

Theory... for Life

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Je vis comme si j'avais quarante vies...

...

Je me fuis de vie en vie.

...

Moi par moi délogé, remplacé,

Par d'autres plus puissants habitants

Ma vie sans moi par une vie où je serai

Pourra se remplacer...

[I live as if I had forty lives

...

I escape from life to life

...

Me by myself dislodged, replaced

By other more powerful inhabitants

My life without me by a life where I will be

Can be replaced...]

(Armand Robin, "Quarante vies [Forty Lives]," *Ma vie sans moi*)¹

Style de vie—Life, in theory

There is this a rather funny moment in *Derrida*, the film, when Derrida tells an anecdote about his mother reprimanding him for misspelling difference with an "a."

This is a moment that might encapsulate in many ways the question about theory and style, style in theory, theory as style and the theory of style. Is it really necessary for theory to make life so difficult, so counter-intuitive? This essay is not intended as some counterattack on apparent everyday-life populism in favor of an intellectualism removed from practical usefulness—as if the non-theoretical was always to be found on the side of *real* and the *useful* life, practical life, or living, whereas theory, by implication, would somehow be removed from life, dead, maybe even death itself, at least on the side of death. Instead this is an attempt to see theory on the side of life, asking whether theory has a life, a life of its own, whether theory actually might be

life, not just alive but somehow *for life*, at least more than death, and thus it is also an attempt to show that there is life in theory, still and always, that one can dwell in theory, actually live, in theory, that one might somehow, and indeed maybe always and only, live in theory.

In theory, one should have a life. Many people would say, instead, that maybe a theorist should get a life, meaning that he or she should get out more. Presumably, to experience the *real* life, the buzz, the hum, the pleasure of living life to the full, consume life. Life is time is capital and thus indulgence; life is what you make it: the meaning of life is “x”—to be determined. Interestingly, this rather intimidating phrase, “the meaning of life,” has recently been resurfacing with increased regularity. In fact, there seems to be a new urgency in the meaning-of-life-thematic to be seen in the proliferation, or should that now read *pro-life*-ration, of *life* issues. Maybe what is at stake here, in theory, is, and maybe has always been, nothing less than the undefinability of life itself.

Deconstruction, poststructuralism, theory, has a deep affinity with what Derrida calls “*plus d’une langue*”—no longer (just) one and *at the same time* more than one language, which, arguably, might be the most accurate description of a plurilingual life, or a life in language(s).² *Plus d’une langue*, as maybe the most existential stance of theory, creates a curious remove from any particular language, but not in the form of transcendence—one can never transcend language as such nor can one transcend a language, not even one. It is rather a peculiar, slightly tragic experience, at least momentarily, of some inbetweenness, of being or living in translation, even if this position is always reconstructed, *posthumous*, so to speak, after the effect and affect. Theory is therefore not unrelated to a very specific understanding of *life-writing*, namely of a life in languages, or life-in-languages. It is

therefore more than just (a linguistic) style, if style means a particular form or appearance, or character, as an antonym to substance or content. The whole point, or style, of theory, instead, is to show that form and content, appearance and reality, life and death, or style and substance cannot and indeed must not be separated.

Style as a way of life, *style de vie*, is an expression that follows the same *ontology* described above in relation to language(s). Just as you can dwell, at least temporarily, between language(s), you can inhabit the space in between ways or styles of life, between life(s). It is not so much a suspension of life but a kind of dehiscence, an interruption, even though time does not stop, unfortunately, at least not biological time, Heideggerian time or being-towards-death.

It is useful to remember that one of the major spin-offs of theory in the Anglo-American academy is almost entirely an investigation into style in the sense of lifestyle, namely cultural studies. Raymond Williams's definition of culture as a way of *life*, or the so-called anthropological, non-normative or descriptive definition of culture, quickly led to a pluralization of styles, lives and lifestyles under investigation. In particular, subcultural analysis flourished following the postmodern aestheticization of *life* as the result of the pluralization of *life styles*. Dick Hebdige's influential *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979) uses Jean Genet's subversive style of revolt as an analogy for the meaning of subculture. Style is "intentional communication," he claims: "The communication of a significant *difference*, then (and the parallel communication of a group *identity*), is the 'point' behind the style of all spectacular subcultures."³ The *monstrosity* of style—literally and in the etymological sense of "showing," "giving to see" (cf. Latin *de-monstrare*)—lies in its *revoltingness* and the revolt speaks through its style. But, most importantly, style is recognized by Hebdige as a signifying practice—arguably the most central phrase of

poststructuralism and theory. Signifying practice is precisely that which problematizes the distinction between content and form, style and substance, all the while, quite ironically, foregrounding language. The medium is the message, but precisely for that reason, medium and message cannot be dissociated. Lifestyle is a shared signifying practice which creates its own subjects: “*le style, c’est le sujet pris et torturé par le langage* [style is the subject caught in and tortured by language],” as Michel Arrivé explains in relation to Lacan and his style (“*Lacan sur le style, sur le style de Lacan*,” in *Qu’est-ce que le style?*⁴ Rather than simple “ornament” [*parure*] or idiosyncrasy [*tic*], style is inscribed or even prescribed in concrete subject positions, as Michel Riffaterre, in the same volume on style, agrees, citing Buffon’s aphorism: “*Le style c’est l’homme même* [style is the man, person or human himself or as such].”⁵

The notion of inscription is of course inscribed into the very concept of style with its etymology of stylus, the marking of wax tablets, and with it the entire question of memory, the trace, or the archive. Style is a historical inscription, or a reflection of its time but it is also an attempt to transcend time and to “make a difference,” as Edward Said explains in his last, unfinished book *On Late Style*: “Any style involves first of all the artist’s connection to his or her own time, or historical period, society, and antecedents; the aesthetic work, for all its irreducible individuality, is nevertheless a part—or, paradoxically, not a part—of the era in which it was produced and appeared. This is not simply a matter of sociological or political synchrony but more interestingly has to do with rhetorical or formal style.”⁶

Theory’s lifeblood is language, and language, quite literally, is an issue of life and death, for theory. The literal or rather *letteral* understanding of language in this way is what constitutes theory, even its essence, the truth of its style—which is another aspect of the phrase living in language(s). That is arguably what is most

fascinating in theory, namely its awareness of linguistic relativity and linguistic inevitability, *at the same time*, language's finite-infinite play, encapsulated in Derrida's famous aporia: "Yes, I only have one language, yet [French: *or*, yet, therefore] it's not mine."⁷ This has nothing to do with the idea of a "prisonhouse of language," nor with any hermeneutic notion of a "*Haus der Sprache*." As Paul de Man pointed out in "The Resistance to Theory," an essay he starts by evoking "this autonomous potential of language" which he finds in literature and rhetoric: "The resistance to theory is a resistance to the use of language about language. It is therefore a resistance to language itself or to the possibility that language contains factors or functions that cannot be reduced to intuition."⁸ However, one has to add, that theory itself is not immune to this resistance. Theory *is* the resistance in more than one sense, including an *autoimmunitarian* one. Resistance to theory is the resistance to language understood in precisely the way outlined above. One could argue that the resistance to theory is a resistance to an ontological understanding of language. For de Man, as we know, the resistance to theory is itself theoretical and can therefore never be overcome nor can theory *die* because it always *survives* in the language of *self-resistance*. However, de Man's prophecy might have been too optimistic for theory's flourishing (which, as he said, would be indistinguishable from its fall). Post-theoretical times tell the story of increasing exasperation with theory. It is said that style has killed theory, and worse, that theory's style is killing language, and since style is indissociable from writing, theory might be one giant thanatography.

As John Schad writes at the beginning of his volume *Life. After. Theory*: "the moment of 'high' theory appears to have passed."⁹ However, the "After" in his title, he explains, is meant as "in pursuit of": "Could life be in pursuit of theory? Could life ever imitate theory? And, indeed, what is 'life'?"¹⁰ He puts life in inverted commas

and claims that “theory has made us wary of the idea of Life, or indeed any other organicist master-word.”¹¹ But however wary of life one might be, its *style*, life’s style, constantly inscribes itself into the matter of the universe which, of course, means that life as living present is only ever accessible as trace, or *différance* and in deconstruction, which turns deconstruction, or theory, into a kind of *life-writing*; “it is, however, life implicated in death, or *thanatos*,” as Schad explains, “hence Derrida’s conceitful talk of his ‘autobiothanatoheterographical opus’.”¹² Theory is, in a sense, what *remains* of life, the traces of life’s meaning, reconstituted and interpreted in a fashion, or style. “If life is, necessarily, *after-life*; if all living is a form of ‘living-on’... then theory is very much a form of life,” Schad concludes.¹³

How then to account for the recent resurgence in the theoretical interest in life. Two examples of the resurgence of the phrase, “meaning of life,” are Rupert Read’s *Philosophy for Life* (2007) and Terry Eagleton’s *The Meaning of Life* (2007). Both probably want to be understood as treatises on life-affirmation but both, inevitably, are inscribed, inevitably so, in a *clear and present danger* logic. The threat of imminent death—of humanity, for example—heightens the sense of and brings out the best in life, or so it is hoped. Read, in his “Conclusion: Philosophy for Life” summarizes: “The first decade of the third millennium is a time of vast peril and vast opportunity for humankind.”¹⁴ “Philosophy can be a radical and powerful tool for starting something good,” as long as it reminds us of our “embeddedness in the ecosystem” and urges “a certain humility in the face of the wonder and horror of human life.”¹⁵ Rather less humility, interestingly, is required in relation to *style*, where Read confidently proposes to “reclaim politics” by reclaiming “the English language”¹⁶, following Wittgenstein and Chomsky, back from its *metaphysical* to its *everyday use*. This no-nonsense commonsensical, pragmatist and eminently realist

approach is designed to make philosophy relevant again to “our actual lives”:
“Philosophy *for* Life... That is, philosophy *on the side of* life. The fundamental question of the twenty-first century is whether human life as we know it, human civilization, will survive at all.”¹⁷ The call to arms for a change in philosophical-*cum*-life style predictably ends in a threatening promise or a promising threat: “We will sink or swim together.”¹⁸

So was theory, then, merely some stylistic aberration, one may ask. Eagleton, who famously turned his back on theory, who, one could say, has gone over to the other side, seems to think so, as his equally blatant *no-frills* approach makes clear: “There is a sense in which those who deny the reality of the human condition also deny global warming. Nothing ought to unite the species as effectively as the possibility of its extinction. In death, at least, we come together.”¹⁹ Eagleton, however, in the end retreats to a form of contemplative cynicism: “No doubt our continuing wrangles over the meaning of life will prove to be fertile and productive. But in a world where we live in overwhelming danger, our failure to find common meanings is as alarming as it is invigorating.”²⁰

Theory for life, that is to say...

Given the general disenchantment with theory, is there life *after* theory? “Is there life after deconstruction?”²¹

Derrida’s last book, *H.C. pour la vie, c’est à dire... (2002)*, *H.C. for Life, That Is to Say... (2006)*, is all about sides, and in particular about being on the side, especially on the side of life and / or on the side of death. It is also a book about an extraordinary

friendship between H el ene Cixous who is, as Derrida claims, always on the side of life, and Derrida himself, who, as he explains, cannot be on her side. Nevertheless, it is a friendship *for life*. Derrida explains the title in an interview with both Cixous and himself in *Magazine litt eraire* (2004) entitled “*Du mot   la vie* [From (the) Word to Life]”: “*C’est pour la vie*—wants to express both loyal and unfailing friendship, forever [*  jamais*], for life but also for life [*pour la vie*] which for her [*chez elle*] is an affirmation, a taking side for life that I never managed to share. I’m not ‘against life’ but I’m not ‘for life’ as she is. This dissonance [*discordance*] is at the heart of the book—and of life.”²² But Cixous is quick to add that Derrida is nevertheless “fiercely [*farouchement*] for / on the side of / in favour of [*pour*] life. But otherwise. *In/qui tement*.”²³ *In/qui tement*—with a slash between *In* and *qui tement*: worriedly, anxiously, uneasily, but also calmly, both worried and calm, apparently, at the same time. Un / easily for life, or maybe uneasy about life? How is that possible? How to take sides here, between Cixous, who is all for life in the affirmative and unreservedly, and Derrida who is “un / easy” about life and about the very idea of taking sides, but all the more conscious of death, which, however, as Cixous explains, and Derrida endorses, is not a side, not a side to *be* on. Death is not a side because it is the annihilation of life, and therefore one cannot be on its side, because one cannot be on the side of death, where death *is*, precisely, by not being.

Undoubtedly, despite this difference, what brings Cixous and Derrida together is their curious relationship to language, a language shared but through their respective “monolingualism of the other,” the almost tragic remove from one’s *own* language, namely French, which for Cixous is the cause of her *alg eriance* and, for Derrida, his *nostalg rie*, their mutual autobiographies-in-translation or life (in) writing. “*Au commencement, il y a le mot* [At the beginning, there is the word],” “*Du*

mot à la vie [From (the) word to life],” as the interview says: “Yes, at the beginning is the word... As if I was thinking nothing before writing: surprised by such a resource of the French language that I didn’t invent, and I do something with it that wasn’t programmed but which was already made possible by some lexical or syntactical treasure.”²⁴ Language invents, in other words, language is alive with words: “*Tout me revient, mais depuis la langue—qui se passe de moi en passant par moi.*”²⁵ Which is, of course, untranslatable because it is already the experience of translation, but translation into and within one’s supposedly *own* language—*being*, translated, but also being-translated by and in language. Everything comes back to me but also belongs to me. I’m responsible for it—*tout me revient*, but [*mais*, but one might even have expected *or* here, as in “*je ne parle qu’une langue, or c’est n’est pas la mienne*”) but it comes back to me *from* language, *depuis*, from or ever since, language, which always precedes, maybe even *life*, language *before* life. It is this ontological love of language that Cixous admires in Derrida as if it was her own: “I envy his titles. His hypersensitivity as to what these words in French conceal both *folittéralement* and *philosophiquement.*”²⁶ Untranslatable, again: madness, literally, or the madness that lies in taking language literally, and the idea of doing philosophy through (homo)phony, philosophonics... as for example in *H.C. pour la vie* where the *C* for Cixous is a (near) homophone to *c’est* for “it is”—Hélène is for life, and “that is to say [*c’est à dire*],” which is translation itself: that is to say, in other words, the figure of translation even within (one) language, but also that which has to be said, which always remains to be said—an injunction.

So how to make sense of this “for life” and “that is to say”? And why would Derrida not be on the side of life, at least not as *affirmatively* as Cixous and maybe also many others who recently have helped to shift the discussion, maybe the whole

of *theory* towards life, or the issue of life, for life—theory for life? Cixous's power, Derrida says, her might, her *puissance*, lies in her ability to *jump* and to replace, or in her speed and transgression, maybe even the ignoring of boundaries:

This nullification of the border, this passage of the forbidden between the public and the private, the visible and the hidden, the fictional and the real, the interpretable and the unreadable of an absolute reserve, like the collusion of all genres, I believe, is at work at every moment. It is the very work of her writing, its operation and its opus, which, although literary through and through, also goes beyond literature, just as it goes beyond autobiography. And my hypothesis will be that the excess and surplus of this passage precisely passes through *life*, a word that becomes all the more obscure.²⁷

Life—italicized in this passage—becomes more and more obscure, the more the boundaries are *transgressed*. Much of theory has been about the transgression of all sorts of boundaries so much so that theory is almost synonymous with this transgressing movement, a movement that is most recognizable in a certain combative style, situating itself both before and beyond an identified boundary that is or remains to be transgressed. And, one could argue, the result of it has been an *outbidding* of boundary transgression. Finding, or cynics would say, inventing, one could also say mounting, the boundaries that are to be transgressed, theory raises the stakes with every transgression. Power becomes more powerful, life more mysterious, and life in turn becomes the ultimate boundary that contemporary theory has set itself to transgress, or might already have transgressed.

What is thus at stake in theory is life, theory for life, theory *à jamais* and *pour la vie*. A notion of life *before* death or maybe “out / side” death—life whose other side would precisely no longer be death, as Derrida understands Cixous's affirmation:

I do not know whether, more than her, sooner than her, better than her, anyone will have ever given me to think what *to live* means. Not that she taught me how to live—that is not the same thing, and it could sometimes resemble its exact opposite, I mean ‘learning how to die.’ Not that in giving me to think what to live might mean, she assured me that living meant something, something in relation to which thought and knowledge would go

hand in hand and would grant us something, giving us over to something firm and reassuring. No, giving me to think what amounts to living even beyond any will-to-say [*vouloir-dire*], beyond any ‘that is to say,’ and maybe even beyond any will, beyond a living or a life that would still depend on a will, a will-to-live [*vouloir-vivre*], beyond any knowledge, any power, and any contradiction, for example between living and dying.²⁸

These are so many “beyonds,” so many superlatives and hyperboles to evoke the *miracle* of believing the unbelievable—which, according to Derrida, is the only true *faith*, faith in life, because believing the believable would not require the impossibility that faith demands, the possible-impossible, that is to say life without death—*pas de mort, la vie sans mort*.

Life *itself*, however, resists translation, which would be its arrest or death. Instead, it is language or life, but not as a question of choice, because there is no *other side* from which to choose, for example between life or death. And this has been the case for theory from the very beginning. It is not as if we had just discovered life, as an object of knowledge or science, as the phrase “life sciences” might suggest. *Au commencement la vie la mort*, René Major writes (1999), referring to Derrida and the inseparability and undecidability between life and death, deathlife or lifedeath, which gives rise to *différance*, or spectrality, and turns ontology into hauntology. “Living, by definition, cannot be learned. Not by itself / not by oneself, not by life from life [*de la vie par la vie*]. Only by or from the other and by death,” “living just like dying cannot be learned [*ne s’apprend pas*],” as Jean Birnbaum quotes (from *Specters of Marx*) in Derrida’s “last interview,” *Apprendre à vivre enfin—Learning to live at last*.²⁹ Instead, *lavielamort*, is the experience of life as *living-on* as *survivre, survivant, survivance*, even before any notion of “*Dasein*” or ontology in general. As Derrida explains in *The Post Card*, reading Freud’s “death drive” and François Jacob’s *La logique du vivant*, side by side: “If death is not opposable it is, already, *life death*,”

and in doing so, he undoes a whole tradition of “life science,” from the start, for which the end of the living, its aim and term, is the return to the inorganic state.³⁰ The evolution of life is but a detour of the inorganic aiming for itself, a race to the death. It exhausts the couriers, from post to post, as well as the witnesses and the relays.”³¹ It is “send[ing] oneself the message of one’s own death” or “keep[ing] oneself from death” in a movement of reappropriation (which is “the most driven drive,” but also the drive in which “life death are no longer opposed,” or on two sides): “Before all else one must auto-affect oneself with one’s proper death (and the self does not exist before all else, before this movement of auto-affection), make certain that death is the auto-affection of life or life the auto-affection of death.”³² The immanence of death in life causes the auto-immunitarian instinct for which Western metaphysics, if such a thing exists, is so infamous. It is a war-like state that is reproduced in every self, in every subject, but can it really be overcome or maybe *outlived*, which is something completely different from a Derridean sense of *survived*, or haunted living? “I am at war with myself,” Derrida says, “it is true, you cannot possibly know to what extent, beyond what you might guess, and I’m saying contradictory things which are, let’s say, in real tension constructing me, make me live, make me die. This war I sometimes see it as a terrible and painful war, but at the same time I know that this is life.”³³ Life is at war with itself, or maybe even at war with *its* self. That’s life—*c’est la vie*. Or rather, *c’est la survie*, which is the only knowledge of life possible: “living-on is an original concept that constitutes the very structure of what we call existence, the *Dasein*, if you wish. We are structurally survivors, marked by this structure of the trace, or the testament.”³⁴ The mistake that should not be made, however, is to equate Derrida’s idea of life as surviving with some form of morbid thanatography (death inscribed within life) or as necropolitics (i.e., politics as the power over life and death,

still understood as two sides of a choice).³⁵ As if there were two sides, one turned towards death and the past, and the other, turned towards life and the future. This much Derrida agrees with Cixous: there is only affirmation: “deconstruction is on the side of the yes [*du côté du oui*; which is the only side possible], of the affirmation of life”: an *unconditional* affirmation of life. “*La survivance, c’est la vie au-delà de la vie*. Life beyond and more than life [*La vie plus que la vie*],” “for surviving is not just what remains, it is the most intense life possible.”³⁶ Derrida credits Cixous with occupying that side, the only one possible, of life and still, he regrets not being able to join her, on her side, the side of life, simply because: “If I were on her side, I could not speak of her nor tell her anything whatsoever.”³⁷ He could not speak of her or about her, or of life nor death, which, of course would be worse than death. “Indeed, when one is *on the side of*, one is not close; one has to be on the other side, on the other side of the other, in order to be close. When one is on the same side, paradoxically, one is not close, there is no longer any distance or proximity; neither speed nor slowness.”³⁸

So how indeed does *she* do it? Being on the side of life, unconditionally, while continuing to write—a curious form of life-writing indeed: “life, whence everything derives and detaches itself and toward which everything comes and comes back. Life has no other, it has no other side; and all the sides, all the asides, all the sidesteppings leave their traces on the same side of the same vein.”³⁹ It is the resulting undecidability—being on the same but *only* side which calls for the decision, which, for Derrida, has to pass through the experience of the impossible but can only be affirmative: “Because it is undecidable, one can decide and settle only for life. But life, which is undecidable, is also, in its very finitude, infinite. What has only one side—a single edge without an opposite edge—is in-finite. Finite because it has an

edge on one side, but infinite because it has no opposable edge.”⁴⁰ *For* life, to be *for* life, the whole mystery lies in the *for*. What comes *before* life, from which position to be *for* or *against* life, from which side to argue? That is precisely why it is impossible to be against life, why there is only one side, always already *for* or *before* life. It is the life of the other, for the life of *me*: “before the being-for, and even the being-of-life-for, there would be the life-for-life, the *for-life*, which at once gives and replaces life with life in view.”⁴¹ Living for the sake of living, that might be the definition of Cixous’s writing, for Derrida.

Life-writing

A discourse on life / death must occupy a certain space between *logos* and *gramme*, analogy and program, as well as between the differing senses of program and reproduction. And since life is on the line, the trait that relates the logical to the graphical must also be working between the biological and biographical, the thanatological and thanatographical.⁴²

So why, as Derrida insists, stay turned towards death? Is it merely a question of style, or life-style, as if there were two *styles de vie*, maybe also two *styles de déconstruction*, the one turned towards death, nostalgical, all the while enjoying life and affirming everything “*parce que c’est passé, fini* [because it is passed, finished]”—the last words of “*Apprendre à vivre enfin*”⁴³; or the other, on the side of life for life, which certainly does not mean ignoring death, rather *outliving* or *outspeeding* death, overtaking it: “Death counts for her, certainly, on every page, but she herself does not count”⁴⁴, “*mais elle, elle-même, elle ne compte pas.*”⁴⁵ There is ambiguity in “*elle*”: Who does not count, death, in the feminine, *la mort*, or her, *elle*? Death *herself*, death *as such*, or Cixous, *her self*, what or who does not count? And what does *counting* mean in this context?

Cixous's, it appears, would be the missing *logique de la vivante*, not Jacob's logic of the living, but of the living—feminine, like *la vie*, opposed to a masculine, *le vivant* or in the plural universal *les vivants*. And this is precisely what is at stake in theory, today, but arguably, already from the beginning: “*le vivant*,” the undecidability between life and death, or the living-on (*survivance*). That which is neither on the side of death, which is no side, nor entirely identical with life, on the other side of life, maybe, where all forms of life and non-life, organic and anorganic seem to proliferate, machines, cyborgs, viruses, genes, molecules, minerals, plants and so on. Maybe this is a neo- or even ultravitalism somehow liberated from the very notion of *life*, or from an ontology of life, and entirely turned towards the living presence, whatever in life is *living*, some kind of pure force, the “*élan vital*” without the heroism of life, or “bare life,” “*zoē*,” as opposed to “*bios*,” as Agamben claims.⁴⁶

It remains to be seen, however, as Christopher Johnson remarks in “*La vie, le vivant*”—his contribution to *L'animal autobiographique* – “whether this new science (e.g., “life science,” “*les sciences de la vie*”) is not, in the end, finally [*à la fin, enfin*] a science of death, ultimately following the economy of death *in* life.”⁴⁷ It is thus not surprising that there is so much talk of *life* in theory these days, life in all its forms. On the one hand, there is the irreducible plurality of life forms, while, on the other side, there seems to be life itself, bare life, *zoē*, *bios*, with their associated forms of bio-, necro- or, at worst, thanatopolitics. It is as if the *end of man*, the apparent antihumanism of theory, thematized in the landmark Colloque de Cerisy in 1980 on “*Les fins de l'homme*” (Lacoue-Labarthe & Nancy, 1981) has finally, and ironically, given birth to *life*, life after people so to speak, posthumanist if not posthuman, arguably post-theoretical, but at least hopefully post-anthropocentric. The posthumanist (bio-zoo-thanato-) politics of life which is starting to see the day under

these new circumstances comes in various forms. Donna Haraway, for example, understands it as “multi-species flourishing.”⁴⁸ It becomes clear that the last borderline was always going to be life—from the theory wars to the culture wars to the science wars and, maybe, now *life wars*. And with regard to the danger (the desire for *and* anxiety of) the possibilities of *posthuman* life, theory has been shifting rapidly, maybe all too rapidly, and it has raised the stakes to embrace the war *for* life, which increasingly looks like the war *on* life, and raises the question of life’s *precarity*, as Judith Butler puts it in her *Precarious Life* (2004), to address the escalation of biopolitics, and the generalization of the *state of exception*, by attempting to re- or neo- *vitalize* itself. Facing the general posthumanizing drive it is important to remain mindful of the potentialities but also critical of the speed with which desires are taken for inevitabilities. It is worth recalling life to the letter, so to speak—*du mot à la vie* and back. Affirming life seems to require, literally, saying *yes* to life, first. But even affirming life is not the same as living; it is not the same as living (a) life. Theory, of course, cannot *be* life, even though it may be trying hard these days to theorize what life *is*—theory as *life-writing*.

To give just a few examples and a few names that are key to this revival and proliferation of life in theory today: on the one hand, on the one side, the side of death probably, are the late followers of Aristotle: from Hannah Arendt to Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben, who are all in their own way thinkers of *biopolitics* based on the impossible but necessary distinction between *bios* and *zoē*. To complicate matters, according to Agamben, this is a distinction that modernity has blurred and continues to do so, which gives rise to the idea of the *state of exception*, the exposure of *bare life*, which, in turn, becomes the main *material* for and the main *stake* of modern politics.

On the other hand, the other side, maybe the side of life, are the late followers of Spinoza, Bergson and Darwin. Deleuze and Guattari and Rosi Braidotti, to name just these as examples, who are proponents of a new *vitalism* based on the idea of *biocentrism* (presumably opposed to metaphysical anthropocentrism). Biocentrism is to be seen as the celebration of all life, of life as life, life in all its forms, including material everyday life and even life in its technological forms (i.e., the life or lives of the future). A life is here understood as *pure immanence*, in the Deleuzian sense, which, in a sense, only makes this proliferation of life—*bios* and / or *zoē*—thinkable, because it coincides with the advent of life technologies that go far beyond any modern *technologies of the self*.⁴⁹ Titles like *Bits of Life* (Smelik & Lykke, 2008), *Life as Surplus* (Cooper, 2008), *The Politics of Life Itself* (Rose, 2007), *Biocapital* (Rajan, 2006), *On Creaturely Life* (Santner, 2006), *Inventive Life* (Fraser, 2006) or *Wetwares: Experiments in Postvital Living* (Doyle, 2003) and so many others underscore this. While Agamben's argument in *Homo Sacer, Remnants of Auschwitz* and *The Open* has been widely discussed, it might be enough for the present context to focus on one example from the neo-vitalist side. Rosi Braidotti accuses Agamben and arguably the whole *phallogocentric* philosophical tradition, including Derrida, of a fixation on Thanatos or necropolitics. Instead, she, on her side, the side of life, supposedly, argues that the emphasis should fall “on the politics of life itself as a relentlessly generative force. This requires an interrogation of the shifting inter-relations between human and non-human forces. The latter are defined both as in-human and as post-human.”⁵⁰ In short, Braidotti claims, “death is overrated,” and what in her view constitutes the potentialities of posthuman politics calls for a shift from “bio-power and necro-politics” is “the primacy of life as *zoē*,” as “vitalistic, prehuman, generative life.”⁵¹ In order to oppose and escape the traditional humanistic

necropolitical tendency she follows Deleuze and Guattari in their attempt to “trespass all metaphysical boundaries” by celebrating a “becoming animal, becoming other, becoming insect, becoming machine,” in short, embracing becoming a “posthuman” body: “a living piece of meat activated by electric waves of desire, a script written by the unfolding of genetic encoding, a text composed by the enfolding of external prompts,” which is Braidotti’s take on *life-writing*.⁵² This becoming corpse, which she understands as a Spinozist ontology, is set against the metaphysics of finitude, which negates life and overrates death, according to her, seen from her side, is affirmative, or the affirmation of life itself. It is neomaterialist, feminist and embodied and above all eco-logical and postanthropocentric. It is worth quoting some passages at length in order to get an impression of Braidotti’s style and speed:

I am developing... a sustainable brand of nomadic ethics. The starting point is the relentless generative force of *bios* and *zoē* and the specific brand of transspecies egalitarianism that they establish with the human. The ecological dimension of philosophical nomadism consequently becomes manifest and, with it, its potential ethical impact. It is a matter of forces as well as ethology.⁵³

And, only two paragraphs down, she accelerates:

The vital politics of life as *zoē*, defined as a generative force, resets the terms of the debate and introduces an ecophilosophy of belonging that includes both species equality and posthumanist ethics.⁵⁴

And, gathering speed, on the next page:

I propose a posthumanistic brand of nonanthropomorphic vitalism. To defend this position, I start from the concept of a sustainable self that aims at endurance...⁵⁵

Over pages and pages of programmatic life force follow and almost reach escape velocity:

A higher form of self-knowledge, through an understanding of the nature of one’s own affectivity, is the key to a Spinozist ethics of empowerment. It

includes a more adequate understanding of the interconnections between the self and a multitude of other forces, thus undermining the liberal individual understanding of the subject... At this point, it is important to stress that sustainability is about decentering anthropocentrism. The ultimate implication is a displacement of the human in the new, complex compound of highly generative posthumanities. In my view, the sustainable subject has a nomadic subjectivity because the notion of sustainability brings together ethical, epistemological, and political concerns under cover of a nonunitary vision of the subject... 'Life' privileges assemblages of a heterogeneous kind. Animals, insects, machines are as many fields of forces or territories of becoming. The life in me is not only, not even human.⁵⁶

These passages are characteristic of Braidotti's style: relentless, driven, forceful, full of life, obsessed with, *performing* transgression, one could say. Without question, Braidotti would be on the side of Cixous. Theory for life, that is to say... for all the promise and necessity of posthumanism, as something a *critical* and theoretical step towards embracing the challenges of *our* residual humanism, *our* anthropocentrism, *our* necropolitics, you name it. You *NAME IT*—that is to say. At this juncture it seems the necessity arises to slow down and ponder the question of the power of naming *it*? For life has the capacity to name itself, as Derrida describes in referring to Cixous's style: "... *une puissance d'hétéronomie...*"⁵⁷ Cixous's power of heteronomy, the naming of the other, and the speed in which this happens is also a political gesture which is not free of metaphysical necropolitics in speaking *for* the other. As tempting as it might be to agree with Braidotti, who is here seen as an example of a certain post- or neovitalist posthumanism paradigm gathering momentum, questions remain. For example, the question concerning the rather liberal use of the copula "is," proliferating wherever there's a question of life. And might be worth pausing to see whether theory, while entering the deadly life wars, might have to change its way of speaking *to* life and *about* life. Theory... for life, after all, is itself a *style de vie*: theory for life, that is to say...

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² Jacques Derrida, *Mémoires—pour Paul de Man* (Paris: Galilée, 1988), 38.

³ Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen & Co, 1979), 100; 102. All italics in citations in this paper are those of the author cited unless otherwise indicated.

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⁵ Michel Riffaterre, “*L’inscription du style*,” in *Qu’est-ce que le style?*, 283.

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¹⁰ *Ibid.*, x.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 172.

¹² *Ibid.*, 173.

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¹⁴ Rupert Read, *Philosophy for Life*, ed. M.A. Lavery (London: Continuum, 2007), 135.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 136;137.

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- ²³ Ibid., 26.
- ²⁴ Ibid., 26.
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- ³¹ Ibid., 355.
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- ³³ Derrida, *Apprendre   vivre enfin*, 49.
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- ³⁵ On necropolitics see Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," *Public Culture* 15 no. 1 (2003): 11–40.
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- ³⁷ Derrida, *H.C. for Life*, 21.
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