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Legacies of Theory: Introduction

The conference on “Legacies of Theory” was held at the University of Alberta on October 28, 29 and 30, 2004. Jacques Derrida had passed away just a few weeks before on October 8. By the time of the conference, most of the participants were also aware of the first obituaries that were coming out on Derrida and, most notably, that of Emily Eakin in *The New York Times*, whose article, with the title of “The Theory of Everything, R.I.P.,” was hardly meant to be flattering. John Mowitt, who briefly discusses the article in his paper, illustrates well the prejudice of the misinformed public at large as regards thinkers like Jacques Derrida but also the predicament in which theory finds itself today. Our conference became, on the one hand, an occasion to honor the memory of Derrida, on the other, to take stock of the present status of theory and examine the avenues left open to the future of theory.

The number of participants included in the volume are only a part of those who attended the conference. Peggy Kamuf, Tilottama Rajan, Ian Balfour, Ewa Ziarek, Dianne Chisholm, Michael O’Driscoll and Robert Burch also took part but did not send their papers. The papers presented here cover, however, the wide spectrum of interests and positions that characterized the conference. The debate varied from discussions of what constitutes a legacy or legacies of theory to what defines theory and whether theory is still possible and if so “what theory?”, to more practical applications of theory, which is one way that the legacy or legacies of theory take form.

Among the participants there was J. Hillis Miller, the keynote speaker and one of the major living theorists today, and the last of a small number that beside Derrida also included Paul de Man, who passed away in 1983. It

is to their works that most presenters referred back and took their steps from, and whose legacy they wished to preserve and pursue. While most of the conference participants had been their colleagues, students, translators, and/or assiduous readers, each of them embodied in their own right their own legacy in the acknowledgment that the pursuit of this legacy is what they are.

Miller's contribution, "Sovereignty Death Literature Unconditionality Democracy University," sums up well the spirit of the conference, and the function and role of literature, with which we can associate the role of theory. For Miller, the supreme authority of literature, with its right to death, arises in and is an example of democracy. The democratic right is not only to say anything without being responsible, but also the right to question, to interrogate, to criticize but not irresponsibly but in a responsive way to what Miller calls, after Derrida, "le tout autre", the wholly other. This is the term that for Miller binds all these elements together, which individually articulate the role of literature and theory within and without the university.

Miller's paper establishes a theme that can be said to be reflected in various ways, directly or indirectly, in the rest of the papers. Tom Cohen's "Legacies of Theory; or, Grand Central Station" deals with "a tangle of legacies that we call theory" and examines the intricate theoretical relations that bind a critic such as Paul de Man to a predecessor like Walter Benjamin, as well as to his contemporary Jacques Derrida, but also as it involved him in the so-called "de Man affair," which, for Cohen, marks a rift, a rupture within the legacies of theory. Cohen points to the disruptive nature of theory and the violence that it can generate. Legacies of theory, he remarks, "can be quite bloody, cause civil wars, battles and usurpations." Cohen's own position moves toward "cinema" but not in the sense that it is meant today ("the majority of film studies resides in the aesthetic ideology of the visual"), but in the sense identified by Hitchcock as "a site that stands at some point *beyond mourning* — and detaches itself, as its machinal nature warrants, from any personification ultimately." A shift from the ocular centrism of the filmic image to teletechnics in order to awaken present theory from its sleepwalking and anesthetized political past.

The political aspect forgotten by theory resurfaces in the paper by Shaobo Xie "Rememory Reinscription Resignification: Strategies of Decolonization in Chinese Canadian literature," which accounts for the writing on boundaries of Chinese Canadian writers to vindicate and celebrate their cultural hybridity. Their resistance takes the form of an implosion from

within that subverts the cultural and social order they had no choice but accept. This strategy makes possible the opening of new spaces of social-cultural reinscription and negotiation.

Zsuzsa Baross's "The Future of the Present, An Incomplete Reflection" takes up the notion of theoretical legacy by focusing on Derrida's own testimony and his claim that he has not been read properly, with few exceptions, and that he will only be read in the future. But imitation is not the form taken by Derrida's legacy because to do that would be to betray his legacy. Future writing, for Baross, "would be a reading of Derrida that leaps away from the past taking flight from the writing that he hitherto has always been ahead of us, anticipating, planting our every move." For Baross this flight is Derrida's legacy, a confirmation of his faith in a future to come after deconstruction. But Baross goes further in proposing, as Cohen does, a version of cinema which, in her view, "could be the bearer of the thought of the future." Whereas for Cohen, Hitchcock could be said to be the model, for Baross is Godard, who has defined the cinema as "une forme qui pense," a form that thinks. A cinema, therefore, not as representation or narration, rather as what comes to pass in the abyssal gap of an interval that disjoins. A pure effect that flashes up whenever images are effectively brought together by what is commonly known as "montage."

John Mowitt's "Offering Theory" places in perspective *The New York Times*' obituary on Derrida which is also meant as an obituary on the death of theory. As Miller had reconnected literature and death, and explicated the questioning and critical role of literature and theory, Mowitt outlines the implication of the "legacy of theory" as an assignment of responsibility, as a bequeathing the gift of theory. Mowitt explores the nature of the attacks on theory which are not only an attempt to challenge theory but also to sanctify it. This ambivalence is for Mowitt the key to theory which in de Man surfaces as resistance. The recognition of the failure of theory is said to be for de Man an invitation to address the question of teaching no longer understood as a pedagogical practice but as different as interpretation is from "reading." Reading for Mowitt designates that activity through which one encounters what resists theorization. Theory, in other words, is a zone of indistinction not between theory and practice, but between theory and the reading that separates it from itself.

In Andrzej Warminski's "The Future Past of Literary Theory," "reading" receives its fullest and clearest articulation. Warminski draws first a very important if not essential distinction, namely that when we speak of

“theory” we are really speaking of literary theory and the failure to do is an instance of the resistance to theory, the failure to constitute itself as either theory or literary theory. This failure indicates how we should go about studying and teaching literary theory, which consists by inquiring on which linguistic model it is based, or what it defines language or how it works. This can be accomplished whenever literature is read as a text and not as a collection of ideas and concepts. Reading, in fact, does not consist in paraphrasing an argument but in reconstructing the linguistic model that it implies and in demonstrating why it fails or has to fail. As far as teaching is concerned, teaching literary theory as a series of self-deconstructing linguistic models ensures that it teaches the future-past of literary theory and not reduce it to an empty thematic thesis.

The contributions of Christopher Bracken, Karyn Ball and Kir Kuiken can be viewed to a large extent as examples of readings that more or less take into account the implications of reading theory that has been formulated in the previous essays. Bracken’s “The Desire for Reproductions: Hillis Miller’s *Versions of Pygmalion*” is a reading of Miller’s own reading of the Pygmalion story which aims to show that Miller’s “pre-programming of his own deconstruction makes him into a version of his own Pygmalion.” Bracken questions Miller’s use of the Ovidian tale as an illustration of the ethics of reading, since to read Pygmalion could imply a pornography of reading. Ethically for Miller to read is to be responsible for the consequences of the error of taking a figure of speech literally, as in the figure of ekphrasis, the figure of the verbal representation for a visual representation. For Miller to mistake relations between words as relations between things can bring to dire consequences, but Bracken, in a close reading of a passage from Proust, wants to claim that misreading beside being the condition of reading in general is also “the particular kind of reading that we conventionally call love.”

The aim behind Karyn Ball’s “Holocaust Memory and the Inhuman: Traumatic Repetition between Freud and de Man” is to foreground the unconscious dimensions of mourning and to understand the role of compulsive repetition in ameliorating post-traumatic anxiety. She examines the function and role of repetition in Freud as a homeopathic strategy that heals the individual through a controlled introduction of the very pain that poisons him. Ball’s reference to de Man is to his essay on Walter Benjamin on the “Task of the Translator,” and to his insights on the nature of the

signifier as an “impersonal” force in the dismemberment of meaning, which he identifies as a linguistic event independent of any intent or any drive one might have. If de Man’s definition of the inhuman can be said to rule out both the conscious and unconscious dimensions of subjectivity, and therefore the possibility of any psychoanalytic account, his notion of the inhuman can be said to parallel Freud’s configuration of the drives as metapsychological figures for repressed instincts. For Freud, in fact, the drives are at once economic, structural, and *automatic* in character. Their uncanny relentlessness produces the effect of the *inhuman within the human* — the machine, structure, system, or apparatus that subtends the possibility of a unified intention.

Kir Kuiken’s “Between Heidegger and Derrida: On the Impossible Futures of Techne” is a meditation on legacies as the possibility of inheritance where its contingencies are multiple, contested and even contradictory. He asks how it is possible to open something to the future without annulling it in advance through calculation, programming, and so on. “How does one maintain a relation to this ‘impossible’ temporality without making what arrives present itself in the form of full presence?” Kuiken poses the question to Heidegger and Derrida as to whether there is a fundamental scission in the motif of the logic of the “future anterior” in both thinkers. The answer that Kuiken suggests seems to be in the “continuously (self)-dividing border that ‘it’ repeatedly sets between itself and what it makes possible.” In this scission another experience of the impossible announces itself, “*as if fantasized.*” Thus the necessity of a decision, concludes Kuiken, in the name of a deconstruction to come, if there is such a thing, with the promise of an altogether other experience of impossibility.

My reading of de Man’s reading of Kant and Schiller, “Reading de Man on Kant and Schiller,” wants simply to be an explication of the implications of de Man’s essay not only for those present at the conference, which was de Man’s last, but also for us, readers, as well. Beyond the actual analysis that de Man gives of Schiller’s *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, there is the further implication that “we are all Schillerians” when it comes to reading philosophy or philosophers like Kant. I emphasize this last point that for de Man is not only categorical but, given his failing health, also final and, unmistakably, damning for those of us who claim to be readers. Of course, what is really at stake is the study and the teaching of literature and philosophy in the university. Taking up Schiller’s claim of an aesthetic

education, with its Fascist undertones, de Man wants to equate it to present-day university education and to its resistance to theory, and to the possible recriminations and discriminations that more theoretically minded literary theorists are vulnerable to.

And this brings us back to the first paper of this collection, Miller's, and to the notions of death and freedom to question unconditionally in present-day democratic universities. We can hear echoes of Tom Cohen's bloody theory wars, as well as the racism and colonization characterized by Chinese Canadian writers, described by Shaobo Xie. Baross, Mowitt and Warminski point to the precarious aspect of the legacies of theory and the resistance which attends it in displacing and defacing its literary character, while Bracken, Ball and Kuiken in outlining the potential of theory also point to its dangers and limitations. This is the lesson, or lessons, that this collection of papers on the legacies of theory appears to want to teach us. The legacy of theory seems to be forever condemned to be deprived of its literary character just as, according to de Man, our legacy is to be all Schillerians whether we know it or not. And since we seem to have no choice in the matter, perhaps it would be best to live up to this legacy trying to be good Schillerians, at least.

In conclusion, I would like to thank the organizing committee of the conference which consisted, beside me, of Michael O'Driscoll, Karyn Ball and Kir Kuiken and, of course, volunteers from the English and Modern Languages Departments. A thank you to all those who took part in the conference but did not send their contribution. Their legacy, which they shared with us, will be remembered. I would like to also take this opportunity to thank the University of Alberta Conference Fund, the Milan Dimić Institute, the Office of the Vice President Research, and the Departments of English and Modern Languages, and the Comparative Literature Program for their funding assistance. Also a thank you to Dr. Jonathan Hart for accepting to publish our manuscript in CRCL and to his gracious collaborator Dr. Irene Sywenky that helped putting it all together. The errors are my legacy.

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