

Martin Kreiswirth and Thomas Carmichael, eds.
*Constructive Criticism: The Human Sciences
in the Age of Theory*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1995.
Pp. 223 + viii. \$45.00 paper, \$17.95 paper.

The turns and returns of theory seem to teach that criticism should be constructive and (thus) that destruction is not enough. Deconstruction, which Derrida brought to North America and which de Man made the dominant mode of theory there for about a decade, suggests something more than Heidegger's destruction while indicating that construction cannot occur without a certain amount of destruction. Paradoxically, the skepticism of the pre-Socratics and the rhetorical turn of the Sophists found a kind of *ricorso* in deconstruction. The return to skepticism and rhetoric represents, in the 1960s, a blatant, and perhaps necessary, challenge to Plato's essential, ideal and logocentric view of philosophy. Deconstruction, philosophy that aspired to the condition of literature in Derrida's case and criticism that aspired to philosophy in de Man's, questioned the received wisdom of a Western philosophical tradition, which, in an anecdote, had been called a footnote to Plato. That Aristotle had challenged his teacher, that Sidney reshaped Aristotle to give poetics a higher place, that Shelley reworked neo-Platonism, is sometimes forgotten, but the challenge of deconstruction, although rooted in antiquity, happens in a new context—the upheavals of the 1960s.

Another crisis in mimesis or representation is upon us. Each crisis responds to new historical circumstances. How texts relate to a changing world, where writers and readers face each other across a mutable rhetorical abyss, becomes dramatic in each age because even if that period denies its own importance, it reads and lives everything from the present. Even in the name of history a certain presentism represents itself as if to erase the traces of history that efface homologies in the guise of difference. It is possible to be skeptical about a skepticism that calls itself new as a means of effacing its own genealogy in order to counter a tradition it wishes to oppose. As present theory declares its moment, as an avant-garde, it has little regard for history, or any historical currents that do not support its premise, or any utopian preview that does not provide for the moment from which it rejects and projects. This moving rhetorical now is skeptical of all things except itself even as it speaks about its skepticism of itself.

In this brief response, I can only hint at the issues that these essays raise, especially in the emphasis on the opposition between rhetoric and philosophical truth that resides in the rebarbative notion of representa-

tion. *Constructive Criticism* is a collection of essays that tries to come to terms with recent changes in critical theory. The title echoes and addresses deconstruction, but the book also calls attention to cultural, postcolonial, feminist, gay and lesbian critiques, theoretical movements that have gathered momentum since the late sixties. The editors structure the collection along the lines of several problematics—theorists, theory, representation and situation. The essays on theorists examine the following specific issues: Does the later Foucault stay with a radical skeptical view of truth or is it wishful thinking to salvage his rhetorical construction of the veridical as a recuperation of agency in the deterministic nexus of language (Christopher Norris)? Can or should Hegel be rescued from totality as an anticipation of deconstruction and an opening of texts to their unsaid contradictions, to their historical unconscious, and thereby to a politics that counters and encounters repression (Tilottama Rajan)? Another re-enactment or dramatization of philosophy occurs in Habermas, and it is particularly fruitful to ask whether his critique of modernity can be redressed by an ethnographic analysis of the alterity and similarity of “modern” culture (Victor Li). A looking back can also be a looking forward.

Observing play in form and reform has theoretical implications. The shapes of the narrative of theory and the theory of narrative illuminate each other. Theorists and theory tell stories mutually. The return of narrative in critical writing raises intricate problems about the possibility, use and persuasion of narrative knowledge or elsewhere what I have called “story argument” (Martin Kreiswirth). Another crossing, this time not between narrative and dialectic, dramatizes itself in the relation between deconstruction and feminism, their difference involving a shared search that suggests giving up instrumentality in social thought (Diane Elam). The novel is like social theory: they both represent the ethical, formal and substantive multiplicity of pluralism, although fiction is not yet understood, especially in the way society is a novel (Gary Wihl). The lines have shifted, but, despite Plato and Aristotle now being spectral in this debate, the critical geometry remains representational. Only in taking into account historical changes, like new narrative, feminism, deconstruction or the impact of the novel, do the angles of theory present new refractions.

The editors particularly emphasize this focus on mimesis in the third section, “Theory and Representation.” Here, as in the other essays, the contributors attempt to critique or re-orient Western philosophy, of which literary criticism is a part. What implications does AIDS have for truth in moral philosophy, and does homophobia represent an exclusion that constitutes part of the erasure of alternative subjectivity by a moralist

philosophy founded on universals (Richard Dellamora)? If AIDS is a sign of a repressed other, theoretical discussions of other diseases should also disclose something important about the modes of mimesis in culture. Can a study of the diseased body in opera suggest a way of crossing theoretical boundaries and confronting the problematics of representation (Michael and Linda Hutcheon)? The language of the body in dance criticism, which gives a romantic freedom to dance, might need a more skeptical reading in order to theorize it as a site of resistance (Janet Wolff). The body is a moving locus, a metaphor to some, a lived and sensual experience to others, a form of theory still to others. These essays represent that multivalenced collision of views of the body. They bring back the old-new question of determinism and agency (free will) in changing historical contexts.

Situation or context is the primary concern of the fourth and final section. The essays here raise the question: what sort of space does theory in general, and cultural studies in particular, inhabit? Is the university a place of cultural uncertainty, or a muzzy-eyed monument to irrelevance, or a difficult space with potential for critique, where scholars, being neither inside nor outside it, have no excuses in their work (Bill Readings)? Theorists need to be responsible. It might be possible to take the linguistic skepticism of theory and, paradoxically through language itself, make it do productive, if not utopian, political and social work (L. M. Findlay). The collection ends with a comic turn (at least comic in the structural sense Cornford and Frye use), that is, it finishes with an essay on how to reshape utopia from its specific projections in cultural studies and postmodernism by moving to a more open, heterodox and contingent situation, recycled from a diverse cultural archive, for individual and state (John Fekete). The editors also suggest a utopian turn because not only do they structure the collection so, but they also end their Introduction with a utopian claim, however putatively modest and unfinished, that, after the theoretical turn deconstruction brought, the “now-qualified” human subject can return to the human sciences.

Even though the skepticism of the past thirty years has been so often productive and enabling (at least for a good number of years for this subject), it would be interesting to speculate on how many people, theorists included, ever gave up their subjectivity and agency or actually displaced them on a metonymic card signifying them in endless asymptotic epistemological regression or a desire always approaching desire. Nonetheless, the return of agency in theoretical debates was as predictable as its banishment (picking the dates and circumstances in such matters is much more difficult), so, as part of the literature of this return, *Constructive Criticism*

brings together provocative essays. Quite possibly, it might be a good idea to return to a deconstructive moment, if such a thing were possible, and to have at once a double vision of determinism and agency. To be constructive, perhaps as the editors imply, one has to see the object and the subject, the world and the person in perpetual mobile lap and overlap, doubly and stereoscopically. What is laudable is that in the ever-expanding world of culture, even if this openness and expansion is a utopian hope, there is more room to return from exile, to find a home for Adam and Eve and between, whether under the tree of knowledge, or in working lives outside the eastern gates, in myth, secular and otherwise, with a keen skeptical eye, which can also imagine, if not see, its own multitudinous limitations. The return to Eden, which can never be an actual return, might be recast metaphorically as a thawing of the relation between Adam and Eve, those cold pastoralists, and their critics. The notions of home and exile migrate in a mutual dance, something that improvises a pattern.

While *Constructive Criticism* encourages thought about culture, in its utopian ends, it also reminds us of skepticism and the trouble with utopias. Subjects have to live in determined structures but society cannot live without subjects. Can people change the cultural and natural patterns in ways that benefit, rather than destroy, culture and nature? Subjects, who need to make myths, should be wary of them, for myth is a story but can be ideology, a suggestive open telling or a closing down: propaganda. In practice, these two extreme levels of myth blend in a spectrum. The readers of this book are asked to make their own constructive criticism. Between the fictional world of literature and the possible world of theory lies a putative cultural space as important as it is indefinite. There is no reason to be ashamed of literature or literary studies any more than to be provincial in glorifying them above all else. This collection invites more self-reflection about the relation among literature, theory and culture. Making a contribution to the shifting debate on theory and subjectivity, particularly as it is expressed in representation, would be no small feat.

Jonathan L. Hart
University of Alberta