

ROBYN GARDNER

## haunted theory

JUSTIN CLEMENS

*The Romanticism of Contemporary Theory:  
Institution, Aesthetics, Nihilism.*

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It has been a staple of potted intellectual histories of ‘contemporary theory’, which usually means that formation of literary studies and cultural theory animated by European philosophy over the last thirty years or so, to argue that the Yale school reinvented a Romantic canon in minor abreaction to New Criticism’s earlier textual idealism. That unique conjunction at Yale of European émigrés, Geoffrey Hartman and Paul de Man, along with new Gnostic proselytiser Harold Bloom, and one or two earlier others, were strangely attracted and affiliated in ways not accounted for by institutional proximities alone. Even in those heady days of deconstruction, amid the celebratory reinscription of deviance, the *jouissance* and play of literary deconstruction was shadowed by something darker, somehow indigestible and melancholic, or too recent in the history of American–European relations to be addressed very explicitly. At least not in the USA, where processes of European assimilation were inextricable from disassociation from histories in eugenics and the kinds of biological determinism still active and unapologetic, albeit more circumspect, in other social and biomedical domains.

With the transition of Jewish émigrés to positions of tenure and success in all walks of life, the postwar period of ‘silence’ on the subject of the Holocaust was followed by its overwhelming ‘working through’. In the last decade of the twentieth century, as millennium celebrations gathered pace, humanities discourses were replete—veritably seething—with ghosts and revenants, spectres, spirits and haunting. Figures of this increasingly melancholic dis-

pensation cast a backward light on previous 'sports' in the text, which began to appear, in hindsight and with *l'affaires* Heidegger and de Man, overly hectic positivisations of the century's earlier and all-too-human figures of trauma. Of the original Yale Gang of Four, Geoffrey Hartman, the most playful deconstructor, was also active as director of the Yale Fortunoff Holocaust Video Testimony archive.<sup>1</sup> He had himself been one of the German Jewish children evacuated in the *Kindertransport* from occupied Berlin to boarding school life in England, where he developed a passion for tramping in nature and for the poetry of Wordsworth. And Paul de Man was that other kind of exile from the shadow of Nazism. If his case was transfixing in humanities contexts (exciting excesses of elegiac indulgence), in scientific contexts such passage from intellectual collaboration to respectable tenure in the USA was more pragmatically treated.

That powerful literary critical confluence at Yale was very much a matter of physical transportation, then, of refugees and émigrés in the context of postwar reconstruction and the impact of the GI Bill on American university life. Of course, a major catalyst is often located in the presence of Jacques Derrida at a conference designed to introduce European structuralism to literary theoretical contexts. This advent of structuralism was a birth astride its grave because Derrida's paper was 'poststructuralist already'. However, it seems to me that any very satisfying account of the rise of 'theory' will have to critically think the similar passage in and across disciplines with the tenure of Europeans in science and medicine in the USA,

and with the development of postwar cybernetics under military administration and the auspices of the Rockefeller Foundation's imperative of 'disciplinary' coherence, which included a highly politicised, messianic and military-driven promulgation of mathematics into the more messy and, as it turned out, deeply recalcitrant biological sciences. These alternative histories are becoming more available to founding narratives of the rise of 'theory' with the de-classification of Cold War documents and attendant research in the imbricated archives of early cybernetics, mathematics and biogenetics.

It's tempting, therefore, to see French philosophy's recent turn to the realm of pure mathematics, on the part of Alain Badiou, as a timely response. Perhaps it comes in traditional resistance to American ownership of significant histories—a typically French dissimulative appeal to alternative earlier figures of a chalk-dusty kind. This might especially be so in the context of a wide popular cultural fascination with mathematical savants, brought about by the expansion of the biomedical definition of autism. Badiou's philosophical appeal uncannily echoes an earlier historical formation, in that a messianic appeal to mathematics on the part of the *éminences grises* of Cold War military think tanks advocated not only disciplinary distinction but also a pragmatic 'forcing' or clarification of the intractable problems of bio-life in the cold pure light of mathematics. The impact of this concerted postwar promulgation of mathematics, in cybernetics and in the name of a pragmatic disciplinary coherence, has not been widely appreciated. Even François Dosse's

magisterial twin histories of structuralism do not give enough attention to these events. American accounts of the rise of 'theory' still show an institutional inheritance, a divide between, on the one hand, the 'material' orientations of Harvard and MIT and their presses and some related fine arts journals with technological reference, and, on the other, those accounts emanating from literary criticism.<sup>2</sup>

Literary criticism tends to be a French philosophical affair—or French readings of German philosophical affairs. Left Nietzschean, Kojévian-Hegelian and left Heideggerian inheritances, and those early transports at Yale, have meant that the philosophy that has informed much literary and cultural theory in the USA and in Australia is one that rests happily 'on the poem', returning as often to Wordsworth and an oddly limited selection of (madder) European poets as to the famous aporia of Kant's third critique. It is as if in sensitive post-war contexts this passage *through* France has somehow been necessary for the American reception of German thought, even old German thought. Perhaps in Paris such a sensitive subject as collaboration could be most consummately rethought in terms of potential resistances—and so transformed. The fact that these processes of geographical and historical transportation have tended to sever poststructuralism from other formative contexts—biogenetic science—while conceding the anthropological origins of the 'linguistic turn' is sometimes remarked upon but still improperly considered. Any full account of the rise of 'theory' would not only have to confront the relation of humanities research to science, but also have to

consider how this relation with an ideal 'other' is mirrored within humanities research.

In the meantime, in this much vaunted after-life of theory, in its contented afterglow or gentle suffusion in queer theory and cultural studies (or post-orgasmic 'brainless' slumber, if one listens to Terry Eagleton),<sup>3</sup> founding narratives continue to be told in terms of French proper names and set scenes of instruction—Derrida and Foucault, Deleuze, Lacan, Lyotard, Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe. Many of these names also, not incidentally, mark the progress of an increasing preoccupation with the Romantic impasse of contemporary theory, articulated in terms of stasis, repetition, crippling and blockage. In the late 1980s, the rapidly expanding new economic viability of trauma saw earlier literary Romantic formulations of theorists take on a new cultural charge. Eric Santner, in a neat Benjaminian formation in 1990, expanded on the groundbreaking thesis propounded in the 1960s by the psychoanalysts Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich about Germany's blocked capacity for mourning. Santner makes a distinction between traditions of European postmodernism as mourning play (*Trauerspiel*) and a mere *play* of mourning in American deconstructive literary criticism.<sup>4</sup> And intellectual historian Dominick LaCapra argued that contemporary theory manifested a regressive or immature 'acting out' in relation to the most traumatic events of the twentieth century, which he casts in Romantic relief as the 'negative sublime' of contemporary theory.<sup>5</sup>

Literary critics of a psychoanalytical and philosophical bent have progressively taken up

the idea that 'our' critical condition has something haunted about it. In labouring the limits of everything (the human, nature, thought), poststructuralism has had to recognise its own immersion in this 'ongoing problematic' of Romanticism, in its difficult impasse and perpetual return. This generalisation of Romanticism as a central problematic has continued wholesale, defining the rise of cultural studies and underpinning debates over its ownership, including those made with particular force and persuasion by Ian Hunter. Attempts to specify and historicise the problem of Romanticism seem to end up retaining the term and dispersing its logical (or definitional) conditions. However widely the problem has been articulated, there has been to date no very satisfying account of the conditions and determinants of this Romantic impasse, no gathering summation or analytical interrogation of any sustained and concerted kind.

This, then, is the significance of Justin Clemens's book *The Romanticism of Contemporary Theory*. This title has been dying to be written and the excellence of this book lies in its breathtaking range, insistently interrogative terms of analysis and high theoretical acumen. Its thesis spells out a seeming imperative, or logical condition, by which even the most self-conscious, novel and informed thinkers on these subjects must fall back into the breach—or onto the horns—of the Romantic dilemma. Theoretical Romanticism is doomed to repeat what poetical Romanticism already knew—although this in no way dampens Clemens's ardour for theoretical formulation and extended complication, even if he begins and ends in

Wordsworth. And while his parameters are not a round those institutional relations of science to science, he very successfully circumvents this by formulating a mechanism and critical economy that ingeniously shifts the ground, not quite in the manner of earlier theoretical Romanticism, which would sidestep matters by claiming that evolutionary theory was the scientific assimilation of poetical Romanticism. Clemens's reference is to Kant and he manages to make a logic of restriction seem imperative to any proper analysis. His subtitle—institution, aesthetics, nihilism—articulates an irresistible and circular economy by which each term and condition logically presupposes its (earlier) other(s) and compels the most novel and persuasive thinkers, either in resistance to or embrace of the Romantic, to one or its other(s)—which is what we must call, after Kant and his conflict of faculties, a condition of Romanticism.

Clemens's institution is generalised, a logical condition, rather than specified and historically differentiated in fine detail, although he calls on myriad useful references to add fibre to strict formulations. He finds evidence of the Romanticism of contemporary theory in all the obvious places, and in some less obvious ones. He offers the most highly condensed account to date and an overview of what so many theorists have been saying in passing, or in more or less attenuated, displaced, dissimulative, tactful or simply sketchy and thoughtless terms for decades. Clemens's overview is excellent, in its parsing of so many minor and key figures. It clearly defines and documents all of the terms, paradoxes and way stations in this impasse that everybody mentions and for which no-one has

offered any extensive or entirely satisfactory thinking through. That he does so with extraordinary reach, philosophical regard and, at times, breathless condensations is deeply impressive. As Eagleton once remarked of the general (Francophilic) state of contemporary theory there are more bodies about here 'than at Waterloo'—but this is no simple gathering or citational excursus. Clemens always places his figures by means of a highly wrought operation and his 'danse macabre' is a careful choreography. The collateral damage—there are heaps of bodies—makes for an invaluable reference work as well as a difficult pleasure.

Some of his more wilful selections are a bit shameless but impeccably well protected. He states that he has chosen his main figures—Lacan, Deleuze, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Ian Hunter and Alain Badiou—because they represent very different disciplinary positions and therefore exemplify the wide articulation of the Romantic impasse. He eschews any sustained critical analysis of the Yale school and—notably—of Paul de Man, whose seminal essays and posthumously published *Aesthetic Ideology* are undeniably foundational, furnishing key references throughout.<sup>6</sup> However, he defends these choices at each point, rounds up his own actions, anticipates quibbles and makes his qualifications with crystal clarity and irrefutable logic. The chapters on his key figures seem to me to be significant 'works' in themselves. Of Deleuze, Clemens's relation is distant and gently satirical, as with a quite mad uncle who came back from the war shell-shocked but whose flights of ideas have had a lasting impact on all the family. His analysis of Lacan's mathematical

formalisations tells of a seriously gifted apprentice. To Sedgwick, he is duly admiring but chases her inexorably into her obvious impasses. And on the subject of Ian Hunter's amazing gifts of blindsight, Clemens is eviscerating but still somehow tender, to a thinker whose intelligence has been crucial to his own formation.

These formations mark both his explicit preferences and implicit affinities. Clemens cites Foucault's judgement that theoretical and experimental physics dislodged philosophy from its right to speak of the cosmos, of finite and infinite space. This double investment of space by political technology and by science reduced philosophy to the problematic of time, and Clemens's own return to Kant seems implicitly in fealty to Foucault's early argument that recourse to proper names and foundational texts—re-reading—is a process of 'reactivation' and that this suspension of 'error' is its crucial operation, its *unscientific* distinction.<sup>7</sup>

Alain Badiou resides in the fascinating last chapter as a primal, still-presiding father whose Romantic figure, having hardly arrived as an 'event' in the USA, cannot therefore be properly killed. Clemens is a co-translator of a new collection of Badiou's essays on Infinity and if one follows a line of de Manian thought, translation is the precondition or condition of deathly encounter, so there's a promise of more to come.<sup>8</sup> His wager is on Badiou's futurity—a Pauline dispensation, for this last chapter reads also as a highly competent introduction to Badiou's novel recourse to set theory and implies his status as saviour, rather than enacts a consummated critique. Clemens's grasp of set theory

seems impeccable to me but I'm hardly qualified for refutations, only conjectures. Infinity is the latest hot topic in contemporary mathematics and one must ask, as above, what motivates this flight to earlier figures when recent theory offers such refinements. The co-emergence of infinity in French philosophy (I suspect a bit of a time lag) is 'a sign of the times', as Badiou would be first to acknowledge. But Badiou does not really attend to historical conditions, or to relevant research in neurocognitive contexts in which complex conceptions of lateralisation are also redefining the relation of poetry to mathematical capacities in terms of ideal forms and processes of distinction given by 'our' bicameral natures—which are mutational and 'plastic'.

These scientific revisions must, now, be Kantian through and through, but neurocognitive science's visualisations and the interests of transnational pharmaceutical corporations will own the future and Alain Badiou must 'tail' in this wake, dragging along burdens of culture and learning, as his distinction. Clemens is interested in this relation but he is faithful to his theoretical mechanism. His argument remains grounded in the terms of his subtitle, invoking a dialectical and circular economy between institution, aesthetics, nihilism that none of us may resist. Disputes over the institution or otherwise of cultural studies seem more or less ended now, even in this book's passage from writing to publication, as Clemens acknowledges in reference to Hunter's more recent work, which demonstrates a move beyond the blind spots that have made him so precisely challenging.

Clemens chooses to rest on the poem, and there is little attention to a relevant, directly German lineage. He might have paid some attention to the writings of the late Niklas Luhmann and the avid industry of explication and application of 'systems theory', with its clunkingly naive references to the primacy of Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela's biogenetic theories of *autopoiesis*, as well as to mathematics. In the USA the reception of Luhmann's work is routinely presented, in weirdly partisan contexts as well as sophisticated ones, as a move on from French post-structuralism and its (putative) denigrations of vision and textual romancing, and as a problematic of Romanticism. This book doesn't touch on this strong formation. Reference to Luhmann is confined to an incidental footnote and Clemens's own recourse to a (now) laden language of 'redescription' leaves a point in suspension or the mark of an equivocation. All the more so in that at the sensitive 'disaming' end of his first chapter he quotes Abrams's *Natural Supernaturalism*—its proposal that one of the 'prominent developmental patterns' of Romantic thought is 'the self-moving and self-sustaining system . . . represented as a moving system, a dynamic process which is driven by an internal source of motion to its own completion'—in order to take his leave from it as, rather, engaged in 'a project driven by three ex-timate sources of motion to its own in-completion'.<sup>9</sup>

Recent German philosophy has, since Habermas and the passing of that generation, overtly turned to the mathematician and philosopher Willard van Orman Quine and to

Anglo-Saxon analytical philosophy, partly as a sign of its aversion to French theorising of the literary philosophical kind. This fear of *Litereisierung* (hardly logical given the seeming lack of any natural inclination to poetry on the part of most contemporary professional German philosophers) has its performative expression in pedagogic contexts in the USA, and the theatricalisation of a French–German difference is very apparent, in the assimilation of Luhmann’s work—a temptation I find myself giving into in even daring to mention it.

Whatever the terms of Clemens’s own unspeakable or unspoken conditions, and probably because of them, this book is a splendid achievement. Its remarkable theoretical conversance and high philosophical reach make it indispensable for anyone with interests in the history of contemporary theory, recent philosophy and Romantic studies, and certainly for anyone who professes to be really working on the boulevards and in the lounges of cultural studies.

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ROBYN GARDNER writes on relations to science, and of biotechnologies, in cultural theory and philosophy. She is the co-editor of *Mattoid* and editor of the forthcoming issue *Revisions in Romanticism: Memory and History*.  
<rgardner7@bigpond.com.au>

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1. The Yale Gang of Four refers to Geoffrey Hartman, Harold Bloom, Paul de Man and Hillis Miller.
  2. François Dosse, *History of Structuralism*, 2 vols, trans. Deborah Glassman, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1997.

3. Terry Eagleton, *After Theory*, Allen Lane, London, 2003, p. 6.
4. Eric Santner, *Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory, and Film in Post-war Germany*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1990.
5. Dominick LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust: History Theory, Trauma*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1994.
6. Paul de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis/London, 1996.
7. Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F Bouchard, trans. Donald F Bouchard and Sherry Simon, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1977, pp. 137–8.
8. Alain Badiou, *Infinite Thought: Truth and the Return of Philosophy*, trans. and eds Oliver Fetham and Justin Clemens, Continuum, London, 2003.
9. M.H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*, Norton, New York, 1971, p.173; Clemens, p. xvi.