

# Theory That Matters



Theory That Matters:  
What Practice After Theory

Edited by

Kacper Bartczak and Małgorzata Myk

**CAMBRIDGE  
SCHOLARS**

---

P U B L I S H I N G

Theory That Matters: What Practice After Theory,  
Edited by Kacper Bartczak and Małgorzata Myk

Refereed by Professor Marek Paryz, University of Warsaw

This book first published 2013

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2013 by Kacper Bartczak and Małgorzata Myk and contributors

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-4438-4206-0, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-4206-8

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface .....	viii
---------------	------

Acknowledgements .....	xvi
------------------------	-----

## **Part I: Theory—Continuations**

The Spider and the Bee: Humanities, Theory, <i>un rapport au monde</i> .....	2
Tadeusz Ślawek	

Theory for Theory's Sake: A Blueprint for Theory's Disciplinary Emancipation .....	20
Leszek Drong	

The Critical Aftermath: Critical Theory and Literary Studies .....	33
Tymon Adamczewski	

Myth and Politics in Theory: Roland Barthes's "Myth Today" and Its Contemporary (Postcolonial) Significance .....	46
Agata Preis-Smith	

The White Man's "Burden": The Psychoanalytical Inheritance in Homi K. Bhabha's Postcolonial Theory .....	56
Tomasz Dobrogoszcz	

Reclaiming Postcolonial Identity: Cultural History as "Enunciation" in the Writings of Homi Bhabha.....	69
Sumit Chakrabarti	

On the Apophantics of Thinking: Toward a Deliberate Being .....	79
Wojciech Majka	

Zero Theory = Text Minus Context.....	92
David Waterman	

## **Part II: Practices—Literature**

Intimate Communities: The Theory of Practice .....	106
Antoine Cazé	
Theory in Life Writing, Life Writing in Theory: Edmund White's <i>City Boy</i> and Gay Men's Life Writing.....	125
Tomasz Basiuk	
Jeanette Winterson's Fictional Autobiographies .....	142
Agnieszka Miksza	
The Poetic Critic as a Moral Teacher: Post-Structural Criticism and the Morality of the Twenty First Century .....	157
Wit Pietrzak	
Ciaran Carson's <i>For All We Know</i> as an Essay in Epistemology .....	164
Grzegorz Czemieli	
American Literary Nonfiction of the 1960s and 70s: Some Aspects of Forming Theory and Literary Practice .....	177
Olga Nesmelova and Zhanna Konovalova	
Sexuality In- and Outside Discourse: Pornological Writings of Samuel R. Delany.....	189
Aleksandra Bubilo	

## **Part III: Practices—Film/Media**

Deterritorializing Theory: <i>The Soloist</i> ; When Critique Becomes Creation.....	202
Marek M. Wojtaszek	
From the Kitchen into the Bathroom: Feminist (Post) Theory in Crisis.....	218
Katarzyna Poloczek	
Can Psychoanalytic Film Theory Be Saved for Feminism? A Few Thoughts on the Forty Years of Struggle with the Phallus .....	237
Nina Czarnecka-Pałka	

Contested Readings of <i>Queer Eye for the Straight Guy</i> : Complementary and Conflicting Frames—and the Continued Promise of Critical Theory .....	253
Robert Westerfelhaus	

#### **Part IV: External Practices—Mixed Media**

The Theory of Film Practice: Thirty Years Later .....	264
Rod Stoneman	
[7 Outdated Objects Which Dangle]: The Post-Genre Prism of Thalia Field's <i>Point and Line</i> .....	285
Mark Tardi	
Modalities of Reading: Introducing Statements by Poets Speaking on the Relations between Theory and Their Poetic Practice .....	294
Kacper Bartczak	
Polish Poets on Theory and Their Poetic Practice .....	304
Julia Fiedorczuk, Maciej Melecki, Joanna Mueller, Krzysztof Siwczyk	
Contributors.....	312
Index .....	319

## PREFACE

A book of manners for imitators  
Might sell like hotcakes  
To twins  
If we could only write our theory down  
Oh, theory  
Yes  
There is nothing better  
Than a theory  
But confess  
What?  
You know...  
We will eat anything  
Anything?  
The book, the idea  
Or the product  
—Carla Harryman, “There Is Nothing Better  
Than a Theory”

The above fragment excerpted from Harryman’s 1989 *Animal Instincts* articulates a sense of discomfort, irony, and suspicion towards a theoretical impulse.<sup>1</sup> American poet, essayist, and playwright associated with the Language writers, Harryman may have voiced in the poem a deeply ambivalent attitude towards theory, yet, like that of many other language-oriented writers versed in poststructuralist theory, her work is manifestly informed by the very theoretical orientation it sets out to criticize. Such ambivalence has by now become part and parcel of most debates on the value of theory. Are theoretical texts indeed “books of manners for imitators” easily comparable to academically sanctioned consumer products diligently distributed at no small cost among fiercely competing faculty and theory-confused students of the humanities? Is there really nothing better than a theory? How do scholars, artists, and readers of theory view its apparently depleted potential today? How do they envision its future?

---

<sup>1</sup> Harryman, *Animal Instincts*, 94–95.



Seven years after the mid-1990s high-water mark of the loudly announced “end of theory,” the debate over the value, efficacy, usefulness, and ethics of theoretical practices is not nearly over. While numerous indictments of theory’s both minor abuses and cardinal sins continue to be published, a conspicuous example being Daphne Patai and Will H. Corral’s 2005 739-page tome tellingly titled *Theory’s Empire: An Anthology of Dissent*, it appears that despite the momentous watershed of what looked like its final throes, theory may have paradoxically survived its own death. Dissenting or not, the reader of this book will find here a rich and varied collection of essays whose authors absorbed the pronouncement of theory’s death only to move on and discover not merely that there is still life after theory, but, as cleverly suggested by Michael Payne and John Schad, the editors of another post-theoretical reflection in the format of a series of extensive interviews with some of contemporary theory’s major figures, Jacques Derrida, Frank Kermode, Christopher Norris, and Toril Moi, titled *life.after.theory* (2003), now life appears to be “after” theory, not in the sense of simply following it in time but also, perhaps, being “in pursuit of” theory, if not “in imitation of” it.<sup>2</sup> Life in pursuit of theory, therefore, would mean seeing past the by now somewhat worn-out and outdated dictum of the end of theory, and instead suggest an attempt to reinvigorate the task of a theorist by encouraging a more positive engagement with theory’s contentious potentialities.

Thus inspired, the editors of this volume see the need to re-evaluate theory not as a singular overarching apparatus, but rather as a multiplicity of different interdisciplinary practices currently in use both inside and outside academia, approaching it more pragmatically as an active and sustainable repertoire of possible modes of engagement, fearlessly and ferociously self-critical, but no longer merely stiflingly ironic, overly suspicious, academically dry or detached. It is therefore our hope that *Theory That Matters* stays in touch with lived experience, since it is ultimately life and its changing realities that provide any practitioner of theory with points of reference, sources of knowledge, and numerous occasions for intellectual and other kinds of enchantment.

Following Judith Butler’s reminder that “[t]heory is an activity that does not remain restricted to the academy. It takes place every time a possibility is imagined, a collective self-reflection takes place, a dispute over values, priorities, and language emerges,”<sup>3</sup> this book adopts a broader interdisciplinary purview and takes a more practical stance than most like-

---

<sup>2</sup> Payne and Schad, *life.after.theory*, x.

<sup>3</sup> Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 175–76.

minded publications to date by bringing together scholars representing a broad range of academic disciplines, poets, as well as professionals who also engage with theory.

In the scope of its four parts and an additional closing section, the volume firstly proposes a number of possible continuations of reflection on theory and practice in relation to the critique of the field of literary theory, also in the context of its recently discussed crisis, and, more generally, the present-day status of theoretical practices in the humanities. Part II focuses on the questions related to literary theory and the usefulness of theoretical practices for the study of literary texts, effectuating valuable engagements with what has come to be seen as probably the most looked down upon aspect of theory's application. Part III includes essays that either deploy particular theoretical perspectives in the analysis of film narratives, or evaluate the potential of those perspectives for film and media studies. Part IV includes more personal or performative approaches to the practice of theory that situate themselves as external to the more impersonal and formally tamed academic activity. Finally, the closing section of this part offers unique insights into the ways in which poetic practice may be affected by theory.

The text that sets the tone for the entire volume is Tadeusz Ślawek's astute philosophical reflection which undertakes a radical reconceptualization of the conventionally conceived tasks of theory in the present-day context of the humanities' crisis by perversely challenging what we have mechanically come to expect from theory evaluating it on the merits of usability, readily available and codified knowledge, as well as transparency and directness. In his succinctly presented theses, Ślawek carefully deconstructs and redefines these long taken for granted, ossified characteristics, and urges us to look toward a different horizon of theoretical thinking where thought is situated beyond the urge to obtain a new, usable, "something." Such reconceived theory stands a chance of realizing its immense potential once we yield to an invitation to open up anew not only to what is human but also to what is non-human, and thus establish "a new relationship with the world": *un rapport au monde*.

Tymon Adamczewski and Leszek Drong are both preoccupied with the place and changing impact of theory in the field of literary studies. Adamczewski examines critical theory as an evolving discourse, tracing its development to the legacy of the Frankfurt School and later poststructuralism's focus on language, and locating theory's significance in its continued reflection on meaning, as well as the consequences of particular ways of its production and distribution. Drong, on the other hand, proposes a systematic overview of theory usage, a classification of

sorts, based on its applications by literary scholars, which brings him to define theory's involvement in the study of literature as a form of professional aestheticism. Remaining in a dialogue with the ideas of Stanley Fish, Drong further calls for emancipation of theory that has long enough stayed in the service of other disciplines, suggesting that it should no longer merely provide contexts to be applied elsewhere, but rather ought to be written and studied autonomously.

Agata Preis-Smith, Tomasz Dobrogoszcz, and Sumit Chakrabarti venture into the territory of postcolonial studies to explore its uncomfortable yet unavoidable entanglement with the workings of ideology, the discourses of postmodernity and psychoanalysis. In her insightful essay, Preis-Smith examines Chicana critic Chela Sandoval's reappraisal of Roland Barthes's canonical "Myth Today" to substantiate her argument that there is an irreducible ideological element in every text. While authors and theorists alike are always inevitably implicated in the hegemonic discourses, encounters with theory, as Preis-Smith further argues, should make us alert to its political and ideological implications so that we continue to practice it critically and make it socially useful. Along different lines, Chakrabarti's contribution focuses on Homi Bhabha's meta-theoretical brand of postmodernist anti-identitarian and non-representational politics of "enunciation" as an alternative to the positivist dualism of theory and practice. Dobrogoszcz, who is also the translator of *The Location of Culture* into Polish, carefully unpacks Bhabha's psychoanalytical baggage tracing the ways in which the theorist is engaged with the ideas of Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, and Franz Fanon to finally suggest a deep-rooted indebtedness of postcolonial theory to psychoanalytical discourse.

The Heideggerian roots of much of theory are returned to in a consolidating reminder by Wojciech Majka. Majka turns to Heideggerian ideas on art as the disclosure of being to reflect on the transcendent quality of the work of art, seen as making itself manifest to the world independently of the artist's agency. In this context Majka postulates non-reductive and necessarily open interpretive approaches to art that would go beyond the limitations inherent in the perspectives offered by the "calculative thinking" of positive sciences.

David Waterman encourages us to look more deeply into Cultural Studies' liaisons with cross-disciplinarity vis-à-vis their currently overly rigid academic status, via the ideas of Richard E. Lee and Werner Heisenberg, arguing that theory should become more adept at inciting both its practitioners and readers to become social critics in a broader understanding of the term. This would entail, at least in the case of

literature, going beyond the text and venturing into the non-dialectical territory where a dynamic and productive synthesis of multiple perspectives could coexist. In this way, theory can and should stick to its potential of defying the rigidly formative influence of power.

Part II of our book, devoted to the presence of theoretical practices in the study of literature, can be best introduced by Rita Felski's words from her 2008 *Uses of Literature*:

Championing literature against theory turns out to be a contradiction in terms, for those who leap to literature's defense must resort to their own generalities, conjectures, and speculative claims. Even as he sulks and pouts at theory's baleful effects, Harold Bloom's assertion that we read "in order to strengthen the self and learn its authentic interests" is a quintessential theoretical statement. . . . We are sorely in need of richer and deeper accounts of how selves interact with texts.<sup>4</sup>

Much in the spirit of building bridges between literature and theory, Antoine Cazé's thought-provoking essay focuses on the communal act of thinking through writing and privileges the hybrid text as potentially effectuating destabilization of the stiffly demarcated boundary between theoretical and creative practice. Drawing from the theory of Jacques Rancière and the writing of Lyn Hejinian, who explicitly rejects the distinction between theoretical reflection and poetic practice, central to Cazé's essay is the significance of the landmark collaborative project of a group of major Language writers, *The Grand Piano*. He proposes to read this theoretical and creative collaboration as an exercise in developing a theory of writing in the form of collective autobiography and simultaneously as a processual act of recollecting and recording the emergence of the community founded on the "shared and shareable" *common sense*, in Hejinian's meaning of the term.<sup>5</sup>

Other explorations of autobiographical writing are offered by Tomasz Basiuk and Agnieszka Miksza. Suggesting autobiography's kinship with theory, Basiuk's in-depth reading of Edmund White's 2009 memoir demonstrates that White also destabilizes the genre by falling into the mode evocative of essay-writing and thus probes many of the theoretical concerns related to identity and sexuality present in queer theory since the 1990s. Miksza's essay elaborates on Jeanette Winterson's theory of authorship by focusing on the role of the fictional element in the process of creative re-invention of the authorial self, visible in the writer's fictional, theoretical, and (auto)biographical writings.

---

<sup>4</sup> Felski, *Uses of Literature*, 2, 11.

<sup>5</sup> Watten, *Grand Piano*, 3, 60.

Evoking Derrida's famous reading of Paul Celan, Wit Pietrzak investigates, via Richard Rorty, an active role of the critic who leaves an indelible mark on the text he explicates. Through such active explication, as Pietrzak suggests, an extended moral potential is revealed for both literature and criticism. Somewhat similarly ethically-oriented are the ways in which Grzegorz Czemiel's essay examines the poetic language that simultaneously performs a critical and argumentative gesture. Here, the questions about poetry's forays into the realm of philosophy form the thrust of a reading of Ciaran Carson's book of poems *For All We Know*. Czemiel sees Carson's poetry as deeply preoccupied with epistemological issues, which invites a discussion of the challenge presented by this poetry for modern literary criticism.

In the last two essays of this section, Olga Nesmelova and Zhanna Konovalova present a useful and thorough overview of theoretical underpinnings of the New Journalism that accompanied the development of new hybrid literary forms, whereas Aleksandra Bubiło contributes a provocative analysis of Samuel R. Delany's pornographic writings examined through the critical lenses of Deleuzian concept of pornological literature and the recently emergent field of pornography studies.

With Part III we move to the visual media. The axis of this section is formed by theoretical encounters with film narratives, beginning with Marek Wojtaszek's illuminating creative-critical reading of Joe Wright's 2009 film *The Soloist*. Wojtaszek takes the film to be exquisitely illustrative of what he terms, via Deleuzian thought, *immanent critique*; criticism as creation that reveals the univocity of theory and practice.

Preoccupied with pressing issues of feminist theory and practice, and by way of examining selected films portraying bathroom space as a new symbolic locus of women's entrapment, Katarzyna Poloczek identifies the reasons for the present-day crisis of feminist theoretical thought in oppositional rather than dialogical continuations of feminist theory and political practice, which has had a detrimental effect resulting not only in the movement's internally hampering antagonisms but also a more generally observed backlash wave against women. With the particular focus on psychoanalytic feminist film theory, Nina Czarnecka-Palka reflects on the uncertain promise of psychoanalysis for feminism, looking closely at what appears to be only a partial success of psychoanalytically oriented film criticism to move beyond its essentially phallogocentric thinking.

Robert Westerfelhaus, author of the final essay in this section, in his case-study of eight peer-reviewed journal articles devoted to the Bravo TV series *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, contends that the continuing

potential of Critical Theory derives precisely from a variety of contested readings and critiques, an argument that has been frequently used to discredit and undermine the efficacy of theory.

Part IV is devoted to what we have decided to term “external” practices in order to show that engagements with theory are not only proper or limited to the academic setting, nor do they have to be always realized in a characteristically academic format. Rod Stoneman’s theoretically informed yet intensely personal account traces his professional, even though not strictly academic, encounters with theory witnessed from a vantage point of a practitioner involved in the evolution of film and digital media and the accompanying theoretical practices since the 1970s. Stoneman’s is a memoir of a professional active in profit oriented environments outside academia, who has over the years found that he can usefully resort to tools provided by theory in his opposition to flat and mindless corporate thinking. Along different lines, poet, lecturer, and editor Mark Tardi contributes to the volume through an intriguing performative reading of Thalia Field’s experimental 2000 *Point and Line*. By engaging a variety of theoretical and poetic sources, Tardi performs a double gesture of demonstrating the sheer immensity of theoretical scope and formal innovation of Field’s text while simultaneously intervening in the writer’s speculative post-generic work that so effectively pulverizes the boundary between theory and practice.

Finally, we decided that the readers of the volume should also hear from writers, who, in their mature artistic pursuits, are even more independent of strictly “scientific” discussions of academia. We have contacted four very active and well-recognized young Polish poets—Julia Fiedorczuk, Maciej Melecki, Joanna Mueller, and Krzysztof Siwczyk—asking them to write short replies to the question of the possible connections between their poetic practice and forms of consciousness that we might call theoretical or philosophical. Their highly involving textual reactions are preceded by a text in which we decided to look more closely at the legitimacy of the question itself, thus returning once more to the central question of the volume: the vexed area of the cross-influences between philosophy, theory, and artistic practices.

—Małgorzata Myk and Kacper Bartczak

## Works Cited

- Butler, Judith. *Undoing Gender*. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Felski, Rita. *Uses of Literature*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008.
- Harryman, Carla. *Animal Instincts: Prose, Plays, Essays*. Berkeley, CA: This Press, 1989.
- Payne, Michael, and John Schad, eds. *life.after.theory*. New York: Continuum, 2003.
- Watten, Barrett, ed. *The Grand Piano: An Experiment in Collective Autobiography; San Francisco 1975–1980*. Detroit: Mode A / This Press, 2006–10.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank all our authors for their assistance and cooperation on the completion of this volume. Our special thanks go to Monika Kocot (University of Lodz) and her team of translators, including Lidia Błaszczyk and Joanna Matyjaszczyk, whose help was essential for one of the chapters in Part IV of the volume.



**PART I:**  
**THEORY—CONTINUATIONS**

# THE SPIDER AND THE BEE: HUMANITIES, THEORY, *UN RAPPORT AU MONDE*

TADEUSZ ŚLAWEK

... a holy instinct of not having a theory ...  
—Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Anxiety*

I want to hear the last poem of the last Poet  
—Jim Morrison, *Wilderness*

## I

What seems to be at stake in the present day crisis of the humanities is recognition of the fact that the crisis itself is larger than humanities themselves. Notwithstanding massive relocations of financing toward hard sciences, they are not immune to the present illness, and, perhaps, even have more acutely been touched by its incursions. To speak about the critical position of humanities is a smoke screen which cleverly masks a much more comprehensive uncertainty concerning epistemology in general particularly in its relation to ethics. Edmund Husserl defined this situation with penetrating insightfulness in his famous 1935 lecture *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie*, and Jan Patočka repeated and enhanced Husserl's diagnosis three decades later. We focus on the humanities because their reflection, when critically turning against itself, highlights a problem of a much more general character: if humanities feel anxious about their meaningfulness and usefulness, they may do so because we seem to have lost trust in reason which has previously energized our cognitive processes. If we complain we "don't make sense," we do it because we feel that knowledge finds it harder and harder to demonstrate itself as something more than mere instrumentality. No matter how successful physicists or biologists can be in their research, humanities with their experience of crisis subverts this sense of success not in order to deny progress achieved in particular disciplines but to claim that despite this progress we seem to make less sense of who we are, where we are, and

what we are here for. The three areas within which we see this particularly acutely refer to time, ordering, and existence. If we turned to Shakespeare to find appropriate descriptions of these areas we would get respectively Hamlet's famous claim that "time is of out joint," Ulysses' historiosophic theory concerning the "shak'd degree" (from Act 1 of *Troilus and Cressida*), and Macbeth's equally renowned confession following the death of his wife in Act 4: "Life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury." Since all these areas generate attitudes which, twisted together, form a particular kind of linkage between the man and the world, we may generally agree with two claims we find in the work of Jacques Derrida. One, coming from earlier works of the philosopher, concerns the necessity of taking up the idea of apocalypse as a provocative challenge vis-à-vis the established order of reason, the other, which we find in Derrida's late works, sets before us a task of rethinking our connection with the world, *une tache de repenser un nouveau rapport au monde*.<sup>1</sup> What is ahead of us is putting time back into its "joint," reintroducing some "measure" into our social life, and relearning the ability to hold still thus inviting meaning into a chaotic story of an "idiot."

## II

Two texts by Edgar Allan Poe will open this short meditation. In *The Colloquy of Monos and Una*, which is a report of personal demise and transition from life to death, a more general apocalypse, however, is present as well in the background. It is the end of the world, or rather of a certain world, the end announced here as a form of senility, the termination of the world losing its energies, despite rapid and nervous pace of changes, and approaching the end of its time. "The old age of the world drew on"<sup>2</sup> is Poe's verdict. And, in a manner redolent of what Husserl will do a hundred years later, he puts a blame on science as a chief factor in weakening a link between the man and the world. The complete sentence the ending clause of which we have just revoked reads: "Prematurely induced by the intemperance of knowledge, the old age of the world drew on." The "intemperance" in question is referred to several times as a "disease" the ethiology of which leads us to the claim that the origin of the disease is a triumph of abstract reasoning and its educational institutions ("harsh mathematical reason of the schools") over something which, itself difficult to render in words, can be approximated as a leaning not away

---

<sup>1</sup> Chérif, *L'Islam et L'Occident*, 128.

<sup>2</sup> Poe, *Unabridged*, 704–11.

from but towards the world—what Poe describes as “the sentiment of the natural.” Now we can venture a suggestion that the development of civilization has occurred under the dictate of the propensity towards reducing, and ultimately severing, our connection with the world which, first, gave us “individual Artificialities” of some cultures (Poe mentions Assyria, Egypt, Nubia), and, then, infected the “world at large.” Poe uses the notion of the “end,” of the apocalyptic force just about to explode, to undertake a critique of the modern culture and its central myth of progress. Like E. E. Cummings, he suspects that “progress is a comfortable disease: / your victim (death and life safely beyond) / plays with the bigness of his littleness.”<sup>3</sup> The theory of the “end” (or the “end” as a focal point of theory) brings back what has been exiled “safely beyond” our concerns and what, in fact, constitutes the very heart thus baring the fact that our culture is spectral with the practice of life and death present merely in the form of the undesirable alien, an expatriate, a *sans papier*. Theory reminds us of what we have decided to “forget”—of life and death.

### III

Henry David Thoreau will give us a meticulous analysis of this “infection” in his 1854 classic *Walden* in which technology and instrumental reason are seen as chief forces responsible for the unfortunate twist of the human history resulting in the disturbed and overturned hierarchy of concerns: “Our invention are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things. They are but improved means to an unimproved end, end which it was already but too easy to arrive at; as railroads lead to Boston or New York.”<sup>4</sup> Theory, which as Thoreau’s example demonstrates, becomes practice, speaks on behalf of seriousness our lives seem to be bereft of, and, at the same time, it works in the name of “improved” (i.e. serious) ends, the ends which differ from the “easy” tasks constituting the routine of the everyday. With an eye on Derrida’s essay on the ends of man, we can say that these “improved,” “difficult,” ends of theory spell the end (in the sense of terminating, putting a stop to) of the end (purpose) of our concerns concentrated on what is immediately useful and practicable. In other words, theory is a meditation on the uses of usability, a thinking of the useful itself which shows how mistaken we are in our ungrounded but fossilized conviction that usefulness is the key notion of our culture.

---

<sup>3</sup> Cummings, *100 Selected Poems*, 89.

<sup>4</sup> Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience*, 35.

## IV

The other short text, *The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion*,<sup>5</sup> sets us right in front of apocalypse which is not a metaphor but a literal scorching and destroying conflagration. The final words of the dialogue do not leave space for doubts. “Thus ended all,” the phrase speaks not of “some” ending which leaves open spaces for a continuation and further action in other areas, the ending refers to the totality of existence. There is nothing which escapes the regime of ending. This is a sentence which ushers in the sublime of which Jean-François Lyotard two decades ago said that it subverts our persistent conviction that there is nothing that could be described as the “last,” and that a sentence will come after a sentence and a colour will follow a colour, and that the heart of education is precisely inculcation of this truth “something” will always be happening. Even the cosmic ending of the exploding sun expected in 4.5 billion years does not invalidate this belief. “It’s impossible to think an end, pure and simple of anything at all, since the end’s limit and to think it you have to be on both sides of that limit. So what’s finished or finite has to be perpetuated in our thought if it’s to be thought of as finished.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, our existence is founded upon the unshaken belief that things “will be happening” even if we personally cease “to happen.” Poe’s categorical dictum rejects this firm article of faith, and introduces to us time and space in which “nothing happens.” This is a meaning of apocalypse with which we have to struggle: even if it does come as a spectacular event, its main impact lies in the fact that afterwards “nothing happens,” or—to be more accurate—after Apocalypse “happens nothing.” The void implied by the word “nothing” is then not quite “empty,” “vacant” or “hollow”; in it there lurks always, i.e. as long as we can think, as long as we maintain our thinking in operation, some presence. This void is not absolutely tenantless because it is precisely “nothing” that happens there. And if we have problems with naming this unidentified vague presence, we give it the name of “God,” a being which defies descriptions pertaining to any specific object. The void where “nothing” happens is not “godforsaken” because what “happens” when everything seems to be “ended” is indeed “God.” Sublimity of religious experience consists in this aporetic situation in which “nothing,” without losing its qualities, is illuminated by a “something” which emerges from within. Jean-Francois Lyotard considers this problem in his *Inhuman*: “One feels that it is possible that soon nothing more will take

---

<sup>5</sup> Poe, *Unabridged*, 566–72.

<sup>6</sup> Lyotard, “Can Thought Go on,” 129.

place. What is sublime is the feeling that something will happen, despite everything, within this threatening void, that something will take ‘place’ and will announce that everything is not over.”<sup>7</sup>

## V

Hence our thesis no. 1: **theory is a discourse which always has in view the end after which happens nothing. It is interested and tries to voice the happening of this nothing which is never certain.** The “no” present in “nothing” is therefore a variety of “yes” which allows us to approach what, to quote E.E. Cummings, “lifted from the no / of all nothing.”<sup>8</sup> This means that “no” which is the proper element of theory does not allow itself to be understood as a merely negative and negating force responding to other forces annihilating their presence. It is a negative which, like Freud’s unconscious, does not know the negative because it is the negative itself, and in this it reveals its “positive” potential. We call this activity of the “no” of theory “positive” as it is not merely a spectral reflection which rejects what we already know and what exists here and now (Blake’s “distorted & reversed Reflection in the Darkness”); it is “positive” in a sense that it does not flatly negate but uses and reshapes what has so far been, thus providing them with a stronger form of existence. In Blake’s terms, the “no” in question represents the “Contraries” of which he speaks in *Jerusalem*: “Negations are not Contraries: Contraries mutually Exist; / But Negations Exist Not. Exceptions & Objections & Unbeliefs / Exist Not, nor shall they ever be Organized for ever & ever.”<sup>9</sup> Meaning which lurks in this space of the “no” of “nothing” is in the state of permanent “organization” (“for ever & ever”) and goes beyond the register of “something(s)” (“Exceptions & Objections & Unbeliefs”). As Vattimo explains the “meaning we seek to recuperate tends to identify itself with nothingness, with the fleeting traits of an existence enclosed between the boundaries of birth and death.”<sup>10</sup>

## VI

What is at stake is this movement from “some” to “no” which summarizes most vital concerns of humanities as a kind of thinking

---

<sup>7</sup> Lyotard, *Inhuman*, 84.

<sup>8</sup> Cummings, *100 Selected Poems*, 114.

<sup>9</sup> Blake, *Complete Writings*, 639.

<sup>10</sup> Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 21.

preoccupied with this shift from “something” to “nothing” which implies (1) investigation of the status of the thing (the thing of which we speak as “some” is surely different from the thing referred to as “nothing”). In brief—things are never what we take them to be; (2) if “some” implies a possibility, if not necessity, of multiplication, of adding, of summation and accumulation, “no” opposes this tendency, and speaks on behalf of reduction, subtraction, and impoverishment; (3) hence the implication of apocalypse which in its fire and “intense flame, for whose surpassing brilliancy and all-fervid heat even the angels in the high Heaven of pure knowledge have no name” (Eiros in Poe’s *Conversation*) reduces all “some” to ashes; (4) thus, humanities is a kind of thinking which stems out of ashes of things as we know them, and therefore apocalyptic fire is its element. Thinking as apocalypse of “some”thing(s). Such a topography is liminal for two reasons. First, the “no” of theory (i.e., the “no” of nothing) puts a very heavy demand on language which finds itself on the very edge where it has to name “something” for which there is “no name”, and yet it has to name it. The sublimity of this position (we know from Lyotard that the sublime is the way of presenting the unrepresentable, presenting the unrepresentable while confessing its unrepresentability) is more acute because it refers both to the protocols of secular (“knowledge”) and divine (“high Heaven of pure knowledge”) naming. The second *limes* concerns thinking which cannot survive the end of the matter; the “nothing” which we think must be already a kind of “something.” As Lyotard maintains: “thought as quest dies out with the sun” and “Thought borrows a horizon and orientation, the limitless limit and the end without end it assumes, from the corporeal, sensory, emotional and cognitive experience of a quite sophisticated but definitely earthly existence.”<sup>11</sup> In theory “something” and “nothing” not only become adjacent but begin to interfere, if not coincide, with each other.

Such a positioning cannot make humanities popular since culture sees itself as a machine for producing and collecting things indispensable for progress of science, consumerism conditioning capitalist economy. “No”thing is a slap on the face of capitalism; then (5) humanities distinguish carefully between the pulverizing and purifying fire and between two kinds of war which these two types conflagration imply. The former is the fire that turns itself against life in the service of the machinery of the wrong war—the fire of Auschwitz; the latter is the fire of critical tension, of resistance and polemical strive, the fire of Heraclitus which does not negate life but is its very heart, and belongs to the war that

---

<sup>11</sup> Lyotard, “Can Thought Go on,” 130.

Christ was talking about when he announced that he was not bringing peace but the sword. As N.O. Brown puts it: “Not peace but a sword. Peace lies in finding the true war. The reconciliation of opposites, the making of friendship, takes place on the battlefield.”<sup>12</sup>

## VII

This “end” is of a specific order. If it meant only what we usually take it to mean, the end as a definite terminus, it would inevitably turn itself into another “thing,” another “some”thing. Such an “end” is what we are familiar with, whereas the end humanities ought to be thinking belongs to a different order: if it introduces “no”thing, it already defies the end as we normally conceive it, as a thing, an event. The end we are thinking does not “end” anything, it suspends, undermines, perhaps even destroys “some”thing, but does not leave us empty-handed; now we have to concern ourselves with “no”thing. This is a blow to all the regulations of knowledge: not only do we not have anything at our disposal, anything to think about, anything to add to what we already know and have, but also—faced and challenged by “no”thing—we can do nothing else but wait. Unlike “some”thing which is always here with us constituting our world, “no”thing keeps us waiting, it is always coming, on its way towards us, it is also wholly Other. And therefore our world is also different, unready, unconstituted or deconstructed, undone and unmade. It is and it is not. What is demanded of us in this situation is patience and hospitality. This is what Jacques Derrida tries to capture in his late text on “A Silkworm of One’s Own” in which he thinks the end of our time and “another figure [which] perhaps upsets the whole history from top to bottom, and upsets even the meaning of the word ‘history,’ ” the figure which is “unfigurable” and “who comes to strike dumb the order of our knowledge: neither known nor unknown, too well-known but a stranger from head to foot, yet to be born.” This strange character defamiliarizes the sense of ending. Its verdict is “end of the end of history, everything is going to start again.”<sup>13</sup>

## VIII

Perhaps another important question then concerns amassing, gathering, and accumulating. And because we know only what we have collected for our use, the question concerns knowledge. As we speak about “collecting

---

<sup>12</sup> Brown, *Love’s Body*, 180.

<sup>13</sup> Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, 317.



data” and “gathering materials” our knowledge depends thoroughly on these procedures which allow us to construct lists, catalogues but also arrange them in structures, sequences and chains of occurrences. Things happen in knowledge because knowledge is regulated by collecting “some”thing(s). When we move to the realm of “no”thing the situation changes: now nothing happens and since nothing is precluded from the area of knowledge (unless one would include mysticism into this concept which would not most likely be welcome by majority of scientists), we cannot know what truly happens. As Derrida puts it: “What knowledge does not know, is what happens.”<sup>14</sup> When we “cease” to know, the world happens. Thesis number 2: **theory discloses less what happens IN the world and more tries to show HOW the world happens. And particularly it searches for the way to articulate (always imperfectly) how WE happen to the world. Theory onthologizes.** But, in keeping with its premises, in the same gesture theory de-onthologizes since, operating on the thin threshold between “something” and “nothing,” theory constantly destabilizes solid identities and undermines the regimes of ipseity. Theory believes with Jean-Luc Nancy that “a pure identity would not only be inert, empty, colorless, and flavorless (as those who lay claim to a pure identity so often are), it would be an absurdity. A pure identity cancels itself out; it can no longer identify itself.”<sup>15</sup>

## IX

Theory is an attempt to see what is happening if not totally outside knowledge and its collecting and collective dispositions, then at its far periphery. It does not mean that theory defies knowledge and its discourses. Just the opposite—theory aims at defending knowledge against its own mechanisms which tend to deify it and turn it into a machinery delivering useful products. If the happening of literature and its meaning happens outside knowledge, it wants to raise questions concerning the very sense and meaning of “use.” It wants to be most useful by being, from the point of view of sciences, thoroughly “useless.” Yet the writing of theory is not illegible; when theorizing, we do not forget how to speak or write. To the contrary, the example of Derrida teaches that theory indulges in writing, celebrates *écriture*. But we could say that theory does it in order to unconceal within knowledge another kind of knowing which goes against the current of knowledge as data collecting and explanation.

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 351.

<sup>15</sup> Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 153.

Theory's vocation is Penelope's: to weave in order to unweave. The maker of veils—Schleiermacher. Penelope operated on the frontier of two worlds: of making and hence of “some” thing and unmaking, and thus of “no”thing. By subverting home with its traditions of collecting and sheltering what has been collected and preserved (Telemachus, with his constant complaint that his mother's suitors ruin the accumulated family treasure, is a good example of one who has remained deeply attached to these traditions), she managed to save home for her wayward husband. The dense veil of words of theory means not to name what is happening because it belongs to the realm of “no”thing. Thus, long pages of Derrida's work are, paradoxically, trying to reach and perhaps name the essential silence: the speaker has been speaking for so long and with such a strain and scream that his voice has gotten husky. Theory speaks with the voice of Tom Waits. Derrida writes: “How can one speak of a veiled voice, a husky voice, still veiled even in song, and even when shouting?”<sup>16</sup> Thesis no. 3: **the task of theory is to protect silence of nothing happening against the nervous, talkative, impatient world which wants to see too many things happening at the same time.**

## X

Theory thus creates the situation in which we say much in order to evoke silence. Paradoxically, we say much to say less than what we are saying, and the act of theorizing is, in fact, despite a barrage of words, a certain form of diminution. Of this diminution Derrida says that in it “nothing is undone” and it “consists in saying less, sure, but with a view to *letting* more be understood.”<sup>17</sup> Derrida italicizes “letting” because it marks a crucial moment in thinking and practicing theory: a good theory must reach this point at which it will “let” something more be understood, something more than theory and more than what theory is trying to theorize. “Let”, that is through the use of words create space in which “no”thing could make itself seen also its very name would have to remain unfigurable. Hence the veil of words which is not only an obstacle but also a protective shield. Derrida voices the desire to “touch the word and the thing thus named, the thing itself and the vocable”, the desire which also wishes to have its own language: “I would like not only to see them . . . but maintain a discourse about them . . . a ‘relevant’ discourse which

---

<sup>16</sup> Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, 337.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 312.

would say them properly.”<sup>18</sup> What we do in theory is not “grasp” anything but just the opposite—we “let go,” do not “catch” but “liberate.” This is a democratic politics of theory, a libertarian politics which freeing “no”thing rejects fundamentalisms which are bound to appear and reappear when politics is conducted under the auspices of “some”thing. Thinking theory implies a distance from “some”thing understood as being well determined and solidified, but it is equally distant from the nihilism of “nothing” conceived of as a simple denial of “something.” The “no”thing unconcealed by theory is what appears in these two distances of “letting go.” As the Spanish philosopher Maria Zambrano maintains, “This double distance cannot form a new subject of the political, but is the site for the appearance of that which dwells in the unthought of modern subjectivity. It is the promise of another constitution of the political.”<sup>19</sup> Hence, thesis no. 3: **theory is a way in which modern political subject tries to constitute itself without however falling into premeditated political schemes.**

## XI

There must be then some necessary obliqueness in all theory which is a kind of thinking that approaches its subjects always indirectly. This meandering indirectness consists in the two processes which we already know: one—we say more to, in fact, say less, the other—because of this inevitably unsuccessful evoking of silence, theory is bound to miss the point and never arrive at its destination. This is what Derrida, in his 1898 text “Force of Law,” asks about deconstruction: “Why does deconstruction have the reputation . . . of treating things *obliquely*, indirectly, in the indirect style, with so many ‘quotation marks,’ and while always asking whether things arrive at the indicated address?”<sup>20</sup> Thus, thesis no. 4: **the point that theory demonstrates is that it is impossible to speak directly about meaning, and hence theory always sounds a warning bugle call against those, be they individuals or institutions, who proclaim their right to voice truth directly.** This is what has from the very beginning constituted the essential background of deconstructions: “Respect for contextual, academico-institutional, discursive specificities, and mistrust for analogies and hasty transpositions, for confused homogenizations,

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 313.

<sup>19</sup> Moreiras, “Last God,” 182.

<sup>20</sup> Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, 244.

seem to me to be the first imperative of in the current state of affairs.”<sup>21</sup> As Norman O. Brown warns us, “we should not put in too much meaning,” instead we should put “enough [of] nothing.”<sup>22</sup>

## XII

Theory is therefore “critical,” but the focal point of this critical thinking is not fossilized in the unavoidable act of judgment. Such an act is mandatory, but it does not extend towards the decisive sentence concerning the object of judgment. Theory “judges,” but this practice turns upon itself asking what the grounds for judgment are, on what foundation a given judgement is based, as if proclaiming a mistrust towards what, at least since Enlightenment, should be an obvious and unquestionable corner-stone of any judgment—reason. Following Marquard’s idea of “over tribunalization” (*Übertribunalisierung*), we could claim that at least since Enlightenment all major decisions within the field of ethics and aesthetics had to answer to the demands of reason as the ultimate legitimizing power. It is the excessive rule of reason which, acting as a sole sovereign power, not only subjects all other possible mental faculties but plainly tries to radically reduce, if not eliminate, them, that presides over modernity. William Blake diagnosed this fact penetratingly in his works and that is why in his mythological domain the earth, referred to as the land of Ulro, is confined by the restrictive force of Urizen.

Theory follows in the wake of Blake’s thought, and hence reason does not seem to be the ground which theory thinks although inevitably it has to follow procedures of rationality to confess this suspicion. The ground of judgment which theory investigates is radically other. And if there is talk about the other and its alterity, then necessarily what emerges calling for our attention is a question of justice which regulates how we treat the foreign body. For theory, the relationship between the text and meaning is parallel to the connection holding between law and justice. The former always calls for deconstructions, the latter is undeconstructible. Not only do we have to watch carefully the legislative authorities and its performative agencies in order to see how and in whose interests this or that particular law has been formulated and is being enacted always by force, but we have to, at the same time, realize that what we call “justice” is endlessly different from the law and is founded upon the ground which goes beyond the limits of reason. This is what Derrida refers to as the

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 237.

<sup>22</sup> Pendell, *Walking with Nobby*, 135.

“mystical foundations of law” explaining that “There is here a silence walled up in the violent structure of the founding act; walled up, walled in because this silence is not exterior to language.”<sup>23</sup> In the same way, theory always dismantles, undoes, deconstructs the text while realizing that meaning remains beyond the limits of language. This meaning however has to confess and reiterate its own limitations, and is therefore undeconstructible. There is nothing we can do about meaning, which statement we understand as a proclamation of our greatest power—there is NOTHING we can do about meaning, and it is only this NOTHING which we constantly approach and lose from our vision that makes sense of theory. If Derrida is right in his claim that “Deconstruction is justice”<sup>24</sup> because it constantly draws our attention to the abuses of the so called “justice” which we carelessly identify with law, then we can say that “theory is meaning” because thinking and practicing theory we do not allow ourselves to be imprisoned by any forcefully imposed upon us meaning, even if it is us that enforce a particular meaning upon ourselves. Hence theses no. 5: **theory redeemingly distances us from meaning as a source of violent imposition and enactment of force.** Perhaps when Christianity speaks of “love,” of *caritas*, it wants to suggest that the meaning of salvation is due to the fact that we are saved from meaning, saved perhaps even from salvation. Resurrection is NOTHING rising from the dead body of “some”thing. An act of *anamnesis*: in theory we remember NOTHING which we have forgotten in the existential practice which necessarily surrounds us with “some”things. Resurrection: meaning saved and risen from meaning as a desire for meaning, academia saved from academic pretentiousness. Norman O. Brown confesses this well: “Interpretation . . . I’ve got a vivid image. Look at the futility of seminars I had on *Finnegans Wake* . . . I don’t know what it means. But I can say, ‘Well, all be dumbed.’”<sup>25</sup>

### XIII

Quite simply, we can turn to the wisdom of Hans Christian Andersen and say that theory is to be understood in the light of the story of the Emperor’s New Clothes: “The learning to be unlearned; the simplicity to be acquired. The great, the terrible simplification, the last judgment.”<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, 242.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 243.

<sup>25</sup> Brown, *Challenge of Islam*, 51.

<sup>26</sup> Brown, *Love’s Body*, 231.

This is why the discourse of theory needs so many words and categories: in order to unlearn them, to point at the silence which is the rest: "The rest is silence; after the last judgement, the silence."<sup>27</sup> But this silence is momentarily broken by the discovery that what Andersen's tale reveals is the fact that even the act of unweaving itself does not bring us to the final destination called "nudity" or "truth" ("Exhibiting, denuding, undressing, unveiling: the familiar acrobatics of the metaphor of the truth"<sup>28</sup>), but that it creates and weaves another form of clothing. This is what we have called in this essay the positive potential of the "no": it undoes but this very act already is a form of certain doing. As Derrida puts it when reading Andersen's tale: "What the formal, literary, secondary *Einkleidung* veils and unveils is the dream of veiling/unveiling, the unity of the veil, the disguise, and the denuding. . . . If one takes into account the more than metaphoric equation between veil, text, and textile, Andersen's text has the text as its theme."<sup>29</sup> It follows that the essential theme of theory must be an ongoing discussion of the ways in which truth permanently hides itself from our eyesight, and Heraclitus' famous fragment which attributes to nature the disposition towards hiding could be one of theory's guiding principles. This implies that a certain blindness dwells in the discourse of theory: when it claims it sees "something," this "something" melts into "nothing," and what was seen becomes un-seen, not invisible but precisely un-seen, i.e. caught in the movement between "something" and "nothing." R. S. Thomas, arguably the greatest religious poet of the twentieth century, grasps this phenomenon in the following poem: "Looking at it / without seeing it. / Is this the secret / of life, the masked ball / which meaning attends / incognito, as once men looked / in a manger, failing / to see the beast for the god?"<sup>30</sup>

#### XIV

In 1704 Jonathan Swift publishes his famous *The Battle of Books* in which we find three figures of importance for our meditation. First is "a certain spider,"<sup>31</sup> a form which is the excessive growth of life (its body "is swollen to the first magnitude") parasiting on corpses of other beings ("destruction of infinite number of flies, whose spoils lay scattered before the gates of his palace"). What is crucial for this creature is the fact that

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 256.

<sup>28</sup> Derrida, *Post Card*, 415.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 418.

<sup>30</sup> Thomas, *Collected Later Poems*, 100.

<sup>31</sup> Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, 404.