

## *The Suicide of Literary Theory*

*These are uncertain times for literary scholars. The era of big theory is over. The grand paradigms that swept through humanities departments in the 20th century—psychoanalysis, structuralism, Marxism, deconstruction, postcolonialism—have lost favor or been abandoned. Money is tight. And the leftist politics with which literary theorists have traditionally been associated have taken a beating.*

*In the latest sign of mounting crisis, on April 11 the editors of Critical Inquiry, academe's most prestigious theory journal, convened the scholarly equivalent of an Afghan-style loya jirga. They invited more than two dozen of America's professorial elite, including Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Homi Bhabha, Stanley Fish, and Fredric Jameson, to the University of Chicago for what they called "an unprecedented meeting of the minds," an unusual two-hour public symposium on the future of theory.*

*When John Comaroff, a professor of anthropology and sociology at Chicago who was serving as the event's moderator, turned the floor over to the panelists, for several moments no one said a word.*

*Then a student in the audience spoke up. What good is criticism and theory, he asked, if "we concede in fact how much more important the actions of Noam Chomsky are in the world than all the writings of critical theorists combined?"*

*After all, he said, Mr. Fish had recently published an essay in Critical Inquiry arguing that philosophy didn't matter at all.*

*Behind a table at the front of the room, Mr. Fish shook his head. "I think I'll let someone else answer the question," he said.*

*So Sander L. Gilman, a professor of liberal arts and sciences at the University of Illinois at Chicago, replied instead. "I would make the argument that most criticism—and I would include Noam Chomsky in this—is a poison pill," he said. "I think one must be careful in assuming that intellectuals have some kind of insight. In fact, if the track record of intellectuals is any indication, not only have intellectuals been wrong almost all of the time, but they have been wrong in corrosive and destructive ways."*

*Mr. Fish nodded approvingly. "I like what that man said," he said. "I wish to deny the effectiveness of intellectual work. And especially, I always wish to counsel people against the decision to go into the academy because they hope to be effective beyond it."*

*Finally, a young man with dreadlocks who said he was a graduate student from Jamaica asked, "So is theory simply just a nice, simple intellectual exercise, or something that should be transformative?"*

*Several speakers weighed in before Mr. Gates stood up. As far as he could tell, he said, theory had never directly liberated anyone. "Maybe I'm too young," he said. "I really didn't see it: the liberation of people of color because of deconstruction or poststructuralism."*

—Reporter Emily Eakin, in *The New York Times* (Apr. 19, 2003)

## *Eliot's Dangerous Art*

"Burbank with a Baedeker, Eliot with a Cigar: American Intellectuals, Anti-Semitism, and the Idea of Culture" by Ronald Schuchard, with responses by David Bromwich and others, in *Modernism/Modernity* (Jan. 2003), The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2715 N. Charles St., Baltimore, Md., 21218-4363.

Was T. S. Eliot (1888–1965) an anti-Semite? The modernist poet and critic, author of "The Waste Land" (1922) and other seminal

works, has been attacked for employing seemingly anti-Semitic language, especially in a group of poems written during the period im-

mediately following World War I. Consider these lines from “Burbank with a Baedeker” (1920): “The rats are underneath the piles./ The jew is underneath the lot.” The debate over Eliot has recently heated up again, and some academics now even refuse to teach his work in their courses.

Schuchard, an English professor at Emory University, argues that the poet’s own complex views regarding religion help to explain the controversial passages. A recently uncovered 33-year correspondence with American intellectual and Zionist Horace Kallen reinforces the view that Eliot was no bigot. In the “sustained and cordial dialogue between Eliot the conservative, believing Christian and Kallen the liberal, free-thinking Jew,” Kallen often asked Eliot to intercede on behalf of certain European Jews who were fleeing Nazi persecution. In every case the poet responded vigorously, using his influence to secure a position for economist Adolph Löwe at the New School for Social Research in New York City, for instance, and also befriending sociologist Karl Mannheim and introducing him to other academics in London. Eliot counted many Jews among his friends, including such luminaries as Supreme Court justice Benjamin Cardozo, and, unlikely as it seems, the comedian Groucho Marx. Eliot’s detractors point to his friendships with known anti-Semites—Wyndham Lewis and Ezra Pound, among others.

Schuchard says that during the time that Eliot was writing the troubling poems he was also preparing to join the Church of England, converting from the Unitarianism of his youth, which he detested because of its humanistic separation from traditional Christianity. In fact, says Schuchard, Eliot *admired* the Hebrew faith for its grounding in ancient tradition. Deeply affected by the horrors of the Great War and immersed in the difficult creative

process that would lead to “The Waste Land,” with its vision of the disintegration of Western culture and society, Eliot frequently employed Jewish characters in his poems, according to Schuchard, as a metaphorical device, to represent the decay of tradition. That was effective, but it made for dangerous art, and Eliot’s critics recoil at some of the imagery he used. In “Gerontion” (1920), for instance, a Jew “squats on the window sill,” his skin “patched and peeled” by a loathsome disease.

Equally damning, in the critics’ view, is a published remark from 1933, when Eliot declared that “reasons of race and religion combine to make any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable.” Schuchard counters that, to the archconservative Eliot, freethinking intellectuals of *any* stripe were anathema. Eliot later retracted the word *race*. (He also claimed ignorance of the persecutions that were already under way in Nazi Germany, and Schuchard, relying on several recent studies of newspaper accounts of the time, says that is completely plausible.)

The invited commentators mostly remain unconvinced by Schuchard’s arguments. The milder voices, such as University of Rochester English professor James Longenbach, allow that “Eliot’s poems are powerful because their language invites us to call him a bigot.” But Anthony Julius, author of *T.S. Eliot, Anti-Semitism, and Literary Form* (1995), says that “critics who excuse Eliot’s anti-Semitism, or worse, pretend that it does not exist, merely carry on his own work of contempt toward Jews.” The *Modernism/Modernity* debate concludes on a wistful note, with Schuchard’s hope that future discoveries on the scale of the Eliot-Kallen correspondence might shed new light on Eliot’s personal views. Until then, the truth about his beliefs may remain as elusive as the meaning of some of his poetry.

## OTHER NATIONS

### *Muslim Europe*

“Europe’s Muslim Street” by Omer Taspinar, in *Foreign Policy* (Mar.–Apr. 2003), 1779 Massachusetts Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

Europe’s reluctance to join the U.S.-led war against Iraq reflected more than a different orientation toward power. Europe has a much

stronger Muslim constituency than the United States, observes Taspinar, a visiting fellow at the Brookings Institution’s Saban Center for