

## RESPONSIBLE READING OF THEORY\*

### *Para uma leitura responsável da Teoria*

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#### ABSTRACT

Theory (with a capital T) has become a sensitive point in literary studies. In this paper, firstly, we present a characterization of Theory as genre by investigating its fundamental contradictions, its experiential ground and its symbolic functions. Subsequently, we approach the risks that Theory presents to itself. Finally, we propose two strategies of reading responsibly which modify Theory without falling in its traps.

**KEYWORDS:** Theory; reading responsibly; post-critique.

#### RESUMO

A Teoria (com T maiúsculo) tornou-se um ponto nevrálgico nos estudos literários. Apresenta-se, neste trabalho, primeiramente, uma caracterização da Teoria como gênero, ao investigar-se suas contradições fundamentais, seu terreno de atuação empírica e suas funções simbólicas. Em seguida, abordam-se os riscos que a Teoria apresenta a si mesma. Finalmente, são propostas duas estratégias de leitura responsável que modificam a Teoria sem cair em suas armadilhas.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Teoria; leitura responsável; pós-crítica.

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In the last fifteen years or so literary studies have been passing through a radical process of self-questioning. Differently from former waves of change, at stake today is not just a matter of new trends – not new concepts, movements, or even areas – but rather a full reconsideration of the very foundations of the discipline. It's not that, say, “multitude” replaces “différance”, or that suddenly post-colonialism appears sharper and more powerful than new historicism; nor is one concerned about which noun will next precede that curious particle “studies”: a dispositive that transforms contents into fields. Instead, critics are challenging basic methodological issues, most clearly identified in recent considerations of reading and critique as *practices*. As we know, opposing the conception of the former as “close” and “deep” there are now calls for “distant”, “surface”, “casual”, and “with-the-grain” reading. As for critique, the proposal is for an overcoming, even if a strategic or non-belligerent one, through what has

been termed “post-critique.”<sup>1</sup> These are reformulations that can significantly alter the whole edifice of literary studies, with implications that go beyond everyday practice in the classroom to involve institutional setups and the social legitimacy of literary study. In sum, then, we have to do here with nothing less than a thorough reshaping of the self-representation of literary studies.

I propose that we approach this heated and potentially exasperating debate by way of a detour, which at the same time is a return, namely to the problem of Theory, properly capitalized for reasons that will be explained below. If we agree that the present crisis has its roots in the challenges Theory posed to literary study, canon formation, and the notion of culture in the 1970s-2000s, then it makes good sense to reassess theoretical discourse to ask what a responsible reading of Theory today might be. My intention is to evade the controversy spurred by such volumes as Corral and Patai’s *Theory’s Empire* (2005), which tend to organize the discussion in always the impoverishing opposition between accusers and defenders. My first contention, then, is that the present crisis paradoxically furnishes a propitious opportunity to rethink Theory with the benefit of hindsight regarding its unfulfilled promises, and of foresight in relation to what current alternatives seem to project for the future. A responsible reading of Theory must avoid the two most obvious paths, those of proposing either an alternative to Theory, or its sheer continuation, pretending nothing serious is really happening. This third way must displace the opposition of the new vs. the same, an objective I think we can achieve if we think of Theory as a *genre*. This chapter is an initial step in that direction. It is divided into three parts: a) a conceptual frame to characterize Theory as genre by investigating its founding contradiction, experiential ground, discursive rearrangements, material support, and symbolic function; b) the risks Theory presents to itself; and finally c) two reading strategies for reading Theory responsibly, maintaining it, but with a change. Of course, this framework should not be taken as exhaustive, but rather as an exercise, in both senses of the word, of theoretical imagination.

## I

Let’s start with a still common form of reading: Bakhtin without Dostoyevsky and Rabelais, Deleuze without Proust and Kafka, Derrida without Rousseau (and many others), Lacan without Freud, Freud without Sofocles. . . . It won’t do to assume a moralist posture – “our students (or colleagues!) don’t read literature anymore”; it is much more fruitful to accept as a fact that for many scholars, students and even non-academics theory has an appeal of its own, above and beyond the objects it might be supposed to explain. Publishing houses have long realized this, as I first became aware many years ago as I saw a German edition of *Elective Affinities* in which the text of the novel preceded Walter Benjamin’s essay like an introduction, a secondary text. Or, more recently, when I found Foucault’s complete works edited by Gallimard’s *Bibliothèque de La Pléiade*, in the same collection with Racine, Baudelaire or Proust (needless to say, I bought them all, Goethe – or was it Benjamin? – and Foucault). The most obvious case is the *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, which extends to theorists the whole scholarly

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\* This text was originally written for the book *Modernism, Theory and Responsible Reading: A Critical Conversation*, organized by Stephen Ross and scheduled to be published by the end of 2021 by Bloomsbury Publishing. This explains why “responsible” and “responsibility” are not defined from scratch here, since they are discussed throughout the volume.

1 Some of the relevant sources here include Latour (2004), Best & Marcus (2009), Bewes (2010), Potts (2015), Felski (2015), Anker and Felski (2017), Saint-Amour (2018).

approach normally reserved to the literary monuments of the past. Here each author has their own biographical introduction, bibliographic set of references (quite often commentary of commentary), and footnotes which frequently feel strained: by explaining what seems unnecessary or irrelevant they give the impression of just fulfilling a formal role, of being there to justify anthologization and the philological treatment of critics.<sup>2</sup> There are, then, abundant signs that theory has lost its supposed ancillary role, its status as a subordinate discourse whose primordial mission would be to elucidate a given text. So here is a first idea, not so much a discovery as an observation of a state of affairs, though one that has not received as much attention as it deserves, namely that *theory has passed through a process of (semi) autonomization and increasing self-sufficiency and self-referentiality*.

I hate parentheses expressing ambiguity, but in the case of theory's (semi) autonomy they are unavoidable. On the one hand, as was already mentioned, Theory seems often enough to be impatient with objects. How many articles have you read in which you feel that the whole impetus of the writing is to employ as many times as possible one or more buzz notions? To use the Russian Formalists's term, reality becomes the motivation of the device for terminological innovation – as for instance the impression one has at times that for Žižek the world exists to explain Lacan. On the other hand, no matter how independent theory may aim to be, it never manages to become really intransitive: theory is always theory of something. Much of Theory's controversial character arises from this impasse resulting from the drive towards autonomy, which we will see is not devoid of reason, and its impossible concretization.

Let's agree that for a new genre to emerge at least two conditions must be fulfilled: one paradigmatic and the other syntagmatic. No new genre can take shape without connections to determinate forms of experience, which it then helps solidify and make visible. On the other hand, no new genre can become consistent without borrowing from already existing ones, rearranging their contents in new configurations. In order to approach the former one must characterize Theory historically, which is indeed a thorny problem, given the potential suppleness of the object. For Rodowick (2014), theory can be traced back all the way to ancient Greece, while the essays collected by Herman (2004) occupy the opposite point of the spectrum by linking specific theoretical trends to quite punctual historical occurrences. An intermediary case is that of North's political history (2017), which associates the current crisis of literary studies to a prevalence of scholars over critics in a tension that has followed the incorporation of literature in the university since the nineteenth century (the distinction is discussed by Graff, 2007). As with a number of other fluid objects, periodization here is best conceived as part of the object it analyzes: the validity of its temporal structuring should be judged together with the cogency of its analysis.

The story I would like to propose starts with the social transformations of postwar Europe, especially France, and which include three main elements: the emergence of a generation whose ties with its immediate past were severed; a remarkable expansion of the educational system, especially at the university level, and including the humanities; and a new level of the commodification of culture, allowing consolidation of the high-culture culture industry. From this conjuncture arose a new kind of intellectual, quite different from the philosopher and the *homme de lettres* (KAUPPI, 1996): the theorist. At first identified with structuralism, the theorist claimed to speak in the name of science,

2 Not to mention the fact that the introductions to each theorist seem to lose critical sharpness as we get closer to the present.

could have a conflict-laden relationship to existing academic institutions, but would not shy away from speaking to a general audience. An avant-garde ethos, too, helped give a sense of momentous novelty and change to theory's pronouncements. *Tel Quel's* case is paradigmatic here: founded by young privileged writers in their mid-twenties,<sup>3</sup> the journal was immensely successful. It was never associated to academic institutions, which were spurned, though a considerable part of its sales were due to university libraries' subscriptions, and its successive phases were always ushered in with a feeling of urgency and beginning from scratch.

All of this is to say that there was a *cultural substratum* or structure of feeling if you want, in which theory thrived and which it also reinforced. Ideas were not just things one organized into arguments; instead, they invited ways of being and of interacting with other people. Take *écriture*, for instance: it was not just a term in an intellectual debate, nor was it a simple tool for understanding reality. Rather, it was a concept with a promise, a harbinger of a possible reconfiguration of the world, joining language, desire and economy in the same term. Again, in however attenuated and modified a fashion, theory carried on something of an avant-garde, perhaps even revolutionary ethos. As a living illustration of this, we can turn to the narrative Philipp Felsch tells of Peter Gente, the founder of Merve Verlag, in his *Der lange Sommer der Theorie* (2016). In its summer, "Theorie war mehr als einer Folge bloßer Kopfgedanken; sie war ein Wahrheitsanspruch, ein Glaubensartikel und ein Lifestyle-Accessoire" (p. 12); Merve's founders and their friends saw themselves before anything as impassioned readers, and theirs "war nicht nur ein Verlag, sondern ein Lektürgruppe und eine Fangemeinde – kurz: ein Rezeptionszusammenhang". (p. 19) In sum, then, for a considerable time, editing books couldn't be described as a job, not even as work properly speaking, for it seemed to represent an adventure with new ways of unveiling and imagining the world. Even though universities functioned as catalysts, bringing people together, the decisive aspect was that ideas appeared to broaden one's horizon of experience at the same time that they elucidated reality: cafés, restaurants and bars vied with auditoria. It's no coincidence that this period witnesses the emergence of the paperback theory book, like Seuil and Suhrkamp's *Theorie* series, and Merve's. The paperback theory book is particularly revealing: as a small and cheap object it can be carried and read anywhere. It's not the kind of book you read in the library, but in a park, train or study group. More than that, it desacralizes the book as a vehicle of knowledge. To conclude, and to play it low, let's agree that theory was at very least *exciting*.<sup>4</sup>

The discussion so far helps us formulate some hypotheses regarding the textual rearrangements effected by theory as a genre. The main one is that theory has been converted into a problematically separate realm by demarcating a space which is strictly speaking neither that of philosophy nor that of literary criticism anymore, even though it is closer to the latter and may seem indistinguishable from it. In relation to philosophy, theory downplays the role of tradition and of history. Individual philosophers are dealt with on their own, without recourse to the long succession of answers to

3 "Indeed, the arrogance of youth was their major asset. These rebellious *fils à papa* had nothing to lose and everything to gain. Sons of generals and industrialists, educated at home in prestigious *grandes écoles* and abroad at Oxford, they had acquired their haughtiness through an upper-class upbringing, elitist education, and entrepreneurial training." (MARX-SCOURAS, 1996, p. 2)

4 Focusing on the cultural aspect of Theory opens a new analytical perspective. Take conceptual neologisms, for instance: they not only try to designate unthought-of objects, but also provide the vehicle for the strengthening of collective ties and intersubjective identification.

fundamental philosophical questions. Once concepts are wrenched from the long conversation that constituted them, they acquire something of a prêt-à-porter character, the possibility of being easily mobilized in new situations and for new objects. As far as theory is concerned, breaking up traditions, both the philosophical and the literary, is as unavoidable and structural as the number of hours of study are limited.<sup>5</sup> Important here for the mediation between philosophy and criticism was the emergence of language as the central theoretical problem, which allowed for a relatively smooth inclusion of philosophers and literary scholars in a common ground, and which was only further reinforced by a renewed central role assigned to literary works in philosophical reflection. In relation to literary criticism, the main transformation brought about by theory, as has been suggested already, lies in the primacy given to conceptual elaboration in textual analysis, which now becomes much more sophisticated and productively self-conscious.

The formation of a culture of theory was an important factor for its rise as a genre; another one was its institutionalization in the academy, which redirected and reshaped such culture. Only after theory fully entered the university did it make sense to refer to it with a capital “T” to mark its conversion into a field of inquiry, however nebulous, self-contradictory and self-denying it may conceive itself to be.

If in France and Germany theory thrived in a public sphere in tandem with the university, when it travelled to the Anglophone world it only reached a broader audience after it was institutionalized. This doesn't mean that it lost its capacity to excite and captivate – which incidentally reminds how porous the university can be. The academic circumstances were however different; even if it dislodged philosophy, theory in Europe remained closely related to it; after crossing the Atlantic however, it found hostile departments of analytical philosophy which encouraged its assimilation in English and Comparative Literature departments. The centrality structuralism assigned to language found a happy complement in the Anglo-Saxon practice of close reading. Theory's culture here spilled over the academy's walls and influenced larger circles; two telling examples will have to suffice here. First, as Ryan (2012) shows, Theory provided conceptual *topoi* which inspired literary creation. Second, as Cousset (2003) illustrates, Theory quickly exerted a powerful influence in the American pop culture industry, exemplified in Woody Allen's “*Deconstructing Harry* (1997) sorti en français sous le titre *Harry dans tous ses états*, parce que le verbe ‘déconstruire’ ne dit rien qui vaille aux spectateurs français” (p. 119).<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the culture of Theory in the Anglophone world became a means for conceptualizing one's group and identity. To the excitement of explaining the world was added the revelation of finding one's self and tribe, not to mention the liberating possibility of converting sex into an object of reflection and academic discussion. On the other hand, however, after becoming firmly rooted in the North-American academic system, Theory was exported to the whole world, coalescing something close to a lingua franca, a set of common references that may even surpass literature's in its cohesion. This boomerang effect produced some uncanny returns in Europe as well, for instance when students read Spivak without knowing of Derrida. Even more fascinating is experiencing the mixture of

5 It would be interesting to do a quantitative study with graduate students and professors to find out how much time is devoted to theoretical and literary works. At the very least it seems safe to say dividing one's energy into literature and theory has become a necessity and frequently a source of anxiety about how to dispose of one's time.

6 Meanwhile, here in Brazil “desconstrução” was adopted in political discourse to mean “prove the other wrong, showing their bad faith”.

both in a peripheral country like mine, like Brazil, where, say, the French and the Anglophone Deleuze inhabit the same institutional space with sometimes very stimulating misunderstandings.

But a new genre does more than just convert a certain content, the experiential substratum mentioned above, into form, the rules governing its functioning; it may also be viewed as expressing some underlying collective concern, in which case it can be approached as a symptom. One of Theory's most basic and crucial concepts is that of "text"; its initial structuralist formulation survived subsequent criticism and even today maintains wide currency in virtually all theoretical trends from deconstruction to post-colonial criticism and cultural studies. So let's revisit Barthes' seminal 1971 "De l'oeuvre au texte" (1994). This quasi-manifesto is structured according to the binary opposition between the two nouns of the title. It is composed of seven "propositions" which deal with the following topics: method, genres, the sign, the plural, filiation, reading and pleasure. The contradiction between the content of the concept of text and its *Darstellung* is striking, as has been generations of readers' blindness to it, but even more revealing is the degree to which the text needs such binarism to stand on its own. The "work" is a "notion traditionnelle [...], newtonienne" (p. 1211), "un fragment de substance" (p. 1212), "se ferme sur un signifié" (1213), "est prise dans un processus de filiation (p. 1214), "est [... ] l'objet d'une consommations" (p. 1215), the knowledge it yields is "assez triste" (p. 1216) – and so on. The exercise is worth trying: when one imagines the text without the counterweight of the work, the difficulty becomes apparent as the argument seems to float and acquire a dreamlike character. Thus the intriguing reversal in the fact that the "text" is most productive when it is not taken on its own, but wrenched from the readerly work – which is not a bad definition of *S/Z*. There is something close to a performative paradox here in that the (great) interpretative insights take place in the backcloth of the work's limitations. On the other hand, no empirical object would be able to fulfill what is expected from the text, the libidinal energy invested in it, not even *Finnegans Wake*<sup>7</sup>. The fact that the text is not a real object allows us to posit that it fulfills a *compensatory role*, that it is supposed to offer something that existing culture is not capable of. From an Anglo-Saxon, anthropological sense of culture, the cohesion of a human group through a shared set of symbolic codes and practices, we move to the old-fashioned German one of *Kultur*, something that points beyond the sheer reproduction of existence. Barthes' case lets us glimpse now Theory can embody a yearning for something other, for a "more" that seems to be denied to existing culture. The leap is certainly a huge one, but even so I would like to argue that such a compensatory role is extensive to Theory as whole: meaning here, together with the power of elucidation it performatively brings about, ends up fulfilling the role expressing wonder in its own articulation.<sup>8</sup>

7 This is how Jonathan Culler puts it: "While opposing work and text, Barthes refuses to let text and work be concepts that operate at the same level or in the same way. One consequence of this is that while Barthes' account of the distinctions helps students find *du Texte* in older works, it does not help much dealing with avant-garde works, which always fall short of the radical ideal and which are not much illuminated by accounts showing them to fall short. His insistence that the move to *text* is not just a methodological shift but that there are indeed works (which sometimes contain *du texte*) makes the idea of the text seem something of a fetish, an ideal object so radical and disruptive that no actual discourse is adequate to the idea (while of course *works* really do exist)." (2007, p. 108-109)

8 It would be interesting to think Barthes' libidinal-aesthetic investment in theory with his utter blindness, throughout his chameleonic career, vis-à-vis the concept of culture industry in Adorno & Horkheimer's sense.

## II

This discussion of the text as production can serve as a transition to the risks Theory poses to itself. Let's first investigate how Theory's contradictory transitivity generates its own temporal complications by going back again to the formative moment of structuralism: Gerard Genette's "Poétique et histoire", a lecture given at Cerisy-la-Salle in 1969, and published in *Figures III* in 1972. The text's main idea is that system and history can be reconciled once structures have been sufficiently studied so that they could be mapped out in time. Never mind the unfeasibility of the project – structures are too mobile, are too much embedded in time to be fixed – what is relevant to us here is this introductory observation:

Je me souviens d'avoir répondu ici même il y a trois ans à Jacques Roger que, du moins en ce qui concerne la critique dite 'formaliste', cet apparent refus de l'histoire n'était en fait qu'une mise entre parenthèses provisoire, une suspension méthodique, et que ce type de critique (que l'on appellera sans doute plus justement *théorie de forms littéraires* – ou, plus brièvement, *poétique*) me paraissait voué, plus qu'aucun autre peut-être, à rencontrer un jour l'histoire sur son chemin. Je voudrai essayer maintenant de dire brièvement pourquoi, et comment. (p. 13)

The refusal of history is just a "provisional parenthesis," a "methodological suspension" that will be resolved by means of a new theory. This gesture is by no means particular, and can be found in countless other texts in the 60s and 70s, but it suffices to illustrate that figure typical to Theory, to use a term by the same Genette, of prolepsis: a projection to the future under the guise of a new name. Allusions to a completion in a foreseeable time abound in structuralism, which is perhaps natural given its ambition to unify the humanities in one single overarching scientific framework. This project was of course not realized, nor, one is led to think, could it possibly be, but it is interesting to note how it legitimized concept-formation. Proposing new terms and categories for literary analysis was justified in view of a coming fulfillment of the theory, which in turn was supported by the novel concept. In structuralism, presentism was a force only of submitting the past to new reading codes, but also of conjuring the future in a dream of fulfillment.

The desire for an all-embracing general theory was soon criticized and abandoned (though it would be fruitful to investigate its metamorphosed survival in the present), but the orientation towards the future persisted. Theoretical elaborations now point to their achievement as application, in what can be viewed as a promise: learn this new concept and your interpretative problems will be solved. Without a doubt number of theories, say Bloom's anxiety of influence or Moretti's distant reading, have been adopted and explored in different objects, but what is misleading about this promise is that it ignores that *the really productive (and exciting) moment is that of its formulation itself*. Applications are as rule derivative if not quite tedious.<sup>9</sup> No theory without the promise of a broader scope of validity than itself; no interesting theory when such extension is realized. Or to put it differently, the possibility of innovation is paid by forfeiting the future. Incidentally, this confers a new meaning, not deprived of irony, on that deconstructive conceptual suffix "to come".<sup>10</sup>

9 Notice that this doesn't prevent them from being academically valid. What the university requires of research is that new knowledge be created, not necessarily interesting knowledge.

10 The future can also be found in theoretical discourse as an explicit preoccupation, sometimes not with the best results. Leitch (2008) starts his book with the metaphor of the futures market to ascertain the Theory's posterity; the semantic field of capital, however, is infamously used in a totally neutral, descriptive fashion.

Theory's curious temporal structure leads us back again to the question of its relationship to production, now in relation to the neoliberal university, for whose *modus operandi* it seems to be strangely well suited.<sup>11</sup> In the first place, Theory speeds up the turnover of papers and books. Instead of having to master the historical sedimentation of a long-standing field, supported by old categories and the tradition of accumulated readings that give it unity, the critic can now confront a given corpus with a new concept, which as it were resets the whole debate. A more drastic case is that of *ad hoc* corpora that do not fit any preexisting a disciplinary area; to be sure, new configurations of objects can be very interesting and exciting, but when the practice becomes an ethos in itself and the new is converted into an abstract value, something close to the logic of fashion is established. And let's remark in passing that the stricture against Theory regarding its often aggressive posture in debunking arguments, something defenders of post-critique are keen to point out, may at least in part be accounted for by the current competitive academic milieu. Theory's adaptation to university Darwinism in a context of the shrinking of tenured positions is not a fateful one, and could very well vanish under different institutional conditions.<sup>12</sup>

Another aspect of Theory's elective affinity to production is the division of labor it helps establish. The other side of Theory's lightness and connection to the experience of world is its association to use. No matter how abstract – or better, the *more* abstract and general, the greater the possibility for application, however mediated and indirect, to the most varied realms of objects. The rise of Theory brought to the realm of culture (I was almost writing the sphere of Spirit) the semantic field of manufacture, comprising four levels. If cultural manifestations can be regarded as raw materials in need of explanation, criticism processes them producing consumer goods; literary theory in a strict sense, concerned as it was with different ways to bring intelligibility to large group of artifacts, would fabricate durable goods; Theory, finally, corresponds to capital goods, since it produces interpretative machines.<sup>13</sup> Not surprisingly, these different levels are not just superposed by, but end up erecting a hierarchy of their own, which then reconfigures the academic ladder, the producers of reading machines now occupying the higher positions. Attempts at *overcoming* won't work precisely because of Theory's affinity to production: they can only reproduce Theory's logic, if less persuasively. "Post", "new", "after", "beyond" are conceptual particles which took shape together with the consolidation of Theory (note: pronouncing its death won't be effective either).

11 There is no space here to develop the argument, but the point would be that the privileging on research and its quantification at the expense of teaching is at the basis of the current erosion of an emphatic idea of university. Without the obsession with measurement, fierce competition would be impossible, as well as the penalties ensuing from losing. It is always sane to remember that some of the most important intellectual and academic practices are hardly countable.

12 See here, e.g., Ginsberg (2011) and Donoghue (2008).

13 In my *Teoria (literária) americana* (2010), I situate the Theory's productivism in the context of unequal international exchanges. In the same way that technology is conceived at the center of the world's capitalist system and then exported to the periphery, so new conceptual elaborations (the concept as the machine of thinking) are imported by marginal countries. In Brazil, theories are normally explained or applied, seldom evaluated through metatheory; moreover, concepts and theories as only rarely proposed (Roberto Schwarz is a happy exception here). This is particularly embarrassing in the case of elucidations of puns in foreign languages and the lack of daring to theorize what one's native tongue offers. Imagine the field day Lacan would have with the identity of "I speak" (*falo*) and "phallus" (*falo*), or Heidegger with two verbs for being (*ser* and *estar*).



All this brings us to the problem of method, an exceedingly thorny one. I have never managed to think of a method for the study of literature except for a quite simple three-stage process of a) inhabiting (to avoid “penetrating” or “immersing yourself”) the object as much as you can, b) having ideas, c) confronting these ideas with what has been written on the object (and repeating the cycle if need be). This may seem banal, which of course it is, but when compared to much of the usual practice it becomes strangely liberating. For very often Theory functions as ready-made methodology, furnishing pre-prepared conceptual tools and argumentative gestures for textual analyses. The exercise in theory classes of adopting a reading position (supported by a plethora of manuals and critical editions) at the same time that it transmits content restrains the critical imagination. To be sure, there are some movements of thought (the dialectic reversal, the deconstructive inversion of binary oppositions, the formation of constellations etc.) that compose the backbone of reflection’s actions, but these cannot be taught in a traditional way (imagine an exam: your categorical progression deserves a B+), but must rather be apprehended, as we’ll see in a moment, mimetically.

The intelligent reader (yes, you) will have noticed that I have been trying to articulate a forcefield surrounding Theory, which comprises positive and negative elements in tension and which tries to mediate between Theory and processes outside it. To argue that Theory be considered a genre, rather than a field or a discursive formation, represents an attempt to solve the question of its complicated thrust for autonomization and the resulting problems of instrumentalization and neoliberal productivity. If a discursive formation is characterized by its capacity to generate language, whereas a field is unthinkable without a belief in its progression, the idea of genre eschews the representation of Theory as a machine, by converting its problematic semi-autonomy into a formal trait.

This permits that we propose a twofold conclusion. In the first place, we can ask in what measure, if at all, the recent reformulations of reading and critique mentioned in the beginning will aspire to or unwittingly replicate the logic of (semi) autonomy. If the answer is in the negative, the risk will be of falling on a well-behaved but unexciting academicism. A positive reply, on the other hand, would have to show how all the negative aspects referred to might be avoided. Such a question is far from rhetorical, but here (at the end of the chapter!) is not the place to handle it. The more fitting task at this point is ahead is a different one, namely, assuming that Theory may still be recuperated, that it ought not be thrown in the trashcan of academic-critical history, how are we to still read it, acknowledging all the problems identified so far, and even granting that more promising alternatives might be looming ahead?

### III

What would it mean, then, to read Theory responsibly? Surrounding the adverb there is a subtle but emphatic distinction to be made, for when looking closely enough one can find in the word an ambiguity in transitivity. To be responsible in a good (I almost said responsible) sense is transitive: responsibility *towards* something, more precisely towards a kernel in that something that calls for responsibility. As this transitive impulse weakens and “to be responsible” begins to appear as a trait, and consequently a possession, responsibility acquires questionable moral shades. From what has been discussed so far, we can gather that a responsible reading of Theory would be one that would at the same time preserve Theory’s creativity, at least provisionally evade the dilemma of its (semi) autonomy, and shun its crippling effects in fostering productivism and pre-formatting interpretation.

I would like to propose two reading strategies, which perhaps they can be viewed as forming a dialectics of objectification: first, an *unproductive* reading of Theory from a utilitarian viewpoint, reading as an end in itself and for its own sake. Why does theory have to serve a purpose? Why can't it be just appreciated? Indeed, a non-instrumental approach allows us to imagine a fruitful relationship of Theory through its de-objectification in forgetfulness. Daniel Heller-Roazen's amazing *Echolalias* affords an instructive example in this regard. The book contains 21 small chapters in which forgetting in language is exposed as a highly active force, not the cause of loss but an agent of change. One of the work's merits lies in its refusal to provide a conclusion or a detached view of the cases it describes, which nevertheless beg for extrapolation. This silence becomes telling once we realize that there is progress in the unfolding of forgetting, which starts with phonemes, moves to literary and philosophical works, and the psyche, to reach theology in the end. Particularly instructive in our context is the chapter, "A Tale of Abū Nuwās", which tells how eighth-century Arabo-Persian Nuwās became a poet. The story deserves to be quoted in full:

Abū Nuwās asked Khalaf for permission to compose poetry, and Khalaf said: "I refuse to let you make a poem until you memorize a thousand passages of ancient poetry, including chants, odes and occasional lines." So Abū Nuwās disappeared; and after a good long while, he came back and said, "I've done it."

"Recite them", said Khalaf.

So Abū Nuwās began and got through the bulk of the verses over a period of several days. Then he asked again for permission to compose poetry. Said Khalaf: "I refuse, unless you forget all one thousand lines as completely as if you had never learned them."

"That's too difficult", said Abū Nuwās. "I've memorized them quite thoroughly!"

"I refuse to let you compose until you forget them", said Khalaf.

So Abū Nuwās disappeared into a monastery and remained in solitude for a period of time until he forgot the lines. He went back to Khalaf and said, "I've forgotten them so thoroughly that it's as if I never memorized anything at all."

Khalaf then said, "Now go compose!" (p. 191-192)

Certainly one does not learn theory as one memorizes lines, and without a doubt the process of forgetting is also dissimilar; nevertheless, in both cases there is a hard *work* to be performed. In Theory's case, this would probably entail erasing not only proper names, thus not respecting the authority and authorship over concepts, but also a solid terminology, for there is so much more at going on in theory than the names of concepts and categories. Be that as it may, the most important point is that both for poetry and for theory true forgetting can only take place after an intense period of immersion. I would say that achieving forgetfulness is a way of divesting Theory from the sphere of use, from the hand, to turn it into a form for of comportment, inserting it the blood stream, as it were. In other words, instead of parading concepts, absorbing their meaning and expression. Let us call this a mimetic or osmotic kind of reading and learning. Only after such learning is fully carried out can you yourself become Khalaf and tell yourself: "Now go interpret things!"

The other strategy points in the opposite direction, not a de- but a hyperobjectification of Theory, not relying on the creative power of forgetting but exploring Theory's materiality. The days are long past when critics interpreted a literary text in order to recuperate the experience that animated the author to write it, or, later, the sense they were supposed to have inserted in it. In contradistinction, the current assumption is that criticism more discovers than retrieves meaning. This establishes performatively a structure that presupposes the text not to know everything about itself; the interpreter's function is show it (of course, strong works seem not only to be aware of what which is revealed about them, but also our own desire to do it). In this scheme, theory is the vehicle to bring intelligibility to the text and as such it is conceived as present and transparent to itself. Theory speaks; its objects are spoken. It would then be refreshing to withdraw from Theory its claim to knowledge and suppose that it is more than its sheer propositional content: not a tool, but something quasi-intransitive. To say it in still another way, how would one deal with assuming that Theory doesn't know everything about itself?

I suggested above that Theory as a genre could be viewed as a textual rearrangement of philosophy and literary criticism. Here, at the conclusion of this chapter, it is worthwhile to raise the question of its genetic relationship to literature. One of the jewels of Brazilian seventeenth-century literature is Padre Antônio Vieira's sermons. Reading them today we perceive an astounding political imagination, absolute command over the Portuguese language, and a dazzling theological erudition. And yet, such reading would be totally at odds with Vieira's conceptions of his own sermons, which were thought of as interventions, rhetorical pieces aimed at quite specific results. Might not Vieira's case be instructive for theory? In view of it, the usual inclusion the adjective "literary" before "theory" may acquire a new emphasis, not literary *theory*, but instead *literary theory*. A few tentative examples, then: take Jameson's *The Political Unconscious*, singled out by recent critics as a privileged example of theory's vicissitudes (depth, suspiciousness, strong theory etc.); one needs just a small gesture of detachment or estrangement (to use an old theoreme) to view both in its overarching frame and sentence structure something of the epic, now unthinkable in literary terms. Or consider Barthes' already mentioned *texte*, perhaps in conjunction with Lacan's *objet petit a*: could they not be viewed as reconfigurations of the sublime? Or what to do with Derrida's question marks? Might they not, in their gesture to the reader, share something of the rhetorical essence of the sermon? Of course these works may still be read for their propositional-conceptual content, just as one may read Vieira in search for the inspiration of God; one thing does not annul the other, although they can't happen at the same time. And this shouldn't be understood as simply matter of reading Theory as if it were literature either (though it would be entertaining to do it literally, imagining concepts as characters, arguments as plots, adverbs as setting, etc.) – for what is at stake here is turning the question into an answer, of striving to responsibly de-instrumentalize Theory and put to work everything that is sedimented in its complex and mixed constitution, and which to a great extent has in its own way motivated this perhaps recalcitrant chapter.

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