The 'crisis' comes not from too little criticism, but too much, from the fact that literary theory has shifted criticism from a secondary to a primary activity, from the fact that it threatens to engulf literature altogether.

The crisis was felt because traditional criticism appeared so defenceless. Certainly there was extraordinarily little argument at a theoretical level from theory's opponents. This is largely the result of the fact that in order to argue against the positions of the theorist, the traditional critic who, in the Leavisite manner, eschews theory would be obliged to involve himself or herself in theoretical arguments—which he or she cannot

do because it is the very need for theory and theoretical arguments that is at stake. The result of this situation has been that in Britain traditional critics ceded the intellectual battle with virtually no contest, contenting themselves with 'common-sense' objections or occasional denunciations in the popular press or literary weeklies.<sup>2</sup>

So much for the intellectual arguments. The institutionalization of literary theory, on the other hand, poses a real threat at the level of institutional power. That struggle will no doubt continue for some time although its outcome, aided ironically by the Thatcher government programme of early retirement for older academics, is not in doubt. The 'crisis' in this sense, is really only a process of the transfer of power, a *Fall of Hyperion* of the critics, an event of indisputable historical but little theoretical interest, merely, as Paul de Man puts it, 'a passing squall in the intellectual weather of the world'.<sup>3</sup> The event of real intellectual interest is the crisis that occurred for theory as a result of its institutionalization, a process which articulated the diversity of positions within the theoretical domain that were formerly raided at random and eclectically homogenized. At this point, the traditional critic's 'crisis' becomes the theorist's 'the politics of'.

This crisis is the result of theory's very success: while theorists were contesting the precepts of traditional forms of criticism, that in itself gave any form of theory a political purchase. Against the ruminations of belles lettres, or the unquestioned assumptions of most of what goes by the name of historical criticism, even the strictest formalist could be said to be making a political intervention. Now, however, the formalist critic, safely ensconced within the institution, has lost his or her former political lever. 'Theory' is no longer political *per se*.

And that is one reason why literary theorists have turned to ask the question: what are the politics of theory itself, that is what are the political principles of the different areas of literary theory? What are their political effects?

Though 'literary theory' may appear as a homogeneous entity to its opponents, it is not self-identical but set against itself: the real arguments are not between theory and its opponents, but between competing theoretico-political positions. The crisis consequent upon its institutional success has been accompanied by an outbreak of internal conflict which is taking place in Britain for the most part between three forms of theory—which for the sake of argument I shall characterize as Marxism, feminism, deconstruction—that compose a triad of differentiated positions each of which makes political claims to the exclusion of the others. Crucial differences are now marked out: after all, heresy is a more serious matter than disbelief. The absence of any serious contestation elsewhere has meant that a new fifth column enemy has had to be constructed in the mask of the old: the charge is made that certain theoretical positions merely repeat and sustain the traditional forms that they have nominally opposed and superseded.

This argument runs as follows: the success of deconstruction, the ease with which it has been accommodated, and turned into a version of New Criticism in the United States, shows that to all intents and purposes it is hardly different from its critical predecessor. Both forms of criticism, it is suggested, concur in eliminating the social and historical, and hence the political; only a politicized form of criticism can offer real resistance to the literary institution as it is constituted. The problem with this argument is that it does not account for the historical conditions in which it

is made, viz. the acknowledged crisis. The contradiction here is that deconstruction, and more generally theory in the form of poststructuralism, has produced a political disruption in the institution at least as great as any form of 'politicized' criticism achieved in the past; yet, paradoxically, it was then accused of being apolitical while 'politicized' criticism attempted to capitalise on the political crisis that it was itself unable to produce.

Clearly a more complicated economy is at work. For a long time Marxism exercised a virtual monopoly over the political and theoretical work done in Britain, but today this is no longer the case. The threat of current theory to the institution of Literature and to Marxism itself has meant that the call for the political has also at times become a defensive gesture to protect both. In the United States the recent rise of Marxism in the literary sphere—in direct antithesis to its political and intellectual decline in Europe—could also be accounted for by the fact that it is felt to constitute the only viable defence against the success of deconstruction: but the lack of a Marxist political tradition since its extirpation in the fifties means that this Marxism remains a very literary one which, unlike British Marxism, has few links with the social sciences or with a political base in the public sphere. You can make almost any political claim you like: you know that there is no danger that it will ever have any political effect.

At the same time, the pressure of feminism, and more recently Black Studies, has meant that today the political cannot be ignored by anyone, and may be responsible for the white male retreat into Marxism. Marxism can compete with feminism and Black Studies insofar as it offers to return literary criticism to its traditional moral function, but can, more covertly, also act

as a defence against them—as for example, in Jameson’s well-known demand that ‘the oppositional voices of black or ethnic culture’s, women’s and gay literature, “naive” or marginalized folk art, and the like’ be restored to ‘their proper place’ in class conflict.<sup>4</sup>

If the tendency now is to highlight politics at all times, the current call for the political is not merely a trend to be applauded or deplored as it is for William Cain in his *The Crisis in Criticism*.<sup>5</sup> If there is a crisis in theory which erupts as a question of politics then it may be the result of the institutionalization of theory in an institution that embodies the very presuppositions at issue, producing a dissension within theory that has yet to recognize the conditions of its own operativity. The result is that the very terms of what constitutes ‘the political’ are now being questioned. This means that the crisis is not so much about the institutionalization of theory as about the question of what comprises the political, how the political is established, and how competing political positions are judged or reconciled in relation to each other.

## Model Politics

What are the politics of theory itself—in the sense of how are its debates conducted, its objectives fought for and won? How are the different positions legitimated? There are two dominant forms according to which debate operates in current academic practice, neither of which, however, is adequate to the demands that current literary theory places upon them.

Politics, in Aristotelian terms, consists of the science and art of government, of supervising and

reconciling the varying interests within a state. This model is endorsed in one practice of literary politics, and constitutes nothing less than the founding ideology of the American academic institution. So, for instance, we find the editors of the Modern Language Association's prestigious journal *Profession* affirming in their 1984 editorial that 'since Jefferson's time, our colleges and universities have ... reflected American principles of democracy'.<sup>6</sup> This might be well termed the 'liberal' position, and can be found embodied in institutional form in the Modern Language Association's annual conference. To a European what is most remarkable about such an event—even more remarkable than the vast diversity of topics of papers for which it is famous—is the almost limitless politeness accorded, at least in public, to virtually every paper, whatever it may be saying. (An extreme example of this practice occurred at a conference I attended in which someone gave as their paper a chapter out of someone else's book. Not even the author, who was sitting in the audience, said anything. Polite questions concluded the session.) A democratic society requires and encourages a diversity of 'approaches' to Literature: everyone is allowed their own point of view without challenge. This means in effect that there is no position so radical that it will not be taken up and endorsed by the institution as a valid minority view. It is therefore in a sense almost impossible to be oppositional. On the other hand, this attitude has undoubtedly worked to the advantage of the institutionalization of theory, and in general it might seem reasonable enough, the epitome of the civil tolerance that the humanities are supposed to embody and sustain in our society.

Certain presuppositions, however, are at work

here and show that the freedom of conscience allowed in such a 'diversity of approaches' model is itself a position—not simply a toleration of all positions. This explains the paradox that on occasion those most committed to such humanitarian ideals turn out to be most intolerant of contemporary theory.<sup>7</sup> In the first place, the liberal model implies that criticism is a matter of individual sensibility, even of quasi-religious conviction necessitating a version of religious tolerance, rather than an intellectual activity that needs to be argued out in a specific fashion. In the second place, it assumes without question that in the midst of the diversity of individual sensibilities stands the common object of appreciation, Literature, the status of which is not in question. Though the canon may have to be extended or modified under pressure from minorities in order to preserve its status as the common object, the status of Literature as such is not in doubt. All 'approaches' share the aim of getting close to the object Literature, each competing with the other in order to extract more ore—in the form of books and articles—from its seemingly limitless mine. For the plurality of approaches model depends on the Shelleyan idea that Literature is like Truth itself: its veil, however often torn, simultaneously remains miraculously intact, always ready to divulge more riches to her next reader. At the same time, as one might expect, such a liberal approach masks a drive for possession and a competitiveness that provides the very energy of the whole economy: for each reader reads with a secret wish and fantasy that his or her approach will at last see the literary object as it really is, finally get to it, seize it and carry it off—that his or her reading will be so complete, so final, so irrefutable, as to render all future readers powerless and dispossessed. While the liberal model,

therefore, can easily accommodate, and indeed requires, competing positions, it cannot allow any questioning of Literature itself, and this goes some way to explaining the extent to which an unquestioned privileging of the literary can be found even among many of the most 'advanced' American critics.

In Britain, as one might expect in a less democratic social and political system, there is far less of the ideology of pluralism. It is no surprise to find that in Britain there is no equivalent to the Modern Language Association; nor is there a general conference of 'the profession' which everyone attends—broadly speaking conferences divide along political and theoretical lines. The general representatives of the profession to the University administrations and the Government are, significantly, the Trade Unions, who take no responsibility for 'Literature' as such.<sup>8</sup> The traditional form of criticism in Britain, however, of scholarship as a labour in the accumulation of knowledge, is really only the reverse image of the diversity of approaches extraction model: here, literature instead of being a mine is itself the jewel, the aim of scholarship being to overlay it with the encrustations of marginalia, glosses, and footnotes. The object of this labour of historical criticism is to create a setting for the jewel, to force the text into the position of being available only to a single, correct interpretation. This means that other methods of criticism must simply be wrong. At the same time, the 'diversity of approaches' model is equally dismissed by those who oppose this scholarly historical view and who, generally speaking, are on the Left. Politics is a matter of commitment, and demands; the liberal model, therefore, is quickly dismissed: 'all these approaches and so few arrivals'.

Effectively, the British model comprises

antagonistic groups who are already entrenched explicitly or implicitly according to the political divisions operating in the country at large. Here the institutional control and deployment of power is a good deal more obvious. In this much more politicized situation, the explicit invocation of politics is, paradoxically, often attacked on the grounds that it involves an intolerance, an unwillingness to countenance opposition. Analogies are then implied with the politics of totalitarian regimes with which, it is suggested, certain critics have political sympathies. But even those who attempt to occlude the political are not really interested in tolerating their opponents, and certainly see little reason to allow them even representative status within their own institutions. They are, after all, a threat to everything that Literature is supposed to stand for—including, apparently, tolerance, with the result that such critics must be intolerant themselves, and betray the very value with which they rationalize their own behaviour. The differences are entrenched: denunciation rather than dialogue forms the mode of exchange between the parties. Competing approaches are simply regarded as incompatible, and institutional power is utilized to prevent the bearers of radical views from being academically successful or employed at all.

Unpleasant though such mutual intolerance might appear, it could be argued that there is more of a rationale to this situation than might at first appear. It could be that differences have intellectual grounds rather than merely being a matter of individual sensibility. Any argument that can be made must necessarily involve incompatibility with other arguments, just as it would in philosophy or physics. The variety of approaches model implies that none of them have a justifiable intellectual

rationale, that none of them can be shown to be inadequate, based on fallacious presuppositions, or simply incoherent—or, on the other hand, to be coherent and irrefutable. In this sense, it has to be acknowledged that intellectual arguments are not liberal; they cannot be mapped by analogy on to the model of a democratic system.

We might call this second model, in which arguments are marshalled and opposed on rational grounds, the 'logical' or 'rational' model. It does, necessarily, involve a form of intolerance, for those who have been convinced by one argument have also decided that alternative arguments are erroneous, fallacious, or simply ineffective or inappropriate. Such a model may not constitute a satisfactory form of politics, but this only suggests that there is no reason why intellectual argument should be conducted according to the model of political and religious tolerance. This is the beginning of the conflict between the realms of knowledge and politics.

Although the logical model is ostensibly the framework within which debate is conducted in Britain, it remains the case that the lack of liberalism towards opposing positions is as likely to be predicated upon unargued presuppositions derived from existing politico-philosophical sympathies as upon the results of rational argument. Political commitment always presents its arguments as a simulacrum of the logical model, but the feint can be distinguished by the fact that where it operates no debate actually takes place. This goes towards explaining why, as has already been noted, there has been strikingly little discussion between traditional critics and contemporary theorists in Britain. No 'Limits of Pluralism' exchange can be found in any British

journal—indeed there is no British journal that even attempts to represent competing points of view. The only intellectual exchange takes place among the multifarious positions within the theoretical domain.

The idea that any intellectual debate can operate entirely within a forum where speakers operate according only to the dictates of reason rather than, at least to some extent, according to historical and social positioning, is a pure fantasy of reason itself, as Derrida's analysis of Kant's *Conflict of Faculties* illustrates.<sup>9</sup> This is also the substance of Wittgenstein's critique of analytical philosophy. The logical model denies the operation of context and conditions and will thus tend to be determined by them, rather as the liberal model ends up by promulgating the very intolerance to which it is nominally opposed. It is curious, therefore, that even the debates within theory, especially discussions of the politics of theory, continue to operate according to the logical model's assumption not only that there is one correct position which could be universally valid but also that it should form part of a total system of knowledge. This impulse towards a complete system is itself illogical to the extent that it is derived from fantasy: paranoid delusion, Freud suggests, is simply 'a caricature of a philosophical system'—and vice versa.<sup>10</sup>

Marxism offers a third model which claims to subsume both the liberal and the logical: its theory of conflict makes the tension between different positions productive while at the same time eliminating them by resolving the differences into a 'higher' form. The operation of such a Marxist model when confronted by the plurality of theoretical methods at work today has been most clearly described by Jameson:

Marxism cannot today be defended as a mere substitute for such other methods, which would then triumphantly be consigned to the ashcan of history; the authority of such methods springs from their faithful consonance with this or that local law of a fragmented social life, this or that subsystem of a complex and mushrooming cultural superstructure. In the spirit of a more authentic dialectical tradition, Marxism is here conceived as that 'untranscendable horizon' that subsumes such apparently antagonistic or incommensurable critical operations, assigning them an undoubted validity within itself, and thus at once canceling and preserving them.<sup>11</sup>

At a political level, this generosity means something very specific as Jameson makes clear: the return to the dualism of class struggle, and the unity, solidarity and class consciousness of the working class. Other oppressed groups, among them women and blacks, are characterized merely as symptoms of the fragmentation of post-modernist late capitalism and must therefore be subsumed back into the collectivity of the higher form of class consciousness. The drive to totalization in a dialectical model, while certainly acknowledging the operation of differences, must always have as its ultimate aim their negation, be they regional, racial, cultural, sexual, or even economic. The refusal of the British Labour Party to allow Black Sections was merely a symptomatic example of the oppressiveness of such classism in practice. This means that although Marxism presents itself as a dialectical synthesis of the liberal and logical models, in its pre post-Marxist forms at any rate, it represents a more sophisticated version of the logical model.

The assumption that total systematization is both

desirable and perhaps even utopically possible leads to many of the problems that occur in discussions about the politics of theory where it is assumed that theories should operate globally at all levels. But the drive for a totalization of theory, the attempt to achieve an ultimate theoretical purity in which all the questions will finally be sorted out for all time—'you know', as Foucault puts it, 'that much-heralded theory that finally encompasses everything, that finally totalizes and reassures'—must itself be predicated upon a denial of the historical and institutional conditions under which those questions emerged. Theories are themselves historical—even if the historical is also a theory, a fact that has to be denied in the drive for a total theory, or for total compatibility between theories as if they were part of a purely synchronic system, all parts of which must fit together. Articulation between theories, it then follows, has to be absolute: either complete compatibility, or utter incompatibility.<sup>12</sup> Yet different theoretical positions can be shown to be compatible or incompatible depending on the questions asked and the issues under discussion. The drive to reduce positions to an essential compatibility implies that the speaker is always speaking from the same place, that he or she addresses an identical addressee, about an identical object or situation.

This poses the question of the difficulty of squaring politics with knowledge. The surprising idea is that they should both be in the same location: almost by definition, if theoretical enquiry is going to have anything to say at all it will tend to conflict with existing forms of thought, including political ones—if it doesn't, then it will merely be affirming what is already known. For its part politics, though usually founded on ideas with some semblance of rationality, must also be guided by

pragmatic considerations and the necessity of compromises; it must seek to persuade, often through fairly simplistic forms of rhetoric. This suggests that both theoretical enquiry and practical politics may often have to deviate from established political doctrine.

It is a contradiction in terms for intellectual inquiry to be contained by prior intellectual conclusions, even if they are politically validated. Thinking may on many occasions involve the abandonment of politically acceptable positions, but it must do so in order to lead to the formulation of new ones that are more effective. The risk is that such a thinker will end up by shifting to an alternative political position altogether, and this is often the accusation that is made about radical political theorists. But the ossification of political thought, formulated in different historical conditions, can be more damaging politically. A constant difficulty for socialism is that it finds it hard to recognize the difference between a betrayal of political principle and a change that is required because certain formulations of policy no longer correspond to contemporary circumstances. In spite of the frequent invocations of history, both Marxism and socialism share a constant tendency to dehistoricize their own theory. Capitalism, by contrast, is always at an advantage because, as Lyotard has pointed out, its disavowal of belief, principle, or theory in favour of pragmatic considerations means that it can always adapt immediately and ruthlessly to political needs.

To invoke 'the politics of theory', therefore, can easily be a form of repression, whereby the new is judged by the very formulations which are in the process of being rethought, and thought itself becomes a political impossibility. A recent example would be 'the question of the subject'. If Marxism led the way in the sixties in

instituting an attack on the ideology of humanism prevalent in bourgeois society, in recent years its critique of the subject and subject-centred knowledge has diminished in the face of a supposition that it is impossible to operate politically without such a notion, however bourgeois it may be. Some feminists have come to the same conclusion. Both therefore risk being reintegrated into the very ideology to which they are nominally opposed. This is the kind of moment when theory instead of retreating before the political could be called upon to reformulate it instead. Those involved in such rethinking would not be prevented from engaging in other kinds of political activity, even though it might be incommensurate in certain respects with their current intellectual work. This only becomes a problem when it is assumed that all political activities, knowledge, and forms of thought must be part of a general theoretical totality applicable to every situation for all time.

It could nevertheless be objected that this leaves unsolved the problem of the conflict between politics and knowledge to which the question of 'the politics of theory' is partly addressed. There seems to be a conflict between knowledge and the political: the one no longer seems to be available for the other but to inhibit it. Does this mean that we have to assume that the two are simply incommensurable? This would be the Lyotardian view, in which mutual incompatibility is simply recognized as a state of mutual incompatibility.<sup>13</sup> If Lyotard would solve the problem by abolishing the tension between them altogether by declaring them examples of the differend, by characterizing them as different language games, this dissociation is not helpful at the level of politics where the language games must play with or against each other: they may be incommensurable, but they still come into

contact, are proposed as alternatives. The very possibility of incommensurability as a theoretical suggestion, however, is enough to produce Eagleton's immediate condemnation:

Lyotard ... has found his latest secret weapon in the ruptures, instabilities, and micro-catastrophic discontinuities of 'paralogical' science. It is to this, rather than the clapped out narratives of classical emancipation, which we are advised to have recourse—a statement which was published in Britain just as the miners' trade union, led by revolutionary socialists, was hell-bent on bringing down Mrs Thatcher and replacing her with a workers' government.<sup>14</sup>

Eagleton's objection here seems a good example of the incommensurability to which he is objecting. The irony of the assertion is that Eagleton's statement was itself published just as such confrontational politics had singularly failed to bring down Mrs Thatcher, and had ended with the crushing of the miners' union. The strike, which attempted to reproduce the dualism of Marxist dialectical politics, did not bring down Mrs Thatcher; nor did it produce class solidarity, as the splitting of the miners' union during the strike indicates. What is required is a new form of politics, in which the demand for unity does not absorb all energy, produce debilitating self-inflicted wounds and end by crippling political action, in which different groups and movements can work together effectively according to the requirements of different situations through, as Laclau and Mouffe put it, 'hegemonic articulation with other struggles and demands'.<sup>15</sup>

What is needed is a new model that can include conflict, in which incompatibility provides more than an aporia, and yet which does not require that such

differences are subsumed—and dissolved—into the nostalgic notion of a collective unity. The acknowledgement of irresolvable but productive differences has in fact been proposed as a theoretical possibility in recent years. Writing of psychoanalysis and anthropology, for instance, Paul Hirst and Penny Woolley comment:

They are condemned for the foreseeable future to coexist in tension. We should try to make that tension productive rather than sterile. Recognizing mutual incompatibilities and limitations may be one route to doing so.<sup>16</sup>

But the problem with the idea that mutual incompatibilities can generate a productive tension is that, expressed as a moral prescription as it is here, it easily reverts into the liberal model once more: we all have our own points of view, they all add up to life's rich tapestry, etc.

Deconstruction, which includes a non-totalizing conflictual perspective as part of its own theoretical argument, has also been accused, by Eagleton among others, of being simply another version of the liberal model. It does not, however, merely *recognize* mutual incompatibilities, but demonstrates how they can operate in relation to each other in a productive economy. *Diacritics* notwithstanding, deconstruction is not a political position and cannot even be said to offer a politics as such, but it does provide a way of thinking through certain conceptual problems in politics and in knowledge, including the relation of politics to knowledge. There is no reason why it necessarily precludes identification with certain political ambitions

of either Marxism or feminism.

Deconstruction demonstrates that the liberal model works according to the necessity of inclusion, while the logical model works through exclusion: together they repeat the general structure of inside and outside which we have already detected in the coupling of politics and theory. Such a coupling, therefore, far from posing the question of 'the political', simply repeats its theoretical problem. In suggesting, as Samuel Weber puts it, that any position can 'articulate itself only in and through an ambivalent relation to an other that it can neither fully assimilate nor totally exclude', deconstruction argues that differential positions can only be held through a continuing articulation with and against others.<sup>17</sup> It therefore offers an account of the operation of those terms of theoretical debate for which neither liberal nor logical models can provide adequate forms of understanding. This means that it can also provide a way of rethinking the problem of how to articulate different political positions, such as Marxism and feminism. Attempts to relate them generally always work either by the liberal model which leaves their relation untheorized—such as in the frequent invocation of 'gender and class', with 'race' often thrown in for good measure, or by the logical model which always works to a structure of incompatibility or exclusion/inclusion so that one always ends up by subsuming the others: class before gender or race.

Deconstruction is not itself in turn a totalizing model that subsumes all other models, because by definition it is a theory of non-totality. It offers a way of thinking through some theoretical problems of the contemporary politics of theory: in this context, the term 'poststructuralism' or, more generally, 'postmodernism',

may be taken to describe the conditions of contemporary theory in which traditional models of argument through which we achieve and legitimate knowledge are acknowledged to be no longer adequate or effective. Poststructuralism is not in itself a position but a state of difficulty, a name for a conflict in which there is a dynamic but no necessary cancelling, preserving or final resolution between terms. It is impossible to get out of it simply by denying it, as even Jameson has acknowledged.<sup>18</sup> In short, 'the politics of theory' could well be a description necessitated by the exigencies of contemporary theory itself, with theoretical differences symptomatic of a conflict that constitutes the very mode of thinking that produces theoretical insight.

Deconstruction's own contribution concerns the proposal of new hybridized logics through which theory can operate. One aspect of the crisis in theory which erupts as a question of politics may be the result of the institutionalization of theory in an institution that embodies and presupposes the very logics in dispute, producing a dissension within theory that has yet to recognize that conflict as the condition of its own operativity. The question of the political in this sense could therefore be seen to be symptomatic of the institutionalization of theory as such, as theory itself becomes conditioned according to the apparent inside-outside dichotomies of the institution.

## **Inside Stories**

If 'the politics of theory' can be seen as a symptom of such a situation, then what about 'the crisis in English Studies'?

While it was the very nebulosity of the concept of 'Literature' that facilitated a home for such a wide-ranging diversity of interests now called 'theory', theory's subsequent questioning of the boundaries of the literary domain was one of the major factors that precipitated the crisis in English Studies. But crisis as such is nothing new: any account of the discipline will show that its history amounts to little less than a successive series of them. This is hardly surprising in view of the fact that the discipline is never quite sure what constitutes its object or what its own relation to that object should be. From this perspective, English Studies itself constitutes nothing other than a practice of crisis management.

What is less usual about the current situation, however, is that it is being made unusually explicit that the dispute is taking place over the object 'Literature' and the function of literary criticism—and that the projected revisions offer a very different alternative. When traditional critics accuse contemporary theorists of destroying Literature-as-we-know-it, in many cases they are perfectly correct. For many forms of theory the point is precisely not to produce a new 'approach' at all but to change the very activity and object of criticism. Even here, however, there are radical differences between different theoretical positions and political interests. While neither Marxists, feminists, nor deconstructionists wish to preserve Literature intact as it has been constituted to date, this does not mean that their objectives are identical. In addition, as we shall see, there are other needs for change that are at least as significant.

With these sorts of pressures Literature might well seem in danger of dissolving altogether, as well it might, whether by apocalyptic flood as Wordsworth feared or by some other means. Its vulnerability stems from the fact

that even though it is frequently suggested that Literature involves an essence of some kind, it has always tended to be defined in terms of exclusions on which, paradoxically but inevitably, it remains dependent. The excluded elements will always return to expose its precarious identity, and however much they are denied will refuse to leave it in peace. Central to this process is the attempt to mark out a literary domain unsullied by other forms of knowledge. At this point it is possible to see that Literature itself is in some sense already structurally constituted by the inside/outside opposition which the demand for politics repeats.

As recent historians of English Studies have shown, the denial of the relevance of non-literary methodologies or knowledges forms a part of the attempt to define literature as Literature, as a discipline within the institution in its own right. The denial of the extra-literary in the appreciation of literature constitutes a professional as well as an aesthetic strategy. But the very hand that closes the door to the rest of the world at the same moment opens another to let it back in. This structure continues to determine critical activity of traditional and modern kinds while it apparently provides the grounds for the most radical differences between them; these can then be debated endlessly without fear of any recognition that each presents the same argument in reverse. Whereas Literature and Leavisite criticism are constituted through a process of exclusion, the reverse is the case for theory, which depends upon the transfer of knowledges from other disciplines. Few theorists, however, have interrogated the problems involved when such knowledge, or methodologies, are invoked for and translated to a different problematic.<sup>19</sup>

Thus a traditional English criticism has always

maintained that you should not 'impose' anything on a text: you should come to it with an 'open' mind, bringing no presuppositions, special interests, other knowledges or foreign disciplines to it. Reading is less a cognitive activity than an affair of feeling that operates according to Richards' stimulus-response aesthetics. Yet when a reader's sensitive sensibility has responded to the text—in an always original way—it turns out that literature is about life, in fact about nothing other than all those things in the world that are the formal provenance of all those prohibited knowledges. The poststructuralist, by contrast, never reads a text alone, but always in the company of friends—philosophical, psychoanalytic, anthropological, linguistic, or whatever. The result of the vast array of learning that is required before the poststructuralist can begin to read or analyze a text is then the discovery that the literary text is no longer about the world, or life, or any of the formal disciplines that have been studied, but about itself and the problems of its own self-representation, a narcissistic speculation on the impossibility of knowing more than that it cannot know more than itself. In both instances, therefore, one side of the equation remains irreducibly blank: the blank simply changes sides. Its positioning constitutes the ground for furious argument, but meanwhile both parties are determined by the same structure of exclusion that constitutes the literary domain, and are therefore, in a sense, in complete agreement.

Nor are 'political' forms of theory immune from the operations of this structure. Take Marxism, for instance. Whereas there is, relatively speaking, little doubt about what Marxist politics involve at the level of the state, it is less clear how such politics can be accommodated at the level of literary theory. Marxist

criticism faces a problem because by definition it has to rely upon the transfer of Marxist theory to the literary domain, adapted for application to literary texts. Any Marxist model has to be concerned with the process of reconciling the two. Generally speaking, literary Marxism depends upon innovation at the level of Marxist theory proper: produce a new theory of Marxism and it will eventually be used for a new theory of Marxist literary criticism. This structure of priority creates an imbalance in which Marxism always already has a prior knowledge: the literary text then can have little to say to Marxism except to confirm its theses. This is effectively a version of Augustinian hermeneutics in which the meaning precedes the interpretation. Insofar as Marxism's political objectives remain outside the sphere of literature and literary theory, there will always be a tendency for theorizing to accommodate itself to this end and to invoke the 'outside' sphere of Marxism proper as its ultimate context. Although this gives it an effective moral and rhetorical advantage in argument, it also makes it vulnerable to certain forms of intellectual critique which, for example, point to its dependence upon a model of reflection, a form of specularly that is only the inversion of the literary specularly that Marxists criticize in formalist criticism.

If theory, including literary theory, is seen by some feminists as unacceptably male, the problem for Marxist criticism by contrast is that it always positions literature and literary theory as 'feminine', that is, as 'inside', as a domestic activity opposed to the real world of politics by which it should really be judged. As Lisa Jardine has argued, this could in part account for the Marxist argument that Literature should be body-built into the more macho world of Cultural Studies.<sup>20</sup> At first glance,

feminism itself might however appear to be doing something not altogether dissimilar. At its most straightforward, that is in a feminist reading of a literary text, feminist criticism involves the transference of feminist interests and priorities to literature. This might imply the terms of the same exclusion model according to which these interests are not regarded as already being a part of the literary. But for feminism, unlike for Marxism, the literary does not have to be attached to or invoked against the 'real' political world 'outside', whether by the reflection model or any other, for one of the most important arguments of feminism is that the notion of the political as it has been traditionally constituted is itself a patriarchal model that effectively marginalizes the domain of women according to an inside/outside, domestic/real-world polarity. For feminism, by contrast, literature has always been one of the spaces where crucial questions, such as the social construction of subjectivity and sexuality, have been formulated and explored. This means that instead of being read off against an already constituted body of feminist theory, literature and literary theory contribute significantly to the self-definition of feminism itself.

However, feminist theory is not entirely immune to the terms of this inside/outside critique. Forms of feminist resistance are in constant danger of being recuperated, whether by men, institutions, or both: debates within feminist theory have circled around the question of what theoretical positions genuinely resist patriarchy, and which putative forms of resistance in fact collude with it. It is difficult, in any particular area of feminist theory, to avoid someone else coming along and pointing out that though in local terms such work may seem to counter patriarchy, when looked at from a wider

or more philosophical perspective, it really just operates according to its system. This is because theory, whether it be philosophy, history, psychoanalysis, or Marxism, can always be regarded as part of the system itself. If this has led some feminists to reject theory altogether, the problem with that is that it leaves it untouched, unmarked, and able to pursue its recalcitrant ways unimpaired. Yet once you try to work through theory, accusations soon follow: Marxist feminists sacrifice gender to class, psychoanalytic feminists are either implicated in Freud's phallogentrism or are deemed to have fallen into the trap of essentializing woman and therefore continuing the characterizations of patriarchy.

Each of these arguments depends upon the opening up of larger and more radical perspectives and poses the question of which is the more political: is it the immediate, local, social, that can claim a direct political pertinence, or the larger philosophical perspective that presents itself as more radical, less collusive, capable of changing fundamentals and therefore, ultimately, more political and more effective? The answer must be that both are necessary in some form; the problem lies less with the alternative perspectives than with the need to see them as mutually exclusive choices, a structure that debates within feminism have been inclined to repeat even while feminism itself opposes the binarism of male-female hierarchies.

### **The 'Englishness' of English Studies**

If this structure seems to echo 'the politics of's invocation of an outside to theory's inside, it comes no surprise that a similar paradigm occurs with the notion of 'the

political' in relation to literature. It is often suggested by humanist critics that political forms of criticism constitute an illegitimate activity because they add politics on to a literature which otherwise operates in a space that is free from its taint. After all, is not literature defined by its ability to rise above the particular to the universal? Any number of examples can be found of critics making such a pious claim (usually when faced with political texts). Politics, in the last analysis, are extrinsic to literature: from this point of view even 'the politics of literary theory' would be a contradiction in terms if the phrase implies anything intrinsic to the literary. Yet recent studies of the history of English have revealed the extraordinary extent to which, in Britain at least, English was a self-consciously political activity from the start, deliberately conceived, in the face of the declining influence of the national church, to produce harmony among classes, and a shared sense of national identity.<sup>21</sup> In this context it is clear that its constitution as English Literature was not only a reflection of the nationalism of the period but also of Literature's simultaneous function as an instrument for colonial domination: as Gauri Viswanathan has shown, before it was generally instituted in British universities English Literature was developed for consumption in the Empire.<sup>22</sup> Central to these overtly political ends, as for any form of propaganda, was the concealing of any political purpose.<sup>23</sup> Ironically, F.R. Leavis, at one level among those most opposed to the literary establishment and the class interests that it represented, proceeded to place even greater emphasis on English literature as the great tradition in which could be found the repository of Englishness itself. Essential to that Englishness was Leavis' implacable refusal of theory—which since Burke's

critique of the French Revolution at least, has always been regarded as unpleasantly foreign.

Notwithstanding the curious way in which, as Eagleton has pointed out, 'English Literature' in the twentieth century has largely been written by Americans, Irish, Poles, and Indians, this nationalistic model of English literature has continued to operate in the reaction to literary theory where it is often the sheer foreignness of theory that is objected to, the objectors not pausing to consider the rationale of why literary theory should operate upon the domestic basis of English literature, or, conversely, why discussion at a theoretical level should only be relevant to one particular area of literature, defined not even by the language in which it is written but by the political and geographic boundaries of a state.<sup>24</sup> Conversely, the less xenophobic attitude towards literature in the United States—where English literature itself is foreign—has made literary theory much more readily acceptable; as Zabel noted in 1951, the U.S. has always had a history of importing its aesthetics from Europe.<sup>25</sup> But then, so does Britain: the only difference seems to be that it tends to disavow any knowledge of it. Virtually all forms of criticism that are practiced in Britain today, including historical criticism, are derived from European sources.

It is a curious historical accident that the development of Anglo-American philosophy had the effect of obscuring the origins of literary criticism in Romantic continental thought. The separate development of Anglo-American philosophy explains why, on the one hand, many literary critics remain so ignorant about the philosophical foundations of their own discipline, and, on the other, why deconstruction was so quickly recognized as impinging directly on many of the presuppositions of

literary analysis. Its rapid take-up in the literary sphere was accompanied by a new realization of the deep affinities of literary aesthetics as they are practiced by literary critics with continental philosophy. What was discovered was the startling fact that literary criticism had remained intellectually frozen, operating in a curious time-warp, cut off, by the rift between Anglo-American and continental philosophy, from the sources of its formation. An example of this phenomenon in operation would be Cleanth Brooks in *The Well Wrought Urn* (1941) still quoting Coleridge's plagiarism from Schelling on the function of art as the reconciliation of opposites. This produces the paradox that while it is the height of critical respectability to quote Schelling via Coleridge, it is anathema to discuss the work of later writers such as Hegel, Nietzsche, or Heidegger, in the same tradition. It is no wonder that, when challenged, the literary critics of the establishment have made so little attempt to justify their own critical practices on intellectual grounds.

That relation to European philosophy explains why it was those critics who had been brought up in its intellectual and political environment who were able to recognize such affinities and who were thus instrumental in rediscovering this lost tradition.<sup>26</sup> But when these theorists turned to examine it once more, one hundred and fifty years later, they had to announce, not surprisingly, that ideas had changed—as well as the fact that the idea of Literature expressing a national essence was, after Fascism, deeply problematic. This organic association of nationalism, language, and literature, derived from the Romantics, impinges not only upon the criticism of the right: it remains almost equally powerful on the left.

## The Politics of Culture

At this point we are in a position to ask how 'the politics of literary theory' relates to that other well known phrase or saying 'the crisis in English Studies'. One refers to a general concept 'literary theory', the other a specific area: 'English Studies'. The former has a politics, the latter a crisis. How do the two clichés articulate with each other? Their dialectical product is none other than 'Cultural Politics'. Cultural Politics represents a welcome modification of the political as an inside/outside opposition. But the concept of culture is not itself unproblematic.

In general any definition of cultural politics is concerned to distinguish between the bourgeois notion of high culture and the more radical analytic concept of culture as the whole system of social relations and artefacts. As Dollimore and Sinfield put it:

The analytic [concept of culture] is used in the social sciences and especially anthropology: it seeks to describe the whole system of significations by which a society or a section of it understands itself and its relations with the world. Cultural materialism draws upon [this] latter, analytic sense, and therefore studies 'high' culture alongside work in popular culture, in other media and from subordinated groups.<sup>27</sup>

But what does this idea of culture itself enforce? Whose culture? How are its limits defined? For Dollimore and Sinfield, cultural materialism is identified as the study of popular culture alongside high culture, seeking to embrace both poles of the torn halves of the high/low

antimony of culture through anthropology's account of culture as the analysis of the meaning of the practices through which a society is organized. Here we might draw a comparison with structuralism which contested the notion of an aesthetic always associated with a 'high culture' and initiated analyses of a much wider variety of cultural forms through the development of a common method derived from anthropology. But neither forms of analysis take on board the extent to which the object of anthropology, culture, is also itself the aesthetic product of European 'high' culture. What is also noticeable in Dollimore and Sinfield's statement is that the adoption of anthropology's systematic account of the functioning of a culture as a totality has had the effect—as it did in structuralism—of removing the critical edge ('and therefore studies "high" culture *alongside* work in popular culture...'), the point of leverage of a critical practice which focuses on the dialectical differential conflicts of the unequal antimonies of high and low.

In fact culture in its broad anthropological sense has come into general use for some time now, probably ever since the counter-culture of the 1960s. If someone today talks about 'the culture of the BBC', he or she is unlikely to be referring to the opera and the classics. The popularization of culture as 'the culture of everyday life', however, marks the very point when the concept has itself begun to come under criticism. Martin Jay has demonstrated the degree to which both the Frankfurt School and Raymond Williams, from whose work the idea of 'cultural politics' to a large part derives, form part of a tradition which seeks solace for the disintegrative effects of individualism in the nostalgic realm of an organic culture.<sup>28</sup> James Clifford, among others, has pointed to the contested nature of the concept of culture

in anthropology itself which relies, he argues, to a large extent on the same organic assumptions:

For all its supposed relativism ... the concept's model of totality, basically organic in structure, was not different from the nineteenth-century concepts it replaced.... Despite many subsequent redefinitions the notion's organicist assumptions have persisted. Cultural systems hold together; and they change more or less continuously, anchored primarily by language and place. Recent semiotic or symbolic models that conceive of culture as communication are also functionalist in this sense.<sup>29</sup>

If not altogether synchronic, the anthropological concept of culture at best offers a Burkean notion of slow organic change—an indication of just how post-Marxist an anthropologized 'cultural politics' has come to be. Clifford's conclusion is no more reassuring for a 'cultural politics' designed in opposition to supposedly apolitical theory:

It is high time that cultural and social totalities are subjected to the kind of radical questioning that textual ensembles have undergone in recent critical practice (for example Derrida) .... It may be true that the culture concept has served its time.<sup>30</sup>

Despite this intriguing suggestion that it is time for the apparently no longer dangerous concept of culture to be let out on parole, there is no question of suggesting an immediate replacement. As the case of English Studies into Cultural Studies suggests, critics should be wary of quickly appropriating another term that sounds more acceptable because it comes from another discipline. The

point is that to shift literature to culture only pushes it towards an even more unstable, and arguably, undesirable category that is itself currently being contested within its own discipline. As an academic subject, anthropology, and its object culture, incorporated since the nineteenth century the various forms of scientific racism, a disciplinary history that might cause us to pause before taking over even its modern definitions of culture on trust. Is anthropology's history of complicity variously with racism and slavery, or its readiness to facilitate colonial governance, really preferable to the nationalism attached to the concept of literature that has caused such disillusionment in the past few years and increased the pressure to move from literature to culture? Recall Lévi-Strauss' account:

[Anthropology] is the outcome of a historical process which has made the larger part of mankind subservient to the other. During this process millions of innocent human beings have had their resources plundered and their institutions and beliefs destroyed, while they themselves were ruthlessly killed, thrown into bondage, and contaminated by diseases they were unable to resist. Anthropology is daughter to this era of violence.<sup>31</sup>

Culture has been used instrumentally for imperialism and nationalism just as much as, if not more than, literature. To have substituted one dubious disciplinary object for another may prove not to have been such a progressive political move unless these histories and these questions are addressed and reconceived.

As Jameson has observed, today 'some of our most cherished and time-honoured conceptions about cultural politics may ... find themselves outmoded'.<sup>32</sup> The shift

from an aesthetic to an anthropological definition of culture, society as a system, doesn't guarantee the substantive change that gets the critic outside the historical role of literary criticism. If culture has been switched from a category of art to a category of the social, from the academy's own activities to its other, its outside, such cultural theory continues to alternate within traditional inside/outside polarities. The move to literature's outside might seem to mark a loss of belief in the literary, the internal terms of the discipline itself; it would be more revolutionary if it wasn't for the fact that this imperious expansion into social criticism has also been a constant trope of the literary in its most conservative tradition—that of Coleridge, Arnold, Eliot, and Leavis. To that extent Cultural Materialism still operates within the traditional parameters of its own abjured discipline.

The name itself, on the other hand, suggests something rather different, that is an indication of the scaling down of the ambitions of orthodox Marxism. 'Cultural Materialism', we could say, amounts to a way of describing British ex-Marxists, tactfully removing the suggestion of Marxism as such—the love that no longer dares speak its name. This is the significance of the way in which traditional 'historical materialism' has been jettisoned in favour of the anthropological 'cultural materialism' first developed by Marvin Harris.<sup>33</sup> If so, this suggests that contemporary cultural theory marks the appearance of a new consensus on the left, a reformation of the parameters of Marxist analysis in response to the intellectual and political challenges of the past fifteen years. To question the use of the concept of culture is not to suggest that a new concept is required to replace it, but rather to advocate its use through an articulation of those

historical openings that already divide it from itself, re-emphasizing the forms of the conflictual stress that betray the signs of halves that don't add up. The point here is that whereas the history in 'historical materialism' was militantly dialectical, the anthropological concept of culture favoured by Cultural Materialism is not in itself oppositional. Culture needs to be redefined not just in the *conjunction* of high and low but through the disruptive forces that betray their antagonistic divisions.

The idea of a cultural politics was developed in the sixties through the form of the counter-culture: but it is important to recall that if the momentum of the counter-culture was derived from the Civil Rights movement, its strategy of a cultural politics was derived not only from Gramsci but also from the notion of cultural revolution produced by non-European socialists, such as Fanon, Mao, Cardenas, Cabral, as a means for resisting forms of colonial and neocolonial political power, a product of the recognition of the inadequacy of the traditional categories invoked in the European arena to effect political change.<sup>34</sup> Here culture served as a means of unifying the fractured societies produced by colonialism, of producing an anti-colonial counter-hegemony. At the same time, importantly, it operated within the general political framework of revolutionary Black Marxism.<sup>35</sup> If today's counter-cultural form of challenge is called 'Cultural Politics', then strategically from its position as a discourse of the academic institution—as the title of a book series, for example—it no longer makes the same kind of direct intervention. In its institutional formation and formulation, Cultural Politics has become the conventional norm of politics for many on the Left—an academic orthodoxy that can be safely contained within the system, despite the production of antithetical

'dominant' versus 'subversive' structures. Its adoption in Europe has tended to be limited to an identification of cultural phenomena with established political positions. An indication of this is the way in which although, like the ill-fated attempt to turn all politics into questions of discourse, though it represents an assault on the tendency to conceive of the political in terms of inside and outside, at times it has been found to repeat that very same inside/outside structure of nationalism and racism.<sup>36</sup> Cultural Politics hegemonizes a range of different practices, discursive or otherwise, but without itself specifying their mode of political intervention, and often relying on an untheorized assumption of dissidence as subversive, or implicitly referring back to an unexamined orthodox structure of left politics which Cultural Politics simultaneously disavows. At worst, there is a danger that Cultural Politics can become a substitute for all other forms of politics (the contemplative point of exteriority) rather than a part of them or a challenge to them: culture rather than politics. As politics and poetics become intermingled, the degree to which politics has been aestheticized becomes apparent.

If much of the cachet of cultural politics stems from its political popularity after the wars of liberation of the fifties and sixties (even the now despised term 'Women's Liberation' was modelled on the Liberation Fronts of anti-colonial wars), it is worth recalling that many of those struggles were—paradoxically in terms of today's critiques—framed in nationalist terms. For many on the left today, literature has been rejected because of the way, as has been so tirelessly shown, it was co-opted by the state for the purposes of nationalism. This hostility passes over the historical role which, as Hobsbawm and others have argued, literature, as well as philology and

history, indeed the universities generally, played long before the advent of official nationalism, propagated through national institutions: they were often the most conscious and outspoken champions of nationalism (as well as racism) in the nineteenth century and performed a significant historical role throughout Europe in its development and success.<sup>37</sup> In other words, with the critique of literature's relationship to nationalism of the past ten years, we have also witnessed the critique of what must have been, politically speaking, one of the most significant and successful form of cultural politics ever: nationalism itself. The extraordinary historical success of nationalism for twentieth-century anti-colonial struggles, and its continuing power that has been demonstrated in the dismemberment of the Soviet empire and Yugoslav Republic, highlights the extent to which, unlike many an authored 'ism', nationalism has very often also been a popular, if often vicious and genocidal, movement. Its costly victories put assumptions about the possibilities of cultural politics in perspective: how different in scale is the success of the idea of nationalism (however negatively we may consider its consequences) compared to the limited scope of today's academic micropolitics of subversion and resistance.

## Notes

1. Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin*, 140.
2. See Rawson, 'The Crisis, and How Not to Solve It', and subsequent correspondence in the *TLS* and *LRB* during the summer of 1982, and the discussion in Chapter 1.
3. de Man, 'The Resistance to Theory', 12.
4. Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 86.
5. Cain, *The Crisis in Criticism*, 251.
6. 'From the Editors', *Profession* (1984), iii.
7. The *locus classicus* of this position is undoubtedly Bate's 'The Crisis in English Studies'.
8. See Jonathan Culler's 'Criticism and Institutions: the American University' in Attridge, Bennington and Young, *Post-Structuralism and the Question of History*, 82-98, for a comparison between British and American universities; for an analysis of the structure of the British literary institution in the 1980s see Young, 'Une tradition en crise'. Since this chapter was written, the Committee for University English (CUE) has emerged as an effective pressure group for English as an academic subject.
9. Derrida, 'Mochlos ou le conflit des facultés'.
10. 'It might be maintained that a case of hysteria is a caricature of a work of art, that an obsessional neurosis is a caricature of a religion and that a paranoid delusion is a

caricature of a philosophical system': Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 130.

11. Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 10.

12. Examples of such attempts would include Ryan's *Marxism and Deconstruction*; Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women*; or, on the side of incompatibility, Barrett, *Women's Oppression Today*; Weir and Wilson, 'The British Women's Movement'.

13. Lyotard, *The Differend*.

14. Eagleton, 'Marxism, Structuralism, and Post-structuralism', 8.

15. Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 86.

16. Hirst and Woolley, *Social Attributes and Human Relations*, 160.

17. Weber, *The Legend of Freud*, 33. Cf. also the argument of his *Institution and Interpretation*.

18. Jameson, 'The Politics of Theory', 63.

19. This question has been raised in different ways by Derrida, Eagleton, Gasché, and Macherey; it was also the topic that the Johns Hopkins Symposium of 1966, eventually published as *The Structuralist Controversy*, intended to, but in fact did not, address.

20. Lisa Jardine, "'Girl Talk" (for Boys on the Left)', in Young, *Sexual Difference*, 208-17.
21. Palmer, *The Rise of English Studies*; Baldick, *The Social Mission of English Criticism*.
22. Press, *The Teaching of English Overseas*; Viswanathan, 'The Beginnings of English Literary Study in British India'.
23. See Foulkes, *Literature as Propaganda*.
24. Eagleton, *Exiles and Emigrés*, 9.
25. Zabel, *Literary Opinions in America*, 889.
26. See in particular Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness*.
27. Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, 'Foreword: Cultural Materialism', in Cairns and Richards, *Writing Ireland*, vii.
28. Jay, *Marxism and Totality*, 69.
29. Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, 273.
30. Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, 274. Cf. Lila Abu-Lughod, 'Writing Against Culture', in Fox, *Recapturing Anthropology*, 137-62.
31. Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, II 54-5.
32. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 48.
33. Harris, *Cultural Materialism*.

34. See Dirlik, 'Culturalism as Hegemonic Ideology and Liberating Practice'; as Colin Prescod puts it, 'interest in culture is derived from twentieth-century Asian, Central and South American, and African class-based socialist movements which threw up the idea of cultural revolution', [title], 98. Cultural politics was first developed for the anti-colonial struggle in Ireland; predictably, the extent of its role has recently been questioned by Foster, *Paddy and Mr Punch*, 262-80.

35. Robinson, *Black Marxism*.

36. Gilroy, 'There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack', 50-1.

37. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 69. See also Bhabha, *Nation and Narration*; Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism*.

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