

Theory after “Theory”

This programme takes as its point of departure the status of literary and cultural theory at the present time. The current situation can be traced back to the late nineteen sixties, when the established paradigms of Anglo-American New Criticism, which were primarily used for practical purposes of literary analysis, gave way to an entire range of theories studied as models for the interpretation of cultural and social phenomena as well as literature. This “theoretical turn” in literary and cultural studies elevated such critical orientations as Marxism, feminism, deconstruction, psychoanalysis, the New Historicism, and postcolonial theory to the status of subjects often considered worthy of study in themselves. What these ways of thinking have in common is the basic notion that ideas, concepts, truths, institutions and ideologies are constructed in the form of language, and that as such, they are open to the same scrutiny that we would apply to any linguistic formulation. This is the fundamental difference between theory and philosophy: where philosophy creates conceptual entities in themselves ideally independent of language, theory emphasizes the linguistic formulation of such concepts, their ideological contexts, and their subjection to historical change. However, in recent years we have witnessed another turning point, sometimes located on the morning of September 11, 2001, and sometimes described as “the end of theory.” Such formulations are exaggerated: there will be no end to theory as long as we are engaged in serious reflection about the nature of what we do and how we do it. But something nonetheless has happened: theory as such has lost some of its institutional status, and is no longer held to be quite so distinct from its practical uses. Although every scholarly project in the humanities must now have its theoretical dimension, projects devoted exclusively to “theory” are now rare.

The *Troisième Cycle* programme proposed here is one in *applied theory*. On one hand, we will gather a number of established scholars who can speak to the place of theory in literary and cultural studies at the present moment. At the same time, doctoral students in all fields of English studies, regardless of whether they consider their work to be “theory-oriented”, are invited to discuss the theoretical assumptions and implications of their projects; they will participate in a discussion of how theory can help them find their way into and through the material they have chosen to study.

The programme will be held at the University of Geneva, May 25-26, 2007.

Conference participants from the CUSO universities and affiliates (Basel, Bern, Fribourg, Geneva, Lausanne, Neuchâtel) will be reimbursed for meals, lodging, and travel expenses.

One-page proposals for 20-minute presentations should be sent by October 31, 2006 to David Spurr, University of Geneva: david.spurr@lettres.unige.ch

Invited scholars:

Vivian Liska, University of Antwerp

Ned Lukacher, University of Illinois, Chicago

Jean-Michel Rabaté, Princeton University