

Introduction

The Resistibility of Theory: Repositioning, Returning, Reclaiming Critical Practice

Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callus

Theory's Positions on/in Disciplinarity

It is said that Archimedes would have levered the world. It is certain that Bruno Latour has spoken of science's raising of the world from a laboratory.¹ It is doubtful whether either of the two tasks is easier than positioning theory. The doubts arise not only because of debate over the nature of theory (in other words, over what it is precisely that is to be positioned), but also because of perplexity over who, or what, theory's positioning could possibly be down to, and the not unreasonable suspicion that it might not actually be down to anybody or anything at all. In other words, nobody and nothing is responsible for theory, in much the same way that nobody and nothing can be responsible for mathematics, or philosophy, or English. Martin Heidegger, who was remarkably pragmatic when conceding that "[w]e simply have to acknowledge the fact that a philosophy is the way it is," would have understood this.² Theory "just is." Weightily, it resists (re)positioning.

Of course, it was not always so. There was a time when theory was not. That is to say that there was a time when theory was not in the university, and there was then a

time when it very incontrovertibly was. Any account of this development would need to recall how theory “took on” disciplinarity by making itself subject to institutional apparatus that called it into being with identifications of genealogies and repertoires that were particularized enough to make up the matter of a “new” discipline. This encounter with disciplinarity, however, was something that theory also experienced according to the connotation of confrontation that can be conveyed by the phrase *take on*. In other words, theory took on disciplinarity by attempting to contest the process of its own transformation into a distinct object of pedagogy.

It could be argued that theory cannot but engage in that contestation. This obligation arises from curricular presence within the university being consequent upon participation in an academic infrastructure that busies itself with all kinds of practicalities. Such participation is necessary to the operations of disciplinarity, but just as it is to be supposed that few radicals will appear very insurrectional if seen going about their chores, so theory must work to resist any suggestion of being too domesticated by the structures which host it. It would not do, for a discipline like theory that believes itself singularly appointed to radical critical practice, to appear too restricted by the practicalities binding it to the university. Like nations, disciplines must tell themselves and the world at large narratives concerning their own engendering and uniqueness—and theory has often responded to this call by regularly reasserting its commitment to radical critical practice, which thereby (this, at least, is the suggestion) renders it resistant to any denaturing that might derive from collusion with disciplinarity.

The twist to this story is that theory has so often offered itself up as the object of its own radical practice. As our preface showed and indeed itself reaffirmed, theory

repeatedly undertakes a commitment to critically return upon itself. This task grows particularly urgent if, as argued by Mas'ud Zavarzadeh and Donald Morton in *Theory as Resistance* (1994), the principal menace facing theory becomes lodged within theory's very disciplinarity in a manner which compromises its practice.³ In such circumstances it is theorists themselves, and they alone, who can mount the counter that might sustain theory's irresistibility, acting against theory's institutionality from within. And in a dramatic gesture exemplifying this ethic, Zavarzadeh and Morton sounded a call to "daily hand-to-hand combat with the liberal pluralism that underlies today's resistance to theory," doing so in the wake of their profound disaffection with the results of what they regarded as theory's increasingly stultifying disciplinarity in universities in the United States. Their disenchantment arose from resistance within the discipline to their campaigning in favor of a form of radical practice which they called "critical cultural studies." This would have entailed "a study that implicates knowledge and subjects in the political economy of knowing and working," with theory understood in the sense of "a grasping of the world historically for the sake of transforming it in a collective fashion."⁴ In the fallout, Zavarzadeh and Morton were cast as proponents of ideas that were "extremist" and "dogmatic"; they responded by arguing that theory's disciplinarity was a variation on the motif of "[b]ourgeois institutions . . . constantly absorbing the elements of culture that oppose them." Through that process, "tenured radical," far from being seen as integral to theory and to an ethos committed to a certain kind of critical practice, ends up shunned.⁵

The bitterness of the struggle is brought home, in a remarkable demonstration of theory at odds with itself, in Zavarzadeh and Morton's taking to task of some of the very figures represented most prominently in theory's "curriculum":

The resistance to theory is being promoted today in dominant academic and intellectual circles by a large number of writers: (post)structuralists like de Man, Derrida, Lyotard; pragmatists like Fish and Rorty; performativists like Jardine and Butler; old liberals like Graff and Henry Louis Gates; advocates of the cult of experience like bell hooks, Lawrence Grossberg, Constance Penley, Andrew Ross, and other cultural studies critics; and those post-Marxists like Spivak, Aronowitz, Mouffe, and Laclau, who have in fact legitimated most of the dominant theories.⁶

This indictment suggests that, contrary to what might conventionally be thought, it is in being seen to try to put its house in order that theory's credentials as a firebrand are most effectively sustained. Theory moves to safeguard its own radicality and to prevent the domestication that arises from institutionalization by going about the chore of laundering its linen publicly, by coming clean about itself.⁷ To this view, theory is most irresistible when it counters "outside" attempts to test its irresistibility with preemptive moves ensuring that it does not become resistible to itself or to its most radical instantiations. Only thus will it be able to return to the fray, purged, revitalized, and steeled against those who resist it.

Accordingly, and at some length, here are Zavarzadeh and Morton, preparing to sweep clean:

For quite some time now . . . contemporary theory (antitheory theory) has been the captive of professionals of ideology. These are persons who have made careers out of watching over theory's "purity" and promoting what they regard to be its "strict" and "proper" uses within the confines of bourgeois academic and intellectual institutions. . . . In their hands theory has lost its radical, transformative power and become just one more institutional discourse among many others. . . . In other words, although at one time, theory constituted a stubborn and resistant "outside" to the academy, it has become an insider.⁸

This is a contestation of what is proper *to* theory that proceeds by questioning what is proper *in* theory. The English ambiguity over *proper* as "belonging or relating to the person or thing in question, distinctively" and as "in conformity with rule" (*Oxford English Dictionary*) is overlaid with the French denotation of cleanliness through the word *propre*. Zavarzadeh and Morton speak of how theory can be made to claim back what is proper to it, of how cleaning up its act must paradoxically involve ensuring that theory gets itself dirty, so that it reclaims what is proper to it by not being too proper, too prim, too correct. Theory, then, must "clean up" by getting "stuck in." The chore of this particular radical within the academy, then, involves not being too much within the academy. Theory puts its house in order by not being too happily within it, by reasserting a radicality that it believes is at the origin of its being and upholding it. This, in a reworking of Freudian returns, is the uncanniness of theory. It is at home, it is engaged in putting its house in order, it is *heimlich*, when it is not too much inside because it is about, busying itself with the

unheimlich quality of getting round returning to itself, and thence being radical. And it is this uncanniness, this return, this revisiting [*revenir sur*] anticipated in the preface, that secures the irresistibility of theory.

This goes some way toward explaining the compulsiveness with which theory thinks its own nature, and its disciplinarity. There surely cannot ever have been a discipline with quite such an abiding interest in itself. *Resistance to Theory, Theory as Resistance, The Limits of Theory, In the Wake of Theory, The Theory Mess, Post-Theory, The Future of Theory, Disciplinarity at the Fin-de-Siècle*: titles like these, in books either contesting or championing theory's probity and longevity, assert the fact of theory's disciplinarity by investigating that disciplinarity as such, in all its implications.⁹ The essays in this volume, which in their different ways all attempt a renegotiation of theory's disciplinarity and practice, themselves exemplify this trend. Their containment within these covers is a demonstration that theory, in probing yet again the conditions of its own positioning within the university, goes on to affirm its presence there. Indeed, if there is anything that is a constant in the essays that follow it is that the *fact* of theory's disciplinarity is not resented. Indeed many of the essays (like those by Venuti, Milesi, or Wortham), dwell on how it might be more cogently readdressed.

That kind of position appears to be opposed to Zavarzadeh and Morton's. This is not to say that the latter position is not justified in hoping that theory's irresistibility rests on something that goes not only goes beyond the practicalities which have made it possible to graduate in theory and indeed to make a career in theory, but also on something unswayed by theory's almost pathological indulgence of the autotelic (which some might prefer to regard as the egotistical) and its instinct to regard this as

security against its own imperishability. This something would need to resist theory's self-consciousness about its own disciplinarity and practice with the call from and of an "outside" that theory cannot but apprehend and attempt to answer. In fact Zavarzadeh and Morton argue that theory should maintain the notion of an "outside" to the existing system's "inside," urging what they refer to as "disparticipation," that is, pointing to "the *possible* which is suppressed in the pragmatic *is*" (authors' emphasis).¹⁰ This recalls a point made at the beginning of this essay. If theory as a discipline, now, "just is," it surely cannot be fulfilling the ethic of radicality which it believes itself singularly called to. That radicality is not easily reducible to a teachable content; nor should it be amenable to a pragmatic and established disciplinarity that "just is" there, rather like a challenging mountain for intrepid undergraduates and postgraduates to climb. Nor is it necessarily safeguarded by the notion that theory's singularity is bound up with an experience of the "aporetic" and the "living on borderlines"—in other words with what escapes pedagogic capture and makes inapprehensibility to disciplinarity *the* matter of theory.¹¹

A difficulty consequently arises from differences over what precisely it is that constitutes theory's singularity, its radicality, and hence its "outside." Particularly relevant here is a view—one contrary to Zavarzadeh and Morton's—that regards the best practice of theory as one that plants, at the base of theory's disciplinarity, a radix that does not necessarily equate radicality with growth towards a politicized outside but is happy to remain rooted in itself. The consequence of this view is the belief that theory is singular because it can constitute its own outside, so that it suffices that theory return upon itself for it to be radical, with resistance being

construed as self-resistance. At stake, then, is an even more powerful articulation of the view of the autotelic impulse within theory, such that the disparticipation of theory would then not only not require cooperation with the “pragmatic *is*,” but would involve theory being impossible, in all senses of that word. The nature of this (im)possibility demands closer scrutiny.

The Impossible Irresistibility of Theory

The best known expression of the impossibility contemplated above is to be found in the conclusion of Paul de Man’s essay “The Resistance to Theory”:

Nothing can overcome the resistance to theory since theory *is* itself this resistance. The loftier the aims and the better the methods of literary theory, the less possible it becomes. Yet literary theory is not in danger of going under; it cannot help but flourish, and the more it is resisted, the more it flourishes, since the language it speaks is the language of self-resistance. What remains impossible to decide is whether this flourishing is a triumph or a fall.¹²

An (un)cannier policy underwriting theory’s survival could scarcely have been devised. The best resistance to theory, de Man suggests, is the challenge that originates from within theory’s own discourse, which fortifies it against challenges proceeding from without. Despite a superficial similarity between positions that both seem to charge theory with the responsibility of looking within itself in order to “look out” better, this challenge is not analogous to that mounted by Zavarzadeh and

Morton upon theory's disciplinarity and curricula. This is because the challenge foreseen by de Man is entrenched in rhetoricity and in the elusiveness of the signifier. It stands aloof from any practice or agitation undertaken in allegiance to an achievable signified. Theory, as a discourse, ensures its own survival by questioning itself, by binding itself to the ethic of self-vigilance which in other contexts—for instance, in Jacques Derrida's references to the call for “interminable self-critique”—it enjoins upon others.¹³

It is tempting to invoke here a clichéd motif from T. S. Eliot's “Little Gidding.” Might it not be true that theory's compulsion to repeat returning upon itself occurs because only thus can it know itself for the first time, whence comes the capacity for its own renewal and its rediscovery of its radical potential, but also the dangers of complacency? Yet de Man's words are not to be so easily glossed, nor so easily glossed over. Surely it is significant that theory is pointedly represented throughout his essay as *literary* theory. Here, in fact, lies the particularity of de Man's understanding of theory's return upon itself. It is from this that the impossibility proceeds: from his investment in the *literary* signifier. He shuns using the word *theory* in generalized reference to what goes on under designations like *critical theory*, *cultural theory*, or what Zavarzadeh and Morton have called “critical cultural studies.” What this lexical choice asserts is that only theory that takes literature as its object can discover resources for mounting the kind of resistance he speaks of. That supposition is probed in greater detail below; for the moment it is enough to note that to this view the implications of theory taking as its object, for instance, “culture” (as it has done, and very cogently too, in certain essays in this volume, to take just one example) are that it then finds its capacity for self-resistance diminished. Similarly, if

it sets itself up specifically to be *critical*—thereby taking to heart its presumed vocation for a radical and determining intervening—it is debarred from the special capacity for resistance and self-resistance accorded to *literary* theory.

There is more. “Literary theory” becomes less possible, in de Man’s opinion, if its aims become “loftier” and its “methods” better. Aims and methods are the stuff of pedagogy; indeed, of disciplinarity. In other words, disciplinarity is liable to impair what is best about theory. This, at least, provides a point of convergence between de Man’s text and the position staked out by Zavarzadeh and Morton. The latter’s suspicion of the institutionalization of theory comes from their mistrust of a professionalized theory.¹⁴ In tone, if not in perspective, this is not too far away from de Man’s well-known ambivalence about the inescapability of pedagogy. This ambivalence may seem surprising, particularly in view of de Man’s sponsorship of “Yale” criticism (which could be very professional), and also in the light of Wlad Godzich having pointed out de Man’s abiding interest in “questions of pedagogy and institutional determination.”¹⁵ But de Man, it must be remembered, could be scornful of the obligations and compromises necessitated by disciplinarity and pedagogy: “The only teaching worthy of the name is scholarly, not personal; analogies between teaching and various aspects of show business or guidance counselling are more often than not excuses for having abdicated the task. . . . For a method that cannot be made to suit the ‘truth’ of its object can only teach delusion.”¹⁶ This invocation of truth is perhaps incongruous or at any rate disingenuous coming from a poststructuralist, but it serves to stress the strength of feeling at work here about the propriety of theory. Most of all, it frets at the aggravating distance from the best

instantiations of theory that is opened up by processes of disciplinarity that reduce theory to a teachable content, to a “pragmatic *is*.”

The fear is that once those processes dole theory into discrete curricular packages that make it amenable to the operations of transmissibility, assessment, and accreditation, what results can be only a delusion of theory. What theory could be, at its best, becomes denatured, so that what is instituted in its name becomes subject to the processuality of an enveloping disciplinarity and a misting of the vision of what could have been achieved by having theory enter the university. A number of essays in this volume understand that all too well, remarking with wistfulness and sensitivity upon what our preface referred to as crossroads revisited and roads not taken. Other commentators, too, feel it is ever more urgent that certain ill-trod paths be abandoned, and (inter)disciplinary distortions resisted: Herman Rapaport, for instance, has written excellently about how deconstruction has often been violently misapprehended within the university.¹⁷ It is all part of an ongoing revisiting, a *revenir sur*, on theory, and what proceeds thus is at its best not merely a chronicling or an archivization but a revisioning.

Analogously, both Zavarzadeh and Morton on the one hand and de Man on the other converge again to hold that the disciplinarity of theory equates to a deplorable “theory now, theory as it has betrayedly become,” whereas when they speak about theory, in their two separate and very different visions, it is to hold forth about what it could envisionedly be. Of course, theirs are two very different visions, at one only in demonstrating that the letter of theory is peculiarly averse to certain disciplinary processes that propagate its dissemination within the academy, and that this aversion cuts across theory’s denominations. It might seem, however, that essentially what

this consensus amounts to is nothing more than the platitude that to teach something is to kill it. Reworked, this platitude is being made to say that to have anything enter the university is necessarily to invite the delusion of those who have the highest hopes for that entrance. Whereupon it becomes ever more urgent to consider whether the irresistibility of theory, at this time when it becomes opportune for theory to reconcile itself to the inescapability of its disciplinarity, can still most effectively proceed from within (according to the logic of self-resistance propounded by de Man), or from answering to an “outside” (according to the *engagé* ethic favored by Zavarzadeh and Morton).

How, in other words, might the (ir)resistibility of (post-)theory emerge, and how could it be radical? To start to answer this, and to move towards the response anticipated in the last section of this introduction and then developed more fully in our extroduction, we would first like to return to de Man’s contention that theory, if it is to be itself by taking the literary as its subject, “speaks the language of self-resistance,” whereupon it must flourish, even if “what remains impossible to decide is whether this flourishing is a triumph or a fall.”¹⁸ If we are intrigued by the uncertainty de Man affects over that flourishing, it is because of the suspicion that there might have been there an intuition that certain practised assumptions about the nature of the literary would eventually wear thin—especially as they embody a certain kind of poststructuralist orthodoxy. Central to that orthodoxy is the Derridean notion that “this strange institution called literature” lends fiction “*in principle* the power to say anything, to break free of the rules, to displace them, and thereby to institute, to invent and even to suspect the traditional difference between nature and institution, nature and conventional law, nature and history” (Derrida’s emphasis).¹⁹

In these constructions, literature becomes a discourse apart, and literariness its indefinable essence, such that de Man can claim that “[t]he definition of . . . literariness, has become the object of literary theory.²⁰ It would thereby follow that theory is most rewarding, most pressed, most challenged, most resisted, when it configures itself as *literary* theory, concerned above all with the impossible pursuit of a very elusive literariness and exhilarated by a radicality defined by literature’s rootlessness and its resistance to any anchoring in the programmatic or protocol-bound. Beside that, a concern with culture or practice is a distraction, as *cultural* theory must presumably concern itself with artefacts that fall short of such adequacy or radicality, while *critical* theory, which must take on an ethic of a radicality differently defined, cannot avoid being ulterior.

In other words, theory is most worth doing when it is about literature. Cultural theory and critical theory are alibis for that, even excuses for not doing theory “properly.” Not surprisingly, Zavarzadeh and Morton have little patience with this view, perceiving in it a loyalty to “*literaturnost*,” a displaced form of “class politics.” However, they themselves are concerned by certain aspects of cultural theory, by the passage of “literary to cultural studies” spoken of by Anthony Easthope.²¹ For what sometimes appears to be forgotten in this passage from the literary to the cultural is the critical. How, then, is one to renegotiate critical theory, and how to renegotiate its relation with literary and cultural theory? What *is* the critical in theory, and how might it be reclaimed in post-theory?

The Options for Theory

Theory's reclaiming of critical practice might contemplate a number of options. In this volume, for instance, Catherine Belsey affirms faith in the "cultural" option, as long as it maintains an understanding of the place of the signifier, while in her reinterpretation (through Balibar) of Althusser Suzanne Gearhart provides a practical demonstration of how theory can "read" its own most cherished notions more closely and profoundly. Jean-Jacques Lecercle argues for a reclaiming of notions which theory had perhaps somewhat marginalized, like interpretation; others stress the importance of an intensified attention to issues like translation or interdisciplinarity, while a few *embrace* theory's "disciplinarity" as they ponder the implications of its curricular presence. On our own part, there are two options that we believe should be reemphasized here, as they appear to define two poles of a continuum along which theory's different denominations position themselves. The first involves what we call "the letteral-mindedness of theory," while the second implicates theory's radicality.

(1) The Letteral-Mindedness of Theory

The first option, which would not endear itself to the pole of opinion occupied by Zavarzadeh and Morton, concerns itself with what Derrida has called, in *Demeure*, "the *literality of literarity*" (Derrida's emphasis).²² In keeping with this, it is significant that a renewed focus on the signifier was urged by Catherine Belsey in her contribution to the volume on *Post-Theory*. Belsey's adumbration over twenty years ago of what a critical practice might be is revisited with a renewed awareness of the importance of not overlooking the dimension of textuality and the place of the signifier.²³ Considerations of the cultural construction of meaning—which pervade a cultural theory predicated on a position, outlined in a different essay by Belsey, that

holds that “no genre and no form of signifying practice would be excluded a priori from the field of enquiry,” as “[s]ignifying practice is not exclusively nor even primarily verbal”²⁴—should not then be allowed to overlook the materiality of language, or the specificity of the particular instantiations of the signifier that produce effects explicable only by reference to a letteredness of meaning: “If I have an anxiety about English studies in the postmodern condition, it is that we may have neglected the signifier. . . . How ironic if poststructuralism, which draws attention to the opacity of language, should be invoked in support of a new assumption of its transparency.”²⁵

In other words, and whatever the stakes, theory cannot forget its capacity to be language about language. The moment that is accepted, however, is the moment when theory’s metalinguistic propensities may appear coextensive with the metaliterary, and indeed likely to find their most fulfilling manifestation there. This is best understood through reference to de Man’s ideas on language’s capacity for “freedom for referential restraint,” when “[language’s] use can no longer be determined by considerations of truth or falsehood, good and evil, beauty and ugliness, or pleasure and pain.” An “autonomous potential of language” is thereby discernible, and whenever it can be “revealed by analysis” it sanctions the conclusion that “we are dealing with literariness and, in fact, with literature as the place where this negative knowledge about the reliability of linguistic utterance is made available.”²⁶ This negative knowledge occurs as it is not “*a priori* certain that literature is a reliable source of information about anything but its own language.”²⁷ Literarity, therefore, is about its own intrinsicality. Extrinsicality distorts it. Any disposition to oppose that idea is regarded by de Man as an example of how “[t]he

resistance to theory is a resistance to the use of language about language”²⁸—and, it might be added, to literature and the metaliterary as well.

De Man’s statement suggests that there can be nothing to leave theory behind, nothing to displace it, not as long as theory—which is *itself* “the resistance to the use of language about language,” and therefore co-reflective of the very impulses which resist it—continues to inscribe, performatively but also analytically, the residues of indeterminacy which language (particularly *literary* language) itself compels. Indeed, theory *must* do this: it has no option. This is what it does and has always done. And as the residues are always already within language, theory’s work of facilitating their “coming into discourse, as such,”²⁹ can neither be consummated nor exceeded. No post-theory then, not now—and definitely not in any simplistic sense of supersession, which necessarily appears almost crass when compared with de Man’s sophisticated strategies of making the rhetorical and the counter-intuitive so cogent.

De Man’s is a powerful position. Perhaps it is even invulnerable, as the residues de Man speaks of can never not be in language. The work of theory can therefore never be complete, and the defence of theory that is implicit in language is therefore always apt. But the doubts over whether the irresistible flourishing is a triumph or a fall linger. And it is at least arguable that they do so because de Man’s is a position which has now become so much part of the poststructuralist perspective on the necessary symbiosis between language and literariness and literary theory that it has become “correct.” *Correct* is not ordinarily a positive term in English, and de Man himself famously disliked approaches which are “generalizable and highly responsive to systematization,” which are “[t]echnically correct.”³⁰ It would be a rich

irony if the idea he himself was propounding were to become imbued with such characteristics. And there can be little doubt (as will be clarified below, in this essay's last section) that de Man's has become a very proper poststructuralist argument, even part of poststructuralism's "curriculum." Hence it has become teachable, solid, "correct." It has become too easy and too comforting for theorists to say that theory cannot help its own flourishing, that language and rhetoricity can always potentially undo the logical and the referential, and that theory undertakes this better than any other discipline. It was with this in mind that we said, above, that we were intrigued by de Man's indecision over whether the flourishing of theory is a triumph or a fall, and by the possibility of his having intuited that his ideas on the nature of that flourishing would become to seem too practised.

In that context, is it really arguable that a "return to literature" is advisable, on the grounds that theory finds its optimally and most mutually defining object there? Is it by having, through the process of disciplinarity that led it to negotiate different fields of analysis, "abandoned" literature that theory compromised its capacity to be critical? And is the nature of that manner of being critical—indeed, of being *radical*—ineluctably bound up with the Derridean notion that literature remains "an unstable function," that "it depends on a precarious juridical status," so that even "when it harbors the unconditional right to say anything, including the most savage antinomies, disobedience itself, its *status* is never assured or guaranteed permanently [*à demeure*], at home, in the inside of an "at home" (Derrida's emphasis)?³¹

To take this line of questioning further: does not the unsettledness of literature, which, true radical that it is, is never "at home," remind us of our remarks on theory's own chafing at domesticity? Here, in case the identification is not yet clear,

is Derrida again, speaking about literature which will not demurely stay at home, *à demeure*:

This at least is the hypothesis I would like to test and submit to your discussion. There is no essence or substance of literature: literature is not. It does not exist. It does not remain at home, *abidingly* [*à demeure*] in the identity of a nature or even a historical being identical with itself. It does not maintain itself abidingly [*à demeure*], at least if “abode [*demeure*]” designates the essential stability of a place; it only remains [*demeure*] *where* and if “to be abiding [*être à demeure*]” in some “abiding order [*mise en demeure*]” means something else.³²

Theory might wish, with this in the background, to take literature as a model. To be unstable (like literature), to be “precarious” in its “juridical status” (like literature), to be “disobedient” (like literature), to never have its status guaranteed permanently by never being “at home” (like literature), to have no “essence” or “substance” and “not exist” (like literature), it would appear that it needs to act like literature. It needs, then, to take a leaf out of literature’s book. But this can only happen if theory remembers how to be about books, how to be book-ish. To be like literature it must be lettered, it must be (as de Man never doubted), primarily *literary* (not eclectically *cultural*), and then it might (re)learn how to be critical, again. To act like literature, theory has to be an act of literature. Things thereupon become difficult, for theory, realistically, cannot now shed its disciplinarity, cannot help being “at home” in the university sometimes, even as it pines and aspires to the condition of literature.

“To aspire to the condition of literature”: is an identification between theory and literature possible? Might theory *be* literary? There is a certain history that speaks of the possibility of an “articulation” of these two orders of discourse, and chronicles efforts to effect it. For instance, Derrida discovers in the poetry of Francis Ponge a singularity that destabilizes the foundations of criticism, and demands from the critic or theorist the capacity to be Pongean about what is irreducibly and singularly Pongean.³³ With singular texts, in other words, an ethic of “limit-criticism” is called forth, uniquely and unrepeatably, by the “limit-text,” obliging criticism to take after the literary, and to order its signifier accordingly, *literarily*. This has sometimes been taken to justify attempts to write theoretical fiction, or to try to produce theory that aspires to the order of the literary. It is an aspiration that arguably plays itself out in the most inventive of Derrida’s texts, underpinned as they are by the techniques of “autography,” hieroglyphs, the signature, homonymy, anasemia, and others that are variously and inventively used in Derrida’s writing in a manner cognizant of the age of the end of the book but one not forgetful of the resources of literality/literarity.³⁴

That said, Derrida himself has consistently been aware of the impossibility of coincidence between literature and other discourses. This is demonstrated by the fact that his “dream of a new institution without precedent, without pre-institution” that might arise from the “dream of a writing that would be neither philosophy nor literature, nor even contaminated by one or the other, while still keeping . . . the memory of literature or philosophy” must remain, precisely, a dream.³⁵ There needs to be a certain distance whenever two discourses contrive to be “very close; but also too close,” leading to “avoid[ance] . . . *because* of . . . identification.”³⁶

Theory cannot itself be literary, and should not. But it can be an act of literature by remembering to be about literature, perhaps even to be about it above everything else. Theory's disciplinarity now will not enable it to be about literature exclusively, nor should it. In this respect it is telling that most of the essays in this volume are not primarily about literature, though they are all, in one way or another, at least as much about language, or the (linguistic) signifier, as they are about culture, for instance, or politics. But it may be no bad thing for theory to believe that it can contrive to be most radical, most resistant to recuperation, most "unseizable," when it is about literature. It can thereby be a *critical* theory by learning to critique what is most radical, by addressing what happens at "the limits of literature." Theory would then act in the belief that de Man and Derrida are ultimately right when they suggest that literature, as a discourse, is peculiarly radical, and would seek to engage with it in the conviction that this character would rub off on any other discourse focused on the letter-ality of literarity. But there remains, irresistibly, some scepticism.

(2) The Radicality of Theory

The problem—and this raises the second point about the reclaiming of critical practice—is that in being letter-al minded theory cannot but make a virtue of detachedness. Its credentials as an agent for practice would then appear tenuous. How can one be *engagé* unless one is ready to get "stuck in," and how is that reconcilable with the bookish? The argument that theory can be radical by being about literature might be ingenious, but what emerges is not the radical—or, indeed, the theory—that is envisaged by Zavarzadeh and Morton, who instead take "theory to be a critique of material intelligibilities." Their distance from de Man's position is

made clear in that for them “[l]abor, not language . . . is the frame of intelligibility that determines the regime of signification,”³⁷ hence their insistence that “theory should always be a *criti(que)al* theory, that is to say, it should provide critical (not simply affirmative) knowledges of social totality for the student so that he or she sees his or her positionality in social collectivity” (our emphasis).³⁸ That requires a disciplinarity of theory that breaks free from “a curriculum that professionalizes theory, robbing it of its political edge” in the name of “‘reformism’—changing some insignificant features in order to relegitimize the dominant structure.” The answer, then, does not lie in interdisciplinarity, but in transdisciplinarity, which is not “the peaceful, interactive coexistence of fields of knowledge but a transgressive form of redrawing the map of learning in a fashion that opens up new space for rising radical and revolutionary subjectivities.”³⁹

Zavarzadeh and Morton’s attempt to reclaim the critical as “criti(que)al” is fundamentally removed from de Man’s vision for theory. Indeed, they engage directly with de Man’s argument, which they regard as a “structure of understanding” built on “a transhistorical general ‘literariness’ that resists theory.” De Man’s idea of a *literary* theory that resists itself is thereby overturned to suggest that it produces only a resistance to the theory *they* endorse. This is because they view de Man’s position as one that allows “poetry [literature]” to be “a transdiscursive act that is autointelligible, . . . meaningful in and of itself outside all cultural mediations and without being entangled in the materiality of the signifying practices of society”: a mode of investigation culminating in theory becoming “a purely cognitive matter.”⁴⁰ Theirs is therefore a radicality that can be summed up in the view that critical practice must depend not on literary criticism or a faith in

literariness, but on “critique,” an “investigation of the enabling conditions of production of meaning in culture.”⁴¹

The two positions outlined above both attempt to reclaim the critical. Both are driven by a vision for theory that is committed and well-intentioned. The problem is that the road to a stultifying disciplinarity, which amounts to theory’s hell, is full of precisely such good intentions. The vexing thing about this is not so much the difficulty of any adjudication of the two positions’ respective merits. It is rather that they have each critiqued the other so well as to impair the credibility of either in its efforts to mount a critique of culture (however critique or culture are to be defined, for that, of course, is also and above all what is in question). One could indeed shuttle between a position and another and discover that these two contrary movements within theory (which, between them, define the continuum along which the different denominations of theory’s broad church are strung out) have read each other (and themselves) much more rigorously than other attacks mounted from “anti-theory” (which lies outside theory’s broad church). For instance, Zavarzadeh and Morton complain that poststructuralism is committed to a “self-reflexiveness” defined textually rather than politically⁴²—something which Derrida, who for his part has admitted to having doubts about the “vibrating in unison” necessary to most forms of concerted activism, might be ready to concede.⁴³ Meanwhile, Zavarzadeh and Morton’s view that de Man’s perspective proposes “the ‘literary’ as the mark of the impossibility of the connection between language and the social”⁴⁴ opens itself to the counter ready-built into de Man’s argument, namely that such positions exemplify the “resistance to language about language.” For those who would resist these theoretical positions from “outside” theory, therefore, there is little purchase

that theory's own inside has not already sought to gain. Meanwhile, the positions' differences are probably not resolvable. How, then, can theory move beyond this impasse, given that it is an impasse that is at the heart of its very disciplinarity and one that divides its constituency?

“From Theory, Post-Theory”—But How?

Any response to the impasse must surely lie in a factor that emerges as an unexpected point of convergence between these opposed modes of envisaging theory. Both visions ascribe theory, albeit differently, with the capacity to resist the positioning that inevitably follows upon theory's taking on of disciplinarity. This brings us back to where we started, with Archimedes and Latour, and the difficulty of anyone or anything positioning theory. To “position” theory implies, grammatically, transitivity: something will be made to happen to theory. Theory would therefore be “levered.” Levers would, in all senses, be applied to it—for is not this, also, an aspect of disciplinarity? We know that Derrida has written about the relevance of levers to discussions of the university, and we know also that one of the contributors to this volume, Simon Morgan Wortham, has written penetratingly about that area of Derrida's work.⁴⁵ Certainly the positioning of theory will not be down to an Archimedes-like superman, nor is it plausible that there might be some kind of concerted effort, mounted within or without theory's law (or, indeed, its “laboratory,” the university) to shape theory in any given way. That effort would find itself up against the difference between deliberateness and chance, between self-positioning and being positioned, between the willed event and the prospect that

something (probably not very sublime) “is happening” to theory. Most crucial of all is the fact that it must be acknowledged that theory, having been interpellated as such within the university and having acquired disciplinarity under this name, *theory*, has now acquired a life of its own. Indeed, we were tempted to spell *theory* throughout with the first letter in uppercase, disregarding the convention that prefers the lowercase alternative and willing to ride the accusation of an indulgence in anthropomorphization—and that in recognition of the fact that theory, in acquiring a life of its own in the university, has acquired a *will* of its own. If theory, now, truly “just is,” and if it is secure in its accommodation within the university, then it may no longer be sensible to be so uptight about the resistance *of* theory (after Zavarzadeh and Morton) or the resistance *to* theory (after de Man). This would be because theory, endowed with this will through the acquisition of its immovable disciplinarity, may in one sense at least have become irresistible. It will shift only when it wants to—or needs to.

And yet, naggingly, there remains the fact that talk of post-theory, in terms of theory’s passing, remains persistent. The assertion by the editors of the volume *Post-Theory* that “[n]othing stimulates the production of Theory like the proclamation of its own death”⁴⁶ is reassuring. But it is also too much like the reflex of those who have learnt their de Man, and may not convince those for whom the resistibility of theory is a straightforward matter of seeing it superseded. It is, of course, very difficult for theory to resist this reflex, and very typical of it to dismiss as incredibly facile the idea that post-theory might turn out to be something that could supplant it. For theory, it is not a matter of chronology. Rome may have been followed by darkness, and counter-revolution may follow on from revolution, but just as rhetoric

is “from” philosophy in a Derridean relation of supplementarity,⁴⁷ post-theory is surely “from” Theory complexly, for instance in the context of a Lyotardian problematization of relations of supersedence. Post-theory would therefore need to be comprehended in the context of “a procedure in *ana-*” and “the paradox of the future (*post*) anterior (*modo*).⁴⁸ That comprehending repeats theory’s tendency to condemn attempts that think its “post” in terms of straightforward decline. “It will come as no surprise,” the editors of *Post-Theory* acknowledge in the first page on their introduction, “to learn that the ‘post’ in ‘post-theory’ is not to be taken unequivocally,” whereupon “the question of how it *is* to be taken” becomes urgent (authors’ emphasis).⁴⁹ To that view—one sanctioned also by Derridean suspicions of “seismisms and newisms”⁵⁰—suppositions of theory’s passing are delusively built on acceptance of the categories of successiveness, which theory has critiqued. In an essay in *Post-Theory* which typifies this critique, Geoffrey Bennington brings to bear one of poststructuralism’s most “correct” notions to allay fears about a supplanting form of *Post-Theory*: “[T]he post- has always already been at work in theory, and . . . we will never reach a post-theoretical state.”⁵¹ As already suspected, no post-theory then, not now.

We believe, however, that if theory’s (self-)(re)positioning as post-theory is really to be irresistible, it must depend on something more than this reflex whereby talk of its supersedence is dismissed. It is a reflex which risks becoming a mannerism. Revisioning theory’s radicality *à la* de Man, on the assumption that theory flourishes irresistibly because it cannot help resisting itself, is mannered, and revisioning theory *à la* Zavarzadeh and Morton, on the presumption that it can be an agent of transformation, is mannered as well. Perhaps theory needs to learn that it cannot take

the de Man line, or the Zavarzadeh and Morton line, so manneredly any more. Its revisiting should not focus solely on the roads it has most productively traversed, but on the roads not taken, the crossroads revisited—this point, already made in the preface, bears repeating. For theory to argue that it is singularly appointed to radical practice, and then to debate with itself whether this practice is best derived from a preoccupation with literariness or with praxis, is a position struck too often by its pasts. Such arguments are now too firmly within theory’s repertoire, too much part of theory’s disciplinarity and perhaps also of a certain disciplining of its doubts about itself, even when what they do is rail against that very disciplinarity. In other words, they are positions which theory strikes if it is returning upon itself with a sterile repeatedness rather than renewingly. This aggravates what the editors of *Post-Theory* call “the sclerosis of theoretical writing, the hardening of Theory’s lexical and syntactical arteries.” Such writing risks its own credibility, because it is so practised at what it does that it can lead to “a self-satisfied and hypostasized ‘Theory.’”⁵²

In that case, it would be useless to try to position theory “after” de Man or, contrastingly, “after” Zavarzadeh and Morton, with this *after* understood in the twin senses of successiveness and “in the manner of.” Theory now “just is” by being inter-denominational and discipline-d, even if very unharmoniously so. Yet to say that theory “just is” amounts to being complacent about its existence: to believing, precisely, in its irresistibility. This might be a mistake, and the mistake might arise because the irresistibility of theory might, conceivably, be put in question by the appeal of something yet more irresistible which theory itself, endowed with a will of its own though it now undoubtedly is, might be unable to resist. It is for this reason

that in the extroduction we shall speak of the posthuman: one of the most direct and uncomplicated manifestations of the view that the days of theory (and of much else besides) are numbered, and what supersedes it is a time when perhaps what becomes more relevant is an attention to the digital rather than to the signifier and the letter-al and the political. The binarism between de Man's letter-al and Zavarazadeh and Morton's political has arguably been undone not by any poststructuralist deconstruction, but by theory's disciplinarity now engaging with "other" disciplinarity arising from the encroachment of this digitality and the "new" order from which it emerges. Theory, we therefore argue, *must* resist the idea of its own superseding—by posthumanism or anything else—but it must do so by undertaking a revisiting of itself, a *revenir sur*, that is not too practiced in the orthodoxies of the kind of polarized returns (exemplified by the radicality differently envisaged by de Man and Zavarzadeh and Morton) in which it has shown so much faith. Post-Theory would find that very resistible. Instead, the revisiting should not be too correct, too much part of theory's disciplinarity and teachability, to prevent it from reclaiming practice. An engagement with the posthuman therefore becomes important because it can serve as a figure, an allegory, of the way in which theory might go about this reclaiming in its encounter with post-theory.

These, then—our introduction and the extroduction—are the two parts of the frame which, as editors, we are proposing for this volume's exploration of the (ir)resistibility of theory's disciplinarity and practice in a time of post-theory. But a frame can only border, just as disciplinary partitionings do, and it is time to leave it to the contributors to this volume to illustrate how theory might return upon itself, renewingly.

Notes

¹ See Bruno Latour, “Give Me a Laboratory and I Will Raise the World,” in Karen Knorr-Cetina and Michael Mulkay, *Science Observed* (London: Sage, 1983), 141-70.

² Martin Heidegger, “The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking,” in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell, rev. edn (1966; London: Routledge, 1993), 433.

³ See Mas’ud Zavarzadeh and Andrew Morton, *Theory as Resistance: Politics and Culture after (Post)structuralism* (New York: Guilford, 1994).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 146, 160.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 149, 151.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 157.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁹ The full bibliographic references for those texts mentioned here that are as yet uncited in these notes are: Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986)—especially the essay “The Resistance to Theory,” 3-20; Thomas M. Kavanagh, ed., *The Limits of Theory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989); Paul Bové, *In the Wake of Theory* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1992); Herman Rapaport, *The Theory Mess: Deconstruction in*

Eclipse (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001); Martin McQuillan and others, eds., *Post-Theory: New Directions in Criticism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999); Jean-Michel Rabaté, *The Future of Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002).

¹⁰ Zavarzadeh and Morton, *Theory as Resistance*, 150.

¹¹ See Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993) and “Living On: Borderlines,” trans. James Hulbert, in Harold Bloom and others, *Deconstruction and Criticism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), 75-176. The inapprehensibility to disciplinarity of deconstruction’s contemplations of the aporetic, the undecidable, and the impassable is usefully read in the contrastingly pragmatic context of its contemplations of the university. For a good guide to this context, see Simon Morgan Wortham’s essay in this volume.

¹² Paul de Man, “The Resistance to Theory,” 19-20.

¹³ See Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), 89.

¹⁴ Zavarzadeh and Morton, *Theory as Resistance*, 15-17.

¹⁵ Wlad Godzich, foreword to Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), xii.

¹⁶ de Man, “The Resistance to Theory,” 4.

¹⁷ See Rapaport, *The Theory Mess*.

¹⁸ de Man, “The Resistance to Theory,” 19-20.

¹⁹ Jacques Derrida, “This Strange Institution Called Literature: An Interview with Jacques Derrida,” in Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1992), 37.

²⁰ de Man, “The Resistance to Theory,” 9.

²¹ See Anthony Easthope, *Literary into Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

²² Maurice Blanchot/Jacques Derrida, *The Instant of My Death/Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 23.

²³ See Catherine Belsey’s *Critical Practice* (London: Methuen, 1980) and her essay “English Studies in the Postmodern Condition: Towards a Place for the Signifier,” in *Post-Theory: New Directions in Criticism*, ed. Martin McQuillan and others (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 123-38.

²⁴ Catherine Belsey, “Towards Cultural History—in Theory and Practice,” *Textual Practice* 3 (1989): 160-61.

²⁵ Belsey, “English Studies in the Postmodern Condition,” 130-131.

²⁶ de Man, “The Resistance to Theory,” 10.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

³¹ Derrida, “Demeure,” 28.

³² Derrida, “Demeure,” 28. The parentheses in the quotation are in the text of the English translation of *Demeure*.

³³ Jacques Derrida, *Signsponge/Signéponge*, trans. Richard Rand (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), ix and 70-72.

³⁴ See Gregory L. Ulmer, *Applied Grammatology: Post(e)-Pedagogy from Jacques Derrida to Joseph Beuys* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985).

³⁵ Derrida, "This Strange Institution Called Literature," 73.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 60.

³⁷ Zavarzadeh and Morton, *Theory as Resistance*, 8.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 19-22, 17.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 31-32, 79.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 29.

⁴³ Jacques Derrida, "A Madness Must Watch over Thinking," *Points . . . : Interviews 1974-1994*, ed. Elisabeth Weber, trans. Peggy Kamuf and others (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 348.

⁴⁴ Zavarzadeh and Morton, *Theory as Resistance*, 174.

⁴⁵ See Jacques Derrida, "Mochlos," in *Logomachia: The Conflict of the Faculties*, ed. Richard Rand (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), 1-34, and Simon [Morgan] Wortham, *Rethinking the University: Leverage and Deconstruction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999).

⁴⁶ Martin McQuillan, Graeme McDonald, Robin Purves, and Stephen Thomson, "The Joy of Theory," in *Post-Theory: New Directions in Criticism*, ed. Martin McQuillan and others (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), ix.

⁴⁷ Jacques Derrida, "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1982), 209.

⁴⁸ See Jean-François Lyotard, "Note on the Meaning of "post"," *The Postmodern Explained to Children: Correspondence 1982-1985*, ed. Julian Pefanis and Morgan Thomas (London: Turnaround, 1992), 93 and 24.

⁴⁹ McQuillan, MacDonald, Purves, and Thomson, "The Joy of Theory," in *Post-Theory*, ix.

⁵⁰ Jacques Derrida, "Some Statements and Truisms about Neologisms, Newisms, Postisms, Parasitisms, and other small Seismisms," in David Carroll, ed., *The States of Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 63-94.

⁵¹ Geoffrey Bennington, "Inter," in *Post-Theory: New Directions in Criticism*, ed. Martin McQuillan and others (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 119.

⁵² McQuillan, McDonald, Purves, and Thomson, "The Joy of Theory," xi-xii.