

Nathan Hensley. Email Interview with Thomas Pfau, Alice Mary Baldwin Professor of English & Professor of German; Member - Duke Divinity School Faculty
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The following exchange took place over email, January 21-23, 2015, and has been minimally edited for typos and continuity. I have added links where appropriate.

NH: I'm wondering if I might impose on you very briefly to share some personal memories about a traumatic (but now very interesting) episode in the history of humanistic thinking, the so-called culture wars of the 80s and 90s and, more particularly, the place of the breakup of the Duke English department in that storyline.

Given your that you've developed such a powerful understanding of the current crisis *and* that you were there during the controversial years, it occurred to me that I'd love to get your insights into this incredible period in the history of literary criticism, and your sense of what it should mean to us today. Can you share an initial thought?

TP: I have to say that being asked to take a look back at the circus atmosphere of Duke English around 1996-97 is not an altogether enticing proposition. Still, if you have some specific questions you want me to comment on I'll see to what extent a return of the repressed can be managed.

Today's conversation about the humanities is almost unrecognizably different from the heady, narcissistic days of yore, mainly because then (as I perceived it) the sources of irrationality were largely housed *within* certain departments, whereas the main threats now issue from *above* (in the form of micro-managing senior administrators) and also from outside the academy (in the form of state legislators trying their own, often ham-fisted prescriptions on public- and state universities). Inevitably, of course, external threats to the integrity of humanistic inquiry tend to drive some faculty to make frantic and ill-considered efforts at proving their "relevance" and economic viability.

1) NH: There's a striking passage in [the famous *Lingua Franca* article about Duke's "implosion"](#) that refers to the cash-blitz that vaulted Duke into prominence under Stanley Fish:

"Even a decade earlier [than 1986-1992], it might have seemed crass for a department simply to buy its way into prominence. But the stigma of conspicuous consumption had faded considerably in the go-go 1980s, and academia was enjoying its moment of high glamour. For the most well known academics, the rules of the professional game had come to resemble big-time sports or stock market speculation: Play for maximum stakes and then get out while the getting is good."

It's an amazing passage to read from the point of view of the contemporary academy, whose main storylines, in the humanities at least, seem to be contraction, austerity, and budgetary retrenchment. Of course the "theory" era was also marked by various claims about the death of literature and literary thinking, "the closing of the

American mind.” What was / is your sense of the relationship between the Duke-style system of theory-stars and the prestige or status of literary studies in a broader cultural context? What’s changed between then and now? And was this the last moment when literary studies mattered -- or was it, instead, a moment that killed the idea that literary studies could ever matter? Or something else?

TP: The remarkable influx of funds that Duke experienced starting in the late '80s (a result of a booming stock-market and surging Duke endowment money) happened to coincide with an institution eager to break into the top tier of Research I institutions. Those already part of that elite group did not have the same anxiety of establishing their identity; Duke on the other hand felt that it had to shed the image of the Southern "finishing school" and, thus, did what its leaders deemed most expedient: viz., to "buy" a lot of famous people in a very short time span.

Several miscalculations hampered the approach from the start. First, not much thought was given to the sustainability of this approach; one might say that the "irrational exuberance" that Alan Greenspan later diagnosed to have afflicted American economic thought as a whole had bled over into administrative strategizing in the academic sector.

A second miscalculation had to do with the nature of institutions, which I believe cannot be remade at will but, changes in personnel notwithstanding, tend to exhibit a peculiar inertia of their own. Thus the "Southern" mentality (a society of back-room deals, special arrangements, and generally few rules other than a certain phony outward politesse) persisted, indeed was exacerbated by a startling influx of money. The mentality of "getting out while the getting is good" has never quite faded but, rather, has metastasized to the administrative sector.

2) NH: In the context of the culture wars of the 1980s / 90s, the Duke story was, in a way, a perfect culmination, allegory, or microcosm of “the decline of literary study” - - or at least it seemed to be for many observers. Did the players in the Duke department have a sense of their own story as representing something larger than themselves? The 'fate of 'Theory'? The "death of the humanities"? Or was it all just micro-scaled turf wars displaced into the realm of methodology? Given your own vantage now some fifteen years later, what do you think was actually at stake in these fights?

TP: Excellent question! With the exception of Eve Sedgwick, who had a very clear-cut vision for how to transform literary studies, the other individuals Jonathan Goldberg, for example, did not have any particular agenda other than self-promotion. I think you are right to link the upheavals of '96-'97 to an encroaching sense that the entire enterprise of literary studies was in decline. Quite possibly, what transpired at Duke was an attempt at compensating for the larger shifts underway in higher education. As regards "theory", I have always found its association with Duke English something of a puzzlement. Aside from Queer Theory, the department never had any strong credentials in the field, though the Literature Program obviously did. On balance, though, I don't think that the individuals at the heart of the meltdown back then were "representing something larger than themselves." Considering their exceedingly generous self-appraisal that's probably no surprise.

3) NH: In a more historical key: did the “theory” people really hate literature? Were the “literature” people actually anti-theoretical? This structure seems to fit poorly with Eve Sedgwick's work, for example, which always seems to begin with an intimate and particularizing encounter with the text. And your own work, obviously, was and remains deeply interested in the philosophical tradition and its most difficult conceptual problems, particularly insofar as those are rearticulated and shaped by literary form. But despite this seeming traffic between sides, the idea of “theory” as an empty or somehow anti-literary enterprise (and vice versa: of “traditional” scholarship as being averse to theory) still seemed to stick, at least in many public circles. What’s your sense of the fit between those culture-war stereotypes and actual work people were doing -- or in your case, continue to do?

TP: Eve's work, which almost always departs from a moment of aesthetic discernment, always struck me as an exception to the rule. To say that other, self-styled “radicals” really “hated” literature would be going too far. They just did not feel passionate about it, had no ‘negative capability’ but were intent on using texts for very specific agendas. Striking, even in retrospect, was their remarkable lack of irony, self-irony, and an awareness of how structural ambiguities that are virtually constitutive of literary production inherently preclude mobilizing literary works for ideological ends. As for myself, since you ask, I began to feel uneasy about American conceptions of “theory” almost as soon as I arrived here (in 1982). The entire enterprise struck me as philosophically shallow, over-confident in a sort of typical American, Emersonian way, and naively pragmatic about what it means to do conceptual work within interpretive fields. So I suppose I have indeed found theory to often be an “empty” undertaking, at its best an act of Keatsian invention (“an airy citadel” spun entirely by one's own inspiration), though more typically as a form of ideological hyper-ventilation. The Literature Program, while Fred Jameson chaired it, struck a more promising note, combining as he did a variety of theoretical models (Marxism, Cultural Studies, Aesthetic Theory, Film Studies, etc.) without attempting to commit everyone to a specific line of inquiry. And Fred's unusually capacious intellect also allowed him to acknowledge the deep philosophical genealogies of contemporary theory.

4) NH: My own interest in reviewing this period is in how a certain methodological dissatisfaction about “critical reading” in the current moment seems, unwittingly or not, to replay arguments from this earlier traumatic moment in literary studies. Since your own career has taken shape alongside these developments in the academy (you were an assistant professor when quoted in the *Lingua Franca* piece), and you’ve spent much of your intellectual energy since then tracking the professional and cultural role of humanistic thinking in its process of historical unfolding, do you have any final thoughts on the relationship between the 1999 moment and the current one? And what, if anything, do you think the Duke case might have to say about recent forays or fetishizations of what I'd call anticritical methods --- like data mining, “surface reading,” neoformalism, scientific / cognitive approaches, etc?

TP: Some things have shifted. There are fewer resources now, which has helped shift the focus away from the narcissism of some senior faculty's egos to different ways of modelling work in the humanities. The “anticritical” methods, as you sensibly label them, are mainly a result of the humanities' deepening “science envy” -- itself a symptom of the humanities' pervasive concern with their slipping “relevance.” I fear that the humanities'

embrace of neuro-scientific models of inquiry, which from what I can tell are usually employed in the most ham-fisted and unreflected ways, will only accelerate their slide into obsolescence. Likewise the "surface" and "distant" reading models strike me as intellectually shallow, almost embarrassing, though I won't take the time right now to detail what prompts this view. As for my own work, you can tell that it has a deep historical dimension to it and, as I argue in the opening chapters of *Minding the Modern*, does not believe in the history/theory antinomy that has done so much to confuse the intellectual stakes and create unnecessary antagonisms.

5) NH: Finally: What should the Duke case mean to us, now so many years later? Forgive the big question; I'm mostly interested in catching any stray thoughts you might have about the relationship between then and now, in terms of the broader situation of the literary humanities.

I don't know that too many people remember what happened here almost twenty years ago. I do, however, think that it had significance, albeit in a most unfortunate way. The best analogy I can think of would be the Monica Lewinsky case in politics. It was, at heart, a farcical episode. Yet the narcissism of all parties involved insisted on treating it as a matter of universal importance and a matter of great moral urgency. I see Duke's upheavals of that time as the point where literary studies formally entered into a prolonged phase of senescence, which continues to this day (as the growing appeal of some of the anti-critical models you mention suggests). My prognosis is that literature will always flourish, but that its role in the academy will continue to shrink in the years to come. The same erosion of (perceived) relevance is likely to occur in history, cultural anthropology, and other interpretive fields.