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Theory Is, Theory Ain't: Resisting Theory

In a report prepared as part of a comprehensive review of Dalhousie's English Department, one of the external reviewers complained that no theory classes were offered in the department and that the one person colleagues described as a "theorist" (and quotation marks were assigned to the word "theorist") said that he would not like to teach a theory-survey class. It is precisely the question of why the "theorist" was reluctant to teach a theory class, why he would resist what would appear to be in his interest to teach, that I wish to address today not only because I happen to be the "theorist" singled out in the report, but, more seriously, because there are important pedagogical issues at stake in the reviewer's quite explicit valorization of theory and my own reluctance to endorse unreservedly such a view. Let me be clear that I am not arguing that theory classes should not be offered by English departments. In fact I think they should. But I also think that too much has been claimed on behalf of theory-only classes and not enough on behalf of those classes in which what generally passes for *theory* (I refer here specifically to poststructuralist or deconstructionist theory) is not seen as providing avant-garde solutions but as remaining part of the very problem it had sought to redress.

Literature, Roland Barthes once remarked, is what gets taught. In other words, literature is that which accredited institutions rather tautologically define and discuss as literature. Similarly, theory is also what gets taught. And, like literature, what gets taught as theory is not the whole story. That is to say, like literature, theory has a history of institutional,

canonical and political formation. Theory is an event, a historical conjuncture and, as such, it is a strategic socio-cultural formation, not some fundamental or necessary principle. And if theory's status is thus only strategic, then it is incumbent on us to refuse or resist theory if only in order to remind it of its practical rather than philosophical or ontological underpinnings. To put it simply, theory is part of a wider, contested socio-cultural field and not the central principle which governs the field or, in its deconstructive version, the non-principle which nonetheless authoritatively dissolves the field into so many rhetorical or figurative effects.

A quick examination of theory's etymology reveals the presence of socio-cultural and political forces in the formation of the privileged, authoritative discourse we call theory. The word *theory* has its origins both in "the Greek verb *theorin* [sic], to look at, gaze, contemplate, survey, and in the Greek noun *theoria*, the group of representatives who oversaw and functioned as authoritative witnesses of public occurrences and sacred events" (Kreiswirth and Cheetham 2). The Greek work *theoria* thus insists that authoritative knowledge is entrusted by the *polis* to a specially chosen group of representatives (from whose ranks are excluded women and slaves), thereby clearly foregrounding the institutional or political nature of theory's authority. It is this institutional or political authority of theory that is elided when theory is invoked as that radical, anti-authoritarian discourse much feared and resisted by conservative academic institutions.

The resistance I would like to mount against theory must be distinguished from the resistance offered by conservative academics. It is not theory's subversiveness I fear, but rather its claim to authority and centrality, its ambition to be seen as the only game worth playing in town. I also think that the late Paul de Man's insistence on theory's perpetual resistance to itself, spelled out most clearly in his now classic essay, "The Resistance to Theory," results paradoxically in the conversion of that perpetual resistance into an authoritative and inescapable theory, "the universal *theory* of the impossibility of theory." "Nothing can overcome the resistance to theory," de Man claims, "since theory is itself this resistance" (19). Subjecting his own theoretical discourse to a critique, de Man rescues and elevates it by distinguishing its corrosive but nonetheless redemptive self-resistance from other theories that undergo

no such self-critique. Self-resistance thus allows for self-mastery in de Man's case. The humbling admission of the impossibility of theory yields a theory so sceptically pure and self-negating that no other theories can violate it. De Man's argument that theory always resists itself, and, therefore, by implication, that his own theoretical discourse will resist itself, distinguishes the self-awareness of his discourse from that of other theorists. Starting out as a rejected essay, "The Resistance to Theory" ends by superseding the MLA's Committee on Research Activities (the body that commissioned and then rejected de Man's essay), the New Critics, and a distinguished list of contemporary theorists for its own strenuous and original distinction.

As de Man's example demonstrates, privileging the resistance *in* theory may be as much an act of critical deconstruction as it is a reconfiguration of critical authority. Moreover, if theory is resistance and resistance increasingly a cultural value that commands attention, then we can begin to understand why theory's reputed powers of resistance should prove to be so attractive and so much in demand. Displacing established critical discourses, theory's resistance is also innovative and productive and, hence, in the North American academic marketplace which is constantly on the lookout for new products, theory becomes a valuable commodity. The black feminist critic Barbara Christian has observed rather bitterly that theorists and theories have elbowed out writers and literary works and that this "new takeover" has elevated theory into "a commodity which helps determine whether we are hired or promoted in academic institutions—worse, whether we are heard at all" (51-52). That theory has become a mainstream academic commodity is further borne out by the increasing number of job advertisements which require applicants to be versed in theory and by the urgent demands of graduate students who realize that they need a class in theory, that they need to know their Derrida and their Lyotard if they are to remain competitive in the job market. I think it is important to be honest on this point: we can no longer complain that theory is kept out of literature departments by a cabal of conservative elders, and that, at least since the mid-1980s when J. Hillis Miller ratified "The Triumph of Theory" in his Presidential Address to the MLA, theory has been more sought after than denied.

I don't want to single out theory as the only academic discourse that is susceptible to commodification. I am even prepared to admit that short

of a radical transformation of our capitalist society, the logic of commodification controls us all. But I would like to suggest, in a Ralph Naderish manner, that theory has not served its consumers well. One can devote many pages analyzing why what passes for theory in North American literature departments has failed to serve its constituency, but here I would like to describe just two of theory's major shortcomings.

First, theory has been *accommodated* far too easily and comfortably into the existing area-coverage structures of literature departments. Theory when it actually enters the literature curriculum enters as a specifically marked and demarcated theory class, enrolment in which allows one to say that one has covered theory. Moreover, theory-specific classes, more often than not, are organized as a series of readings of great theorists or significant schools of theory. As Kim Ian Michasiw, in a recent *English Studies in Canada* special issue on "The Canon and the Curriculum," points out:

[T]heory courses tend to be taught in a History of Ideas mode rather than in terms of methods and applications. This approach tends to perpetuate theory's oppositional stance, to comfort instructors needing reassurance that they are not the hegemonic centre, and to suggest to students that theory exists to solve problems rather than to pose them. Too often theory courses are mounted as truths that have been suppressed in more traditional courses. Nothing is more traditional in academic discourse, however, than instructorial dissemination of great thinkers' grand truths. Which has left us with the odd situation of a highly canonized body of theorists—the same names invoked again and again—coexisting with the anti-canonical movement regarding literary texts. (413)

There is, therefore, a very real danger that theory will become "just another major," that is to say, just another academic discipline in which the inquirer's political position and investment are obscured and the object of inquiry naturalized and thus neutralized (see Rooney 23). In addition to transforming theory's putative radicalism into the academic retailing of radical ideas, theory-specific classes also tend to support rather than question the separate development logic of curricula based on area-coverage. Such a logic of separate development, as Russell Perkin has pointed out, allows theory "a room to work, but [refuses] its proposal to remodel the architecture of the department." As a result, theory classes ironically work against their own interests since by arrogating theory to

themselves they make it easier for other classes not to have to account for their own theoretical status. Or, to put it another way, to increase theory's participation in an expanded field of cultural and historical studies, it may be necessary to stop offering theory-specific classes.

Theory's second major shortcoming lies in its effective *decontextualization* of the objects it studies. Here again a certain irony ought to be noticed. Theory's radical reputation is in part due to its critique of the tyranny of totalizing discourses that exclude or repress differences. But while theory's sensitivity to alterity is to be applauded, its privileging of difference often succumbs to fetishization, to a repeated and monologic insistence on the otherness of the Other. This relentless valorization of otherness can result in a massive decontextualization as historically specific, culturally localized and politically urgent discourses are assimilated into theory's single allegory of difference. As Rajeswari Mohan, in a critique of poststructuralist/postmodernist theory's appropriation of post-colonial materials, puts it:

Social contradiction becomes ambiguity or deferral; dialogic contestation becomes arbitrary juxtaposition, play, or collage; and interrogation of politically interested narratives becomes self-reflexivity. The political gets aestheticized and resistance becomes a fashionable gesture. (37)

Threatening to open up the institution of literature to questions concerning the uneven distribution of cultural and political power, theory has more often than not ended up reducing the historical, cultural and political context and contest into the elegant textual aporias it so rigorously uncovers everywhere. Theory can thus be imperiously blind in its conversion of political strategies into epistemological puzzles. By elevating aporia over empowerment, theory risks alienating itself from feminist and minority movements for whom philosophical struggles have to be always related to political locations and constituencies. One way of leading theory back to its more radical insights may be to resituate its epistemological or philosophical concerns in a wider socio-cultural field. Thus, instead of asking, "Is there theory in this class?" it may be more productive to ask, "Is there class in this theory?"

In conclusion, I hope my remarks are not construed as some kind of covert conservative backlash against theory; if anything they should be seen as an attempt to remind ourselves that the ascendancy of theory as

we know it in the Reagan/Bush/Thatcher/Mulroney era, that is, theory as the almost fetishistic fixation on textual reflexivity and allegorized alterity, can be interpreted as a retreat from and a backlash against the admittedly imperfect political activism and Utopian ideals of the 1960s. It would be foolish to deny the achievements of theory; but it would be equally foolish to give theory the last word. As Edward Said points out: "Theory we certainly need. . . . What we also need over and above theory, however, is the critical recognition that there is no theory capable of covering, closing off, predicting all the situations in which it might be useful" (241). Returning to my opening remarks, I welcome the quotation marks the external reviewer assigned to the word "theorist" since it captures perfectly my own ambivalent but, I trust, critically productive view of theory. Or, to put it more succinctly—echoing the strategic open-endedness of the Afro-American sermon that goes "Black is, black ain't"—"Theory is, theory ain't" (see Julien 255-57).

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