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Review of: Ten Lessons in Theory: An Introduction to Theoretical Writing
by Calvin Thomas

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de l'*Odyssee* (1708), à Joyce, à Rousseau, à l'helléniste français Victor Bérard, à l'ethnologue français Jean Cuisenier, dans un large parcours historique et dans un tout aussi large parcours des types d'écrits — de divers statuts, hétérogènes, ainsi que l'ont voulu les auteurs, afin que soit dégagée une poétique de cette littérature seconde, fût dans ses témoins les plus minces. Les analyses sont précises, le recours aux textes est constant. L'idée centrale, qui exclut que cet ouvrage se présente comme une étude d'influences ou de réception, se dit simplement : ces reprises, aussi disparates soient-elles, relèvent d'une poétique. Cela semblera paradoxal, éventuellement contradictoire. Mais le long chemin parcouru permet, *in fine*, la lecture de tableaux, dressés dans la plus pure tradition structuraliste — l'histoire des commentaires et des reprises d'un objet textuel singulier et limité est ainsi moins une histoire que la métamorphose — qui autorise des classements — d'une forme, celle du commentaire. A ce paradoxe s'ajoute les inquiétudes que suscite chez le lecteur la manière dont l'argument est présenté ou encadré. Chaque chapitre est placé sous le signe d'une salle de bibliothèque — ainsi, à la bibliographie est attribuée la salle des catalogues. On ne sait si cela traduit une obsession de la réification des objets d'études, une manière de réflexivité (pauvre) de la part des auteurs (le commentaire des commentaires, que constitue ce livre, justifierait cela), ou, plus simplement mais d'une façon inquiétante, l'assimilation de la littérature et de ses commentaires à une muséologie. Ces dernières lignes n'entendent pas amoindrir l'intelligence de cet ouvrage, mais souligner que l'histoire des reprises d'un épisode de l'*Odyssee* est bien proche du dessin de l'éternité de l'immobilité. Que le lecteur puisse venir à une telle notation ne laisse pas d'être troublant.

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Calvin Thomas. *Ten Lessons in Theory. An Introduction to Theoretical Writing*. New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2013. Pp. 240. ISBN: 9781623564025.

The field of modern literary theory took a new direction around the turn of the new millennium. As signaled by the titles of books such

as *Reading after Theory* (Cunningham, 2002), *Life. After. Theory* (eds. Payne and Schad, 2003), *After Theory* (Eagleton, 2003) and *Theory after Theory* (eds. Elliott and Attridge, 2011), “high” theory seemed to have transitioned to post-theory. Calvin Thomas’s *Ten Lessons in Theory: An Introduction to Theoretical Writing* follows such works in its reflection on the waning of the subdiscipline known as Theory, but its focus is less on examining key ideas and concepts of post-theory than on delivering a robust defense of Theory’s continuing relevance.

Thomas’s advocacy is a spirited rhetorical performance, made more valiant when considered in the context of our distinctly post-theory climate. The tenor of the new epoch was crisply captured by François, professor of literature at the Sorbonne, in Michel Houellebecq’s *Submission* (2015) when, toward the beginning of the novel, he breezily remarks, “The academic study of literature leads basically nowhere, as we all know” (10). Nowhere it may lead; nevertheless, François concedes that literary studies carry a certain “marginal value,” for “literature has always carried positive connotations in the world of luxury goods” (10). His idea of literary studies as a futile if harmless activity, associated with privilege and refinement, has, of course, a long tradition. And few people, whether within or outside literary studies, would quibble over his assessment of its modest use-value in today’s job market. But the pivot on which François’s sentence turns—as *we all know*—is stickier, casting as it does, what is essentially a tribal idea into a universal fact.

Between the 1970s and the 1990s, the ideas represented by François were challenged, contested, exposed, and excoriated from a wide and loosely associated range of perspectives, collectively known as modern literary theory. For most literary theorists, the academic study of literature was nothing less than a way of liberating human life from oppression, ideology, and reification, providing not just conceptual tools for interpreting *The Tempest* or *Jane Eyre* but a revolutionary way of understanding the world. Houellebecq’s staging of the return of the individualist bourgeois man-of-letters corresponds with, and is a reflection of, the dimming of Theory, or, as some have pronounced, its demise.

On this verdict, Calvin Thomas is defiant. He upholds that “(T)heory is resolutely *undead*, permanently relevant and perpetually re-entant” (3), found everywhere “as a battery of disturbing *questions*, and an unsettled and unsettling set of strategies” (2), pertaining “not only to students ‘of the humanities,’ but to all ‘the undead’—to everyone, that

is, who still actively participates in our specifically human reality” (4). To demonstrate its vitality and enduring powers, he takes ten key sentences from the canon of Theory and provides a compendious study of the ideas they offer—what he calls the unpacking of the “conditions and consequences of these sentences” to perform the ten “lessons” (xii). The sentences upon which Thomas constructs his lessons are worth listing in full for they provide the scaffolding of this skillfully structured work. They are: “The world must be made to mean” (Stuart Hall); “Meaning is the polite word for pleasure” (Adam Philips); “Language is, by nature, fictional” (Barthes), “Desire must be taken literally” (Lacan); “You are not yourself” (Barbara Kruger), “This restlessness is us” (Jean-Luc Nancy on Hegel); “There is no document of civilization that is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (Benjamin); “The Unconscious is structured like a language” (Lacan, again); “There is nothing outside the text” (Derrida); and “One is not born a woman” (Beauvoir).

Upon these sentences, he brings to bear the foundational ideas of Marx, Hegel, Nietzsche, Freud, Foucault, and others into a sustained critical dialogue not only with the theorists in question but with the ideas of Jameson, Barthes, Eagleton, Žižek, Philips, Edelman, and more. In lesser hands, this ambitious exercise might have easily ended up in a dizzying theoretical tour, rushed and routine, but Thomas develops an admirably tight narrative, marshaling vast multiplicities of often competing theories into an elegant labyrinthine argument, all the while offering sharp and fresh accounts of the different positions in question. The book would make for a perfect introduction to readers new to Theory. Equally, even the most erudite readers will find themselves engaged by Thomas’s astute considerations and deft unpickings of the inconsistencies and contradictions found in widespread, commonly-held assumptions.

Thomas states in the Preface that he has made it one of the central aims of the book to communicate theoretical issues of the utmost complexity in pleasurable prose—prose that is worth reading for its own sake. This conscious and creative effort to push against the high degree of insularity found in too many theoretical books marks a welcome departure from the days when obscurity was professionally accepted, even flaunted in some circles. That is not to suggest that this book is an easy read. Continually iterative, liberally peppered with inverted commas, italics and boldface, Thomas’s style is insistently “theoretical.” So for instance, on the opacity of theoretical writing, he writes: “I would like to suggest that

what animates most theoretical writing is not a spiteful insistence on ‘just being difficult’ but rather a strenuous commitment to *difficultly being just*” (21). Or on his book: “And so, while the book as a whole constitutes a novel approach to theory, it also asks to be approached as a sort of theoretical novel” (xiii). In passages such as these, the writing risks coming close to the hilarious pontifications made by Didier, the literary theorist, in Edward St Aubyn’s *Lost for Words* (2014).

What prevents semantic satiation is Thomas’s deep commitment to political and ethical responsibility that striates the rhetorical flourishes. And it is hard not to be warmed by the central point that the ten lessons all move towards: that the “theoretical” practice of the academic study of literature gives insights that lead specifically to somewhere rather than nowhere because ideas worth engaging with are those that make possible radical changes in ourselves and in the fabric of society.

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Philippe Chardin, Marjorie Rousseau dir., avec la collaboration de Magali Renouf. *L'écrivain et son critique : Une fratrie problématique*. Paris : Kimé, 2014. Pp. 567. ISBN : 9782841746507.

« On fait de la critique quand on ne peut pas faire de l’art, de même qu’on se met mouchard quand on ne peut être soldat » ; « La critique est au dernier échelon de la littérature, comme forme presque toujours et comme valeur morale, incontestablement » ; « Une chose certaine et facile à démontrer à ceux qui pourraient en douter, c’est l’antipathie naturelle du critique contre le poète — de celui qui ne fait rien, contre celui qui fait, — du frelon contre l’abeille, — du cheval hongre contre l’étalon. Vous ne vous faites critique qu’après qu’il est bien constaté à vos propres yeux que vous ne pouvez être poète. [...] Je conçois cette haine. Il est douloureux de voir un autre s’asseoir au banquet où l’on n’est pas invité, et coucher avec la femme qui n’a pas voulu de vous. Je plains de tout mon cœur le pauvre eunuque obligé d’assister aux ébats du Grand Seigneur »... Dispersés dans la correspondance échangée entre Gustave Flaubert et Louise Colet