

REVIEW ARTICLE

ELEGIES FOR THEORY

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- 164 REDFIELD, MARC. *Theory at Yale: The Strange Case of Deconstruction in America*. New York: Fordham UP, 2016. Pp. 272. \$29.95 US paperback, \$28.99 US ebook, \$95.00 US hardcover.

RODOWICK, D.N. *Elegy for Theory*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2014. Pp. 304. \$22.00 US paperback.

RYAN, JUDITH. *The Novel after Theory*. New York: Columbia UP, 2012. Pp. 272. \$28.00 US paperback, \$80.00 US hardcover, \$27.99 US ebook.

Because its paternity is disputed, every genealogy of theory becomes an assertion about its character. When traced to Nietzsche, theory is the exposure of self-interested ideologies masquerading as logical deductions, and the insistence on the historical, embodied communicative constraints on any such inferences—rhetoric over philosophy, Isocrates over Socrates. When traced to Russian formalism, Geneva semiotics and French Marxism, theory is, earlier, the positivist pretence to an empirical science of signs, and later, the refutation of those very pretensions—poststructuralism over structuralism, Derrida over Saussure. Neither of these rival pedigrees is extinct, and indeed the three elegies under review are bright wreaths heaped on theory's catafalque by squabbling but thriving descendants.

Judith Ryan calls *The Novel after Theory* a set of “case studies” (17, 20) demonstrating the moral fitness of theory in contemporary fiction, while in *Theory at Yale*, Marc Redfield recounts “The Strange Case of Deconstruction in America,” according to the book's Sherlock Holmesian subtitle. *Elegy for Theory*, D.N. Rodowick's extensive survey of theory as erratic enabler of Cinema Studies, is explicitly undertaken

in terms of particular Wittgensteinian “language games” within conceptual family resemblances (Rodowick xii).

In order to demonstrate “the moral implications of theory” (20) against the charge of obscurantist, relativistic play with emptied abstraction, Ryan broadly applies poststructuralism to more than a dozen novels apparently informed by it. She gives not only predictable examples, such as Marguerite Duras’s *The Vice-Consul*, Julia Kristeva’s *Possessions*, and Umberto Eco’s *Foucault’s Pendulum*, but also, for example, Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping*, W.G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz*, and Christa Wolf’s *Cassandra*.

Ryan contends that novelists are not simply exercised by poststructuralism but use their stories to refute its critics: “The novelists’ engagement with theory consists in part of an attempt to correct the erroneous impression that theory consists in a facile manipulation of unfamiliar terms” (20). However improbable this sounds as a novelist’s ambition, Ryan does lucidly reiterate, for instance, Duras’s engagement with Jacques Lacan in *L’Amante anglaise*, Graham Swift’s engagement with Hayden White’s metahistoriography in *Waterland*, Don DeLillo’s with Jean Baudrillard’s simulacra in *White Noise*, and Thomas Pynchon’s with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s schizophrenia in *Vineland*.

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Where the traces of such influence are light, her argument falters. Though she hedges her reading with qualifiers, Ryan imposes on *The Rings of Saturn* the rhizome of Deleuze and Guattari, whereas W.G. Sebald specifically invokes the quincunx of Thomas Browne: “The route the narrator takes on his walking tour through county Suffolk and the trajectory of his thoughts, readings, and investigations in the course of the journey might be said to be rhizomatic” (201). If there are parallels between the immanentist trope of Deleuze and Guattari that Sebald never invokes and the providential trope of Browne that explicitly organizes his book, Ryan should establish the parallel. If, like the rhizome, “the irregular and seemingly wayward arrangement of ideas in *The Rings of Saturn* has the effect of undoing logical hierarches” (201), how is Sebald’s alleged investment in *A Thousand Plateaus* consistent with the book’s sustained reference to Browne?

Cassandra is a yet more striking choice, since its narrative is the culminating section of a five-part sequence that provides an extensive account of the novel’s provenance. The preceding four parts were published separately as *Aufsetzungen einer Erzählung* (translated as *Conditions of a Narrative* in a single English volume), none of which supports Ryan’s contention of the influence of Kristeva’s posited “women’s time” on the novel. She speculates that the omission “may be an oversight” (113), even as she admits that Wolf explicitly invoked instead the ideas of Luce Irigaray. Because Ryan scarcely acknowledges the repressive ideological conditions restricting a State-endorsed East German writer from invoking officially denounced ideas, she overlooks the possibility that Wolf’s decision was perhaps not an oversight but a tactic; Kristeva was a defector from a Warsaw Pact member state whose works were proscribed in the German Democratic Republic.

Ryan's argument that a Derridean design underpins the New England Transcendentalism of Marilynne Robinson is her most audacious one. A footnote acknowledges that, despite a doctorate in English Literature and decades of university teaching, Robinson reveals little familiarity with theory; indeed, she has no sympathy for it, being a tireless circuit rider for a revived Humanism inflected by America's Calvinist inheritance. Ryan proposes that the prevalence of Emersonian allusion in *Housekeeping* produces images that "are very close to certain aspects of deconstruction" (62); ergo, the "ambiguities and contradictions" of the novel must be deconstructive, as though Robinson had to trawl Derrida and de Man to understand what she had already gleaned from Emerson's *Essays*, *Mosses from an Old Manse*, *Moby Dick*, and any fascicle Emily Dickinson ever sewed.

166 Ryan's study is really a Humanist defense of theory in the wake of the de Man scandal, the American "culture wars," and conservative reprisals against a perceived leftist hegemony in the Humanities. Her proof is that celebrated novelists conjure up theory's forbiddingly abstruse, seemingly amoral concepts in ethically charged scenarios of discrimination, oppression, and violence. This mission to enlist literature into a reformist acculturative practice, redeeming both poet and poetry professor, was for Paul de Man an ideological confusion of linguistic reference and phenomenism or natural reality. Theory, from this point of view, was a congeries of critical methods to put a stop to just the kind of debilitating interpretation that, in the very name of theory, Ryan offers. One can deconstruct *Housekeeping*, but one cannot fairly ask Robinson to do it for one. Robinson may register related anxieties about the status of language, but this is not via Derrida but *via negativa*, the apophaticism not of Derrida's "How not to Speak," but that of Pseudo-Dionysius, Origen, Juliana of Norwich, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and Jakob Boehme.

For Marc Redfield, the notoriety of theory derived from its fiercely articulate anxiety about language. The real de Man scandal, *Theory at Yale* suggests, was not the posthumous discovery of his anti-Semitic wartime journalism in 1987, but the scandal of literature, which loses its privileged Formalist literariness and revelatory estrangement; it is not even reliable about its own nature. To the resistance to this theory, de Man retorted that such resistance inheres in theory itself, for language eludes theorization. Redfield quotes de Man's essay: "The resistance to theory is a resistance to the use of language about language. It is therefore resistance to language itself or to the possibility that language contains factors or functions that cannot be reduced to intuition" (58). Redfield soundly notes that this "has proved a far more irritating claim than any other that has been advanced by literary and cultural critics. It sparks accusations of nihilism and aestheticism precisely because it interrupts aesthetic discourse on a fundamental level" (58).

By employing theory to bring literature into conformity with upright moral principles, Ryan would vindicate both, but Redfield is more interested in the antinomies of theory at Yale. He scrupulously examines how de Man became the paradoxical face and name for the belief that face and name are illegible (Redfield 166). Perhaps,

then, Harold Bloom was right to contend that his friend's epistemological skepticism regarding figuration was no truth but simply another figure (238). Bloom opposed Jewish gnostic vitalism to deconstruction. Here literature, including even that of the Romantics, campaigns against nature armed with a beautiful fib; figuration's supreme fiction affords refuge from the death drive. Where tragic de Man needed truth in order to set an inaccessible bar, comic Bloom opposed a self-consciously unfounded faith. If, as Bloom contended, strong poets grapple with phantoms like Jacob wrestling with the angel, so too do strong critics, and Redfield sees Bloom as consciously involved in just such a burlesque agon with the implacable spectre of de Man.

From a Wittgensteinian perspective, de Man's notion of reference as an interpretative *mise en abyme* that swallows all epistemic certainty is less a critique of Romanticism than a belated symptom of a Romanticism that continues to feel bereft of the patronymic transcendent signifier. The notion of indeterminacy—so convincingly belied by de Man's own augustly self-assured critical commentaries, none of which hint at, much less betray, his insistence on the "impossibility of reading"—is a red herring, since it depends on the projection of some prior, now inaccessible state of determinacy. The Yale School requirement of a mental intermediary of interpretation between expression and application is, for Wittgenstein, not compulsory; indeed, this infinite regress would still remain beholden, by virtue of its exact inversion of it, to a notion of metaphysical guarantees. The requirement of interpretation depends on the absence of a transcendental signifier that alone could quell undecidability, whereas Wittgenstein shows the superfluity of such a signifier, since *any* solution, including an omniscient one, would furnish only another norm. Interpretation is only remedial, while understanding is normative; that is why Redfield can readily parse Yale school treatises. Language is a form of rule-following, and in rule-following neither a transcendent postulate, nor one premised on its negation, such as *différance*, performs meaningful service, because such an authority, whether infinitely deferred or divine, could not even hypothetically arbitrate among norms within which it too must operate. Wittgenstein observed that, were a god to transcend a mathematical rule, such as by deriving a truth function from a logical contradiction, this would not abolish a mathematics but only introduce a new one; even God can decide a mathematics only by mathematics.

This may help explain why proponents of theory have little rapport with Wittgenstein. They assume that the *Tractatus* is a Positivist decalogue rather than a riposte to the Vienna Circle in its own terms, and they assume that the *Philosophical Investigations* is Ordinary Language scripture rather than a riposte to pragmatism in its own terms. *Elegy for Theory* is thus exceptional for being framed by Wittgensteinian thought. The epigraph is from *Philosophical Investigations*; the Mark Tansey illustration *West Face* follows a party of mountaineers towards his visage among Nietzsche's and that of other titanic Teutonic thinkers; and the book investigates theory not as a stable concept but as a realm of family resemblance (*Familienähnlichkeit*),

where, in contrast to the abstract categories of analytical definition that subsume diverse entities under general rubrics, distinct entities can share with others some common property without satisfying necessary and sufficient conditions. As in the *Investigations*, so in *Elegy for Theory* overlapping fibres and not a single thread make the twine. Rodowick makes strong rope.

168 Poststructuralists and Wittgenstein share the basic assumption that if no sign by itself can determine a meaning, then nor will a supplementary sign, and thus no interpretation ensures agreement between sign and signified. However, Wittgenstein declines the deconstructive deduction that interpretation by itself determines meaning; what rather does is context, a tacit consensus of action established by the outward criteria of specific lived social practices. The sign by itself is to him a misleading philosophical abstraction attached to a vestigial metaphysical appeal for certainty. Where poststructuralism identifies a necessary possibility of doubt as to a sign's meaning, this is only because, for Wittgenstein, the theorist has severed the sign from its enabling circulation within the congruent behaviours comprising a "form of life," the sum of those largely unarticulated agreements bound together in our communal activities. Derived from tacit rules, meaning is necessarily indeterminate, but it is only by assuming that meaning might be univocal that one could imagine such indeterminacy to be a liability and meaning a provisional entitlement only. Wittgenstein thus showed up the Achilles' heel of deconstruction: its contradictorily virtuosic command of a system of reference to prove the fundamental instability of reference. In texts rhetorically charged with acknowledgments of expressive impairment, Wittgenstein clarified the limitations on communication without minimizing the way it regardless and self-evidently functions. To understand Derrida is to refute him.

Yet, even as *Elegy for Theory* relies on a sure Wittgensteinian grasp of meaning, Rodowick does not elucidate the compatibility of Wittgenstein's thought, so adversarial to theory, to a measured defense of theory. Instead, he expertly shows how, deriving in part from the rise of aesthetics and Romantic poetics, theory emerges in the immanent analyses of Formalism and structural linguistics. In one myth of origin, Claude Lévi-Strauss meets Roman Jakobson at the New School for Social Research in New York in 1942, where phonology gets applied to kinship relations to establish what they hoped would be a unified human science and a nomothetic science of poetics. Where neither phenomenology nor, until Lukács, Marxist philosophy supplied a seemingly secure epistemology or asserted critical force, theory would, in this view, actualize philosophy in contemporary cultural expression. This would come at the cost of an autonomous subject prior to language and history. The death of the author was a local skirmish in a war to the death of the subject. In the structuralism that would imprint itself on Lacanian psychoanalysis and Foucauldian sociology, the signifier precedes and determines the signified; the symbol is more real than what it symbolizes. This, Rodowick notes, is signification without a subject, with a pretence to a science potentially untainted by subjective conditioning.

Even as deconstruction repudiated systemic invariants, this denial of a self-conscious subject into one wholly subsumed in a virtual system of differences would make theory at Yale notorious, even, as Redfield notes, to some of its own theorists, notably Harold Bloom. It is this aspect of theory that Ryan's Humanism must minimize. Since, from Cervantes's *Don Quixote* to Kathy Acker's, the novel narrates the chagrined tragicomic flounderings of human agency, the genre appears antithetical to theory, as Marxists quickly discerned. Though Ryan is peculiarly reticent on genre, she implies that the novel restores the decentered subject to theory. Unfortunately, she is just as reticent on those theorizations of political identity that, partly by recourse to Hegelian negativity, mobilize alternative emancipatory forms of self-consciousness, as in Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*.

Rodowick's field is not the novel but cinema; however, he fully appreciates that subjectivity is equally vexatious at the movies. In a characteristically close analytical synopsis that contrasts with Ryan's superficial sketches, he lucidly retraces a formalist pedigree of film theory and practice back to montage and decoupage, techniques that were once imagined to constitute film as a surrogate visual language. Trained as an engineer, Sergei Eisenstein viewed the film editor as engineer of human souls. Along with Béla Balázs, Rudolf Arnheim, Abel Gance, and other early theorists and practitioners, Eisenstein privileged sequence over segment, repudiating descriptive realism and obscuring the referential status of filmic space in favour of fragmentation and reconstitution.

Christian Metz, whose pioneering semiotic film theory is critical to Rodowick's detailed account, affronted this structuralist bias in proposing a phenomenologically-inspired aesthetic semiology that, once again, looks a lot like Wittgenstein: the linguistic and ethnographic models by which structuralists claimed to disclose reality beneath fickle surfaces prove instead only to be other formalizations of it. Wittgenstein, who sped in disgust from the philosophical seminar to the Cambridge movie house to relish Hollywood musicals, urges that the surface suffices, and Metz saw that a doctrinaire reliance on syntagm leads the structuralist anthropologist and the montagist to treat the real as non-pertinent or even—to Chief Engineer Stalin—impertinent. A syntagmatic mandate, Metz stressed, can only conflict with the analogical immediacy and phenomenological rush of film images, which resist codification into discrete signifiers.

Metz insisted that, as a complex institution that visually projects forms of desire, cinema produces and reproduces subjectivity. However, insofar as theory recuperated a transcendental subject without difference, feminist critics detected a gendered, indeed patriarchal norm disguised as a universal form of perception and desire. The feminist subject, such as in Julia Kristeva's Lacanian formulation, is by contrast in process within a dialectic where the imaginary turns on the symbolic. In theory, Rodowick argues, this "excluded or differential subject was granted special powers of agency, (self-)knowledge, and critique that freed it to interrogate all strategies of domination as well as of the imbrication of others in the snare of power" (261). The

self-reflexivity of theory, in his view, “transforms dialectically the problem of the subject—its forms of identity or difference, and the limits and possibilities of knowledge of itself and in its relation to power” (260).

These three books explore three distinct genres—the novel, dramatic cinema, and literary treatise—and together they reveal that theory has its preferred genres. Thus, though Ryan stresses the contemporary novel as carrier of avant-garde theory, few of her examples formally deviate much from narrative conventions. It is notable that theory has been much more galvanizing for avant-garde poetry, such as language poetry, and for conceptual art. Though she never broaches the role of the book industry in the very period of its global commodification, almost all of Ryan’s novels were published by major transnational conglomerates in a period of commercial concentration of literary publishing, with deleterious consequences for narrative experimentation of the very kind that theory fosters. Cinema, of course, is particularly vulnerable to cartel capitalism, though Rodowick too is largely silent on this.

170 As for academic literary criticism, so safely irrelevant to the commercial market, no literary genre is more conservative, as the conventional discursive prose of Geoffrey Hartman, J. Hillis Miller, Paul de Man, and others demonstrate. Though Redfield gives this aspect of their work little attention beyond a discerning critique of John Guillory’s *Cultural Capital*, it is notable that none of these subversive theoreticians strays far beyond a restricted corpus of canonical Western texts or their institutionally approved epigones. Maybe the shortcoming of theory is that it was not so radical at all. No wonder it found a home at Yale.