

Tim Bowers

EMPTY POCKETS, EMPTY READINGS

John Harwood, *Eliot to Derrida: The Poverty of Interpretation*. Macmillan, 1995. RRP (paperback edition) \$44.50. ISBN 0 333 64180 9

Travelling through France for the first time, with polished hiking boots and new rucksack, I was befriended by a conman on the streets of Paris who lightened my pocket of more money than I'm prepared to admit. I had only been in France a few hours and the experience of having been duped has remained with me.

John Harwood seems to have felt similarly short-changed by his experience at Cambridge where, during the seventies, he completed a doctorate on the history of the criticism of T. S. Eliot. In *The Poverty of Interpretation*, Harwood critically assesses the usefulness of the terms "modernism" and "postmodernism" in discussing the literature of their respective periodic categories. In so doing, he constructs "a partial and polemical history of interpretative criticism in the academy" (14).

In reviewing a book as provocative as *The Poverty of Interpretation*, there is the temptation either deconstructively to knee-cap it and thereby assume the theoretical high ground, or to agree knowingly and thereby appropriate the author's radical position. To do either would only

serve to further substantiate the central tenet of this text.

Harwood's disillusionment with academic criticism took shape in the form of an "identikit portrait" of "the archetypal Bad Critic" who "seemed more like an unusually severe case of an endemic disease than a man dedicated to crimes against literature" (4). This disease, the symptoms of which include an unhealthy use of the terms "modernism" and "postmodernism," has thrived in the ever more heady atmosphere of theory within literature departments:

Over the last three decades, so much explanatory and evaluative power has been invested in "modernism" and "postmodernism" that, according to many academic critics and theorists, twentieth-century literature amounts to a two-party system in which all serious writing must belong in one or the other category. Both terms have now been reified to the point where literary works are frequently interpreted as products of cultural forces called "modernism" and "postmodernism." In its most aggressive form, this style of explanation is founded on a myth of schismatic progress, from an undifferentiated "tradition" to "modernism" to "postmodernism," in which criticism, reborn as "theory," finally displaces literature as a primary source of insight into the human (or "posthuman") condition. (13-14)

According to Harwood, the movement from "criticism" ("the Gospel According to Leavis") to "theory" has

led to a self-perpetuating industry in which "the shelves of the critical hypermarket are stocked with an ever-increasing variety of theories and methodologies" (25).

But this is by no means all of the problem. The volume of output of theory and interpretation has not led to any new understanding, Harwood argues, but rather the opposite. The cabbalistic jargon of theory is exclusionary to all but the initiated and is "published in books and refereed journals which are read by no one outside the profession" (19–20). Part of the problem, it seems, is that there is no quality control because both producer and consumer exist within this "profession." Since, Harwood argues, "academic critics and their apprentices are their own, and frequently their only customers, the market analogy collapses" and "the torrent of futile criticism" leads to "the exclusion of quality" (19–21).

There are some particularly tall poppies to which Harwood takes his rapacious scythe. Some critics—John Sturrock, Christopher Ricks, Northrop Frye and others—escape with only a severe pruning. Those who get the full treatment include Stanley Fish, Richard Rorty, Jonathan Culler and Paul de Man, but perhaps the best is left for Jacques Derrida's "twenty-five year refusal to define his project, which is indeed not a method or a philosophy, but a personality cult, a cult of moral and intellectual superiority" (201).

Harwood is obviously not the first to attack the industry of academic criticism. As he fulminates against Deconstruction, Harwood cites Randall Jarrell, Louis Menand, Gerald Graff and Roger Shattuck to support his argument. Interestingly, Frank Kermode gets the job as referee.

Ern Malley makes a well-timed appearance in a chapter entitled "The Case of the Missing Subject." Like *The Waste Land*, "poised between scrapheap and synthesis," the poetry of Ern Malley went far beyond its creators' expectations. Without overstating the situation, Harwood examines the similarities in the ways in which *The Waste Land* and Ern Malley's poetry were pieced together, and became appropriated and admired.

As Harwood lays waste across the critical landscape, the cadaverous fore-fathers are exposed with a kind of macabre relish. Like John Berryman on a good day, Harwood can be both funny and disturbing. His modulated prose resonates with Eliotic and Yeatsian cadences in a kind of parodic reverence. Despite the academic tone of the title, the front cover is adorned by the Glen Baxter cartoon of a cowboy standing shocked before a framed, blank canvas, under which is written, "It was Tom's first brush with modernism." From the cartoon on the front cover to the ironic allusions of "Death by Exegesis," a black humour pervades the text and reinforces Harwood's view that a great literary swindle is at the heart of the installation of *The Waste Land* as one

of the cornerstones of modernism. This swindle has become something of a self-perpetuating industry:

Old methodologies don't, of course, die; they remain on the shelves of the critical hypermarket along with the newer, more heavily-advertised products, and as each miracle ingredient turns out to be not quite the elixir that was promised, the theoretical laboratory churns out yet another: New Historicism will make your readings sparkle like they've never sparkled before; cultural materialism brings out the colour in your interpretations. The anti-capitalist rhetoric of so much recent theory is ironic, given that the business is such a prime example of the capitalist system at work. (205)

Harwood's study of the poverty of interpretation may be ultimately enriching if, as he tries to do, anger and frustration can be turned into a sceptical disposition. He is looking for a balance between textual analysis, historical acumen, and biographical awareness. Above all, Harwood insists that the academy must engage in a public criticism which "assume[s] an audience of equals, informed, exacting, alert to nuance, for whom reading is an end in itself, rather than a problem in search of a theoretical solution" (207).

The Parisian gentleman who took my money gave me much more than he was able to take away. I was more streetwise for one thing. More importantly, I was able to turn my

psychological defilement from hatred and revenge to a more life-sustaining forgiveness; I learned (late in life for so simple a lesson) to be happy for the money left in my pocket. If only a fraction of Harwood's unsettling polemic is correct, one can only hope that the recognition of the emptiness of our pockets may lead to a more sustaining dialogue in the future.

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Gabrielle Watling

POST-POST-COLONIALISM?

Anne Brewster, *Literary Formations: Post-colonialism, nationalism, globalism*. Melbourne University Press, 1995, \$14.95 RRP, ISBN 1039-6128.

Anne Brewster's *Literary Formations: Post-colonialism, nationalism, globalism* is perhaps the most informative work on Postcolonial issues since Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin's *The Empire Writes Back* (1989). But whereas *The Empire Writes Back* was an introductory "how to" book (David Carter, "Tasteless Subjects": 1992), *Literary Formations* applies recent postcolonial thinking to wider theoretical concerns such as gender, nationalism and globalism. In recent years, Postcolonial theory has