



Robbins, B. (2000). Theory and practice: A tribute to Jeff Williams. *Workplace*, 5, 4-5.

BRUCE ROBBINS

## THEORY AND PRACTICE: A TRIBUTE TO JEFF WILLIAMS

It's a pleasure to recommend Jeff Williams to the readers of *Workplace*. He is himself one of the most eloquent recommenders of our work that we have. In all the hubbub about the state of the humanities in a time of theory and multiculturalism, there are perilously few people who, like Jeff, have been able to speak in a sane, undogmatic, publicly accessible voice about the real gains so-called theory has brought to the meaning of humanistic study, about its continuities with earlier moments and figures, and about the sort of future humanists can look forward to. And all this without losing sight of the ultimate values of our work. On the institutionalization of theory, he is a model of critical good sense: no extremist posturing, lots of attention to the daily realities of university life, yet everything informed by a large, generous vision of the values and possibilities of humanistic study.

Journals have life spans, just as their editors do. *minnesota review* had a long and pretty distinguished run as an organ of New Left opinion and sensibility. I was proud to write for it myself once or twice under Mike Sprinker's editorship, and read it (okay, mainly the book reviews) as regularly as I read any other journal. But when Jeff Williams assumed editorial responsibility in 1992 and took it with him to his first academic job at East Carolina University, *mr* seemed to be winding down. Who could have predicted the spectacular renaissance of the 90s? *mr* has swiftly become the liveliest print journal available on the left offering politically serious argument on professional and institutional questions.

Both the liveliness and the political seriousness should I think be seen as the fruit of Jeff's wisdom in choosing to address professional and institutional questions in the first place, or rather choosing to address them in the spirit he has. The spirit of eternal denial, a moralizing spirit with which the left and traditional humanism are equally familiar, has not been allowed to set the house tone.

Of course there has been room in *mr*'s pages for strong critique of existing institutions, a critique for which there is always good gut-level evidence. Today's younger generation of academic leftists, whose voices Jeff has made exceptional efforts to seek out, has been dramatically shaped by the bad job market, and thus has especially strong reasons to dis-identify with the institutional routines that have set them up for a fall. It's all the more remarkable, therefore, that *mr* has on the whole treated the existence of universities, and even the existence of disciplines and departments, as a reasonably positive thing. The critique has been strong but not, as the saying goes, uncompromising.

The utopian spirit of activism has been balanced (and thereby strengthened) by a cold-eyed analysis of what is practicable within a given context. It has been taken for granted that universities are worth acting in as well as on. There has been less horror at what higher education is by nature than disgust at its current submission to the criteria of corporate profitability, a self-degradation that makes its recent past look relatively good. Another tonal option might have been the amusing but pubescent sarcasm of *The Baffler*, with its arrogant frat-boy unconsciousness of its own privileges. Instead, *mr* has chosen the quiet

acknowledgment of a common (if drastically under-rewarded) investment in a professional ideal, an ideal from which many and perhaps most of *mr's* readers quite rightly draw much of their self-respect even when they draw little in salary. In discussions of the publishing market, theory, celebrity, and even academic labor, the journal has encouraged "professional" to be used as something other than a self-evidently dirty word. It has assumed that the so-called academicization of critical intellectuals is not a fate worse than death. And readers have responded with real enthusiasm.

In giving *minnesota review* this new lease on life, Jeff Williams has also kept it remarkably, even strangely consistent with certain emphases that older subscribers will perhaps remember from Jeff's predecessor and teacher, Michael Sprinker, who died last summer. Those who know Sprinker from his many writings will recognize in *mr's* editorial policy, for example, something of Sprinker's polemical verve and ability to carry on a good argument without either euphemism or low blows. They will recognize his grudging respect for the institutional specificity of the academy and his impatience with political posturing by people who mistook the classroom for the barricades. They will recognize Sprinker's sense of politics as a long-term project, not a form of expressive behavior, and his high, unforgiving standards for all intellectual work, the work of allies very much included. They will recognize his hard-nosed hopefulness.

Most of all, however, Jeff Williams's success in rejuvenating *minnesota review* ought to remind us of another salient aspect of Sprinker's example. We often bemoan the individualism and careerism of the academic profession and the need to invent new forms of collaborative effort. Like unionization, helping to edit a journal is an already existing but most often unheralded form of collaborative effort. Just how collaborative it can be will be evident to anyone who has had the good fortune to be edited by either Michael Sprinker or Jeff Williams. Sprinker's abundant kindness in editing the work of his friends, students, and contributors is legendary, as is the fact that he kept it up after he had transferred *mr* to Jeff, right through the years of his fight against cancer, sacrificing his own diminished time and energy to improve other people's work.

The people who gathered on Cliff Siskin's deck in Stony Brook last summer to pay their respects to Michael testified again and again to Michael's astonishing generosity, as did the emails that flooded in from people around the world whose work Michael had devoted his imagination and knowledge to reshaping. Three pages of single-spaced commentary on a chapter, a week spent tidying up a manuscript, an idea for the title of your book, a sample syllabus for the course you're not sure how to teach... This is not the sort of thing you do in order to see your name in a footnote or alongside others on the Acknowledgments page.

You do it because you feel you are part of a collective project, a community of people who share something more than the desire for a longer CV.

Those who help us reach for that something more, or even to hold its image steady despite our frantic, task-besieged daily lives, deserve both our admiration and our gratitude.

*Bruce Robbins, Rutgers University*