Report

Is There a Future?

As Peter Conradi remarked, introducing the final session of the Higher Education Teachers of English Conference at Reading this year, none of us had attended the conference, for we had all been to different seminars, met different people, and received different impressions during our three days together. What follows, therefore, is necessarily a commentary on the conference I attended, rather than a description of the conference as a whole.

The welcoming speech by Reading’s Dean of Arts ringingly evoked a unity of purpose and conviction long since vanished from English studies; I realised later that this anachronistic note was not wholly inappropriate, a point to which I will return. After dinner on the first evening Geoffrey Hill gave an austere and characteristically reticent reading of his own work, confining himself, by way of introduction, to reading the explanatory notes on each poem printed at the back of the volume—a truly self-effacing auteur. The first lecture, next morning, was Karl Miller’s talk on the critic Marius Bewley, interesting in a low-key way, but only tenuously related to the conference theme (‘Is There a Future for ‘English’?’) or to its own official title (‘Leavis and Leavis’s Pupils’). Later the same day came David Crystal’s lecture ‘Fashion in Language and Literature’, which was also less wide-ranging than its title, though delivered with considerable verve. Catherine Belsey’s lecture the following day was a lively and popular occasion. She looked at aspects of Shakespearian comedy under the title ‘Disrupting the Difference’, the difference in question being sexual difference, and sixteenth-century views on the family (deduced from readings of contemporary family-group portraits) were juxtaposed with the portrayal of women in the comedies. The last lecture was Denis Donoghue’s ‘The Question of Voice’, in my view the most impressive intellectual performance of the conference, and the only lecture which addressed the official theme with any directness—perhaps future organisers need to brief their speakers a little more strictly than had been the case here. I will come back to the matter of this lecture, and its reception. In addition to the
lectures, there were numerous papers read in smaller seminars. I heard Graham Martin speaking on the Open University (and keeping fairly close to essays he has published on this topic) and Ann Wordsworth on 'Deconstruction: Derrida and the Yale Critics'.

Because so few of the plenary sessions dealt with the theme directly, the points at issue, though pervasive, were implicit, but in so far as the conference might be taken as indicating the state of play in the crisis (or 'crisis') in English studies, the following became apparent. Firstly, the influence of Derrida remains in full flood, as does the belief that this flood has swept away the foundations on which English studies formerly rested. In this sense Derrida's popular image as a revolutionary and an iconoclast remains intact. But another side of Derrida is beginning to be more widely recognised, for as Antony Easthope pointed out, in a cogent response to Ann Wordsworth's paper, the Derrida who has been so enthusiastically received and promulgated at Yale assimilates all too easily to a tradition of formalism, to what Edward Said has memorably called a 'worldless' (or textualist) variety of literary criticism which, in so far as it has any social or political tendencies at all, is essentially quietist. To put it bluntly, if there is nothing outside the text there can be nothing of social or political interest inside it.

Catherine Belsey seems to be increasingly aware of this aspect of Derrida and reiterated at the conference her call for a Derrida trimmed with Althusserianism. Any move away from the pointless black hole of reflexive textualism is welcome, but Althusser's grim universe, with its implacable hostility to the very notion of literary or aesthetic qualities, is unlikely to have a wide appeal. (Bernard Bergonzi, in 'The Terry Eagleton Story', PN Review, 40, writes interestingly of Althusserianism in British criticism since the mid-seventies, seeing it as responsible for the more arid side of the 'New Accents' series.) Belsey, too, was evidently troubled by the hedonist tendencies of Ann Wordsworth's defence of Derrideanism as 'pleasurable' and 'exciting', although Wordsworth herself, tackled on the immorality of opting for deconstructive pleasures in the present political climate, insisted that deconstruction's social record was no worse than that of other kinds of criticism. Nonetheless, the cracks which must eventually open and separate the Derrideans from the Althusserian-materialists are detectable here.

The second major point to emerge was the undiminished strength of the conviction that there is a direct link between progressive approaches
to literature and left-wing politics. Questioned on this matter during the plenary discussion on the final day, Catherine Belsey stated explicitly that to oppose post-structuralism is to support Mrs. Thatcher. Gerald Graff has recently presented forceful arguments against this kind of thinking in a piece called ‘The Pseudo-Politics of Interpretation’ (Critical Inquiry, March 1983). He quotes a remark of Orwell’s which would place the deconstructionists on the wrong side of the political divide. ‘Totalitarianism’, said Orwell, ‘probably demands a disbelief in the existence of objective truth’. Graff maintains that it would be plausible to suggest that it is the critical objectivists, not the materialists or the deconstructionists, who are the real heirs of the radical tradition which seeks to secularize and demystify the concept of meaning. Perhaps deconstruction, he suggests, falsely classified as an ideology of the left, might equally be classified as an ideology of the right. He concludes, sensibly, that post-structuralism, like other critical practices, is not inexorably linked to any specific politics, though, again like other forms of criticism, it is open to political appropriation. The same issues are succinctly dealt with in ‘Leftist Recreation: The Politicizing of Deconstruction’, Robert Holub, enclitic, spring 1983.

As if to highlight these issues, the T.H.E.S. on the day the conference ended (Friday the thirteenth) contained an article by a Labour M.P., Jack Straw, attacking post-structuralism. Straw asked whether in the post-Robbins context money spent on post-structuralism is money well spent. He claimed that informed persons had been unable to explain to him what post-structuralism is and concluded that there are no mysteries about it, only mystification. Catherine Belsey went into action against this easy target on the letters page a fortnight later asking ‘why is English alone among disciplines supposed to be accessible to the commonest of common sense?’ She ended her letter by recommending post-structuralism to the Labour Party saying that if it were to ‘take some account of the admittedly quite difficult theories of post-structuralism it might be able to analyse the state of Britain at the moment in ways which would more effectively contest the appeal to the electorate of Conservative common sense’. This shows the danger of consistently referring to common sense as the enemy, for it seems to make the bizarre and fatal concession that sado-monetalism (the term is Bergonzi’s in his Eagleton piece) can be seen as common sense.

All this, a few weeks after it ended, put the conference in context, for I realised that the inflated Leavisite self-image of English studies,
which the Dean of Arts had appealed to in his welcome address, is still a power in the land. Leavis offered the discipline a flattering self-image of centrality and influence, giving students the illusion that they would be able (if only indirectly and eventually) to civilise society by the fineness of their responses to poetry. Leavis's rebel children now seem to be trapped in the same dream, imagining that literary critics can become legislators of the world (acknowledged or otherwise) and bring about social reform or revolution by the acuteness of their critical insights. Though the rhetoric has changed, then, the dream has not.

This brings me, finally, to Donoghue's lecture and its reception, which, judging from the formal discussion afterwards, was largely hostile. The reason was perhaps that in order to see English as possessing revolutionary potential it is necessary to see Derrida and figures like him as revolutionary in the strict sense, that is, as making a complete break with the past. An iconoclast, almost by definition, cannot arise from a tradition. But Donoghue's talk did place Derrida within a tradition, and, worse still, it was a religious tradition, for he drew upon, and enthusiastically recommended, Susan Handelman's book *The Slayers of Moses: The Re-emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory*. Handelman's fascinating and difficult book reminds us that Jacques Derrida is the son of a Rabbi, and that the Rabbinic tradition of hermeneutics has numerous points of correspondence with Derrida's approach. In the Rabbinic tradition, for instance, the distinction between text and commentary hardly exists, and the presence of a plurality of meanings—potentially infinite—within the sacred texts of the Torah is axiomatic. The lecture seemed (refreshingly) open to the challenge of Derrida without being blind to his weaknesses, but nothing is so galling to those who are fired and committed by an idea as the liberal insistence on seeing the merits of other points of view. Hence, it was suggested that the lecture was really an attempt to resist the force and threat of Derrida by placing him safely within an existing tradition. The discussion afterwards tried to convict the speaker of complacency and conservatism, but he quite rightly refused to own as his the politics which were being imputed to him.

When the conference reconvenes at Liverpool in 1985 the theme is to be literature and its written contexts ("the various ways in which scholars and critics understand relations between texts") which suggests that Derrida will again loom large. By then, as one contributor
commented, some of the 1984 delegates will have had their departments contracted, or even axed, but there were few signs that such gloomy realities were concentrating many minds at Reading. The suggestion was made that an organisation might be formed which would keep Higher Education English departments in touch with developments at each others’ institutions, but this was quickly rejected in favour of further discussion about the implications of post-structuralism. I hope that the proposal may be made again at Liverpool, for in the light of the real crisis the post-structuralist ‘crisis’ may come to seem like fiddling while Rome burns—or even as fanning the flames.

PETER BARRY
The New Cambridge Shakespeare

General Editor: Philip Brockbank

Responding to shifts of critical tastes and insight, to the findings of Shakespeare scholarship in recent years, and to a changing sense of what is important to an understanding of the plays, The New Cambridge Shakespeare is a completely new edition, freshly edited and designed, and includes a wide range of illustrations.

For a fuller understanding of Shakespeare's poetic and dramatic art, an international team of the very best scholars has provided:

- modernised, easily accessible texts
- ample but unobtrusive academic guidance
- a substantial introduction to each play discussing its context, sources, structure, characterisation, significance, staging, history

Now available:

Othello
Edited by NORMAN SANDERS
Hard covers £15.00 net
Paperback £2.95 net

Romeo and Juliet
Edited by G. BLAKEMORE EVANS
Hard covers £15.00 net
Paperback £2.95 net

The Taming of the Shrew
Edited by ANN THOMPSON
Hard covers £15.00 net
Paperback £3.00 net

A Midsummer Night's Dream
Edited by R. A. FOAKES
Hard covers £15.00 net
Paperback £2.95 net

King Richard II
Edited by ANDREW GURR
Hard covers £15.00 net
Paperback £2.95 net

Further volumes to complete the entire canon will be published over the next five years.

Spring 1985 titles: Twelfth Night, All's Well That Ends Well, Hamlet.