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Offering Theory

For JD

Before there were no WMDs there *were* DWGs. Although abundant, dead white guys were no less phantasmatic. Attributed with destructive powers that mere exposure could trigger, dead white guys figured prominently in debates over pedagogy during the 80s once these debates were given over to the concerns of identity politics. The point, of course, was that the literary canon was comprised almost exclusively of writers who were of one race and one gender. Because the canon was deemed to function, among other things, to constrain literary theory by limiting it to the questions the canon promised to answer in interesting ways, it ran afoul of the theoretical propositions of identitarianism. However, in unwitting confirmation of the blinding character of all insight, this redoubtable challenge to the canon soon floundered on its own lack of theoretical follow up. Once the inevitable Norton anthologies trotted out, the “wounded attachments” that had sustained the challenge to DWGs lost much of their sting. In the *détente* that followed, little or no thought was given to the pedagogy of apostrophe whose claims were also implicitly being settled. In other words, it is one thing to protest being taught about or even by representatives of specific social groups, it is quite another to refuse the instruction of the dead as such. What might be said to rotate here is the arrow of indignation: instead of asking, what can he possibly have to say to *me*? the question becomes, to supply an old phrase with a new ring tone, how can someone like me relate to something like *this*? how can death teach, not by example, but as the very subject of pedagogy? Or, pushed further down the path that will concern me, how can teaching put death to work?

Questions such as these may inevitably call to mind, at least in the western cultural tradition, Book Eleven of *The Odyssey* where the haunting scene of Odysseus receiving instruction from the dead is staged. As will be recalled, Circe dispatches Odysseus to Hades to receive from the dead, transsexual seer Teiresias knowledge concerning, as she says, “the measures of your path and of your return” (Homer 397). In addition to telling him precisely how to go where no man has gone before, she describes in detail the sacrifices necessary to cause the dead, as it were, to surface. A libation must be prepared of milk, honey, wine and finally animal blood, blood which Odysseus must guard over so as to reserve the first taste for Teiresias himself. Because the “strengthless heads” (Homer 397) are surprisingly threatened by the prospect of re-decapitation, this guard duty reveals that the dead are not dead. Nor are they all, as it were, from the future. In fact, several shades solicit information from Odysseus about the futures he has lived in the wake of their departures both timely and untimely.

What marks this as a pedagogical scene are not merely Circe’s use of “*phrenes*” (from the verb *phrenoun*, to instruct) to describe Teiresias’ counsel, and her characterization of Teiresias as one to whom Persephone has granted “reason,” but also the fact that Odysseus turns directly from Teiresias to his mother, in effect, the outer limits of instruction. Nor can it be insignificant that his mother’s inability to return his desperate “glasp” — an inability that prompts her to hasten him back to his wife — is followed, within a few pages, by Odysseus’ encounter with the mother of Oedipus. All of these are elements that later converge in the disparagement of DWGs, for here in the person of Teiresias one dead white guy (Teiresias dies as a man who is not from Egypt or the eastern Mediterranean) instructs another under the aegis of the incest taboo and its undercoating of homosocially sustained compulsory heterosexuality. In retracing Odysseus’s step to resuscitate Homer, I only compound the problem.

Such hoary themes have recently been given new life, a life that bears on the offering of theory in a rather direct way. In the wake of Jacques Derrida’s death on October 8th of 2004, Emily Eakin published a piece in *The New York Times* (the US paper of record) with the title “The Theory of Everything, R.I.P.” Ostensibly an obituary for Derrida, the piece, as its title makes clear, mourns (hardly the right word) something like the “theorist’s two bodies”: the theory of everything, which is presumably his effigy, and Derrida, as it were, himself. While it is important to pressure this metonymy — was Derrida not, in fact, more typically chastised for having repudiated

the totality? — this is not effectively done by refusing Eakin's conflation of the man and the work of his thought. After all, Derrida was in a quite singular and extraordinary way a thought experiment, one that sought to stun our easy assumptions about where thought and life converge without meeting. Nor, I would argue, is it worth chiding *The Times* or Eakin for their ghoulish tone. In fact, she comes by this tone quite honestly as it has rather clearly defined the atmosphere of the discourse of theory for decades, a fact that confronts those of us committed to teaching theory, whether of the DWG variety or not, with challenges that are difficult if not impossible to avoid.

For some time now, measured etymologically, theory has been affiliated with spectatorship. Somewhat more recently, but no less etymologically, the form of spectatorship has been recast as witnessing. Thus, we have come to recognize the *theoros* as a collective charged, typically by a state, with the task of witnessing a properly public event and producing a report that then serves as a frame of reference for public discussion of said event. The report is, technically, a theory. These legacies of *theoria*, theory as spectatorship, theory as witnessing, have been powerfully reanimated in films such as *Monster's Ball*, *Dead Man Walking*, *The Green Mile* etc. where one of the few surviving instances of the classical *theoros* — those gathered officially to witness a state mandated execution — is deftly and routinely fused with the spectator positions produced by such films. So much so one might think these films are about theory, but for the fact that they appear, from where we sit, out of focus.

Although film titles such as *Deconstructing Harry* might lead one to believe that mainstream directors are in touch with theory, perhaps even engaged with it, directors who incite us to witness scenes of capital punishment maintain their distance precisely by proceeding as though theory is simply alive and well. If, as *The Times* reported, theory can be confused with Jacques Derrida, then might we not conclude that, at best, theory is now cast in the role of bearing witness to its own demise, to, in effect, being on time for its own funeral. In fact, one of the striking, even startling features of the Western intellectual scene of the past three decades is the routine, not to say unchecked, killing off of theory. As if in time with the lugubrious rhythm of cicada infestations, theory — often adjectivally inflected as literary, postmodern or cultural — is attacked and pronounced dead about every 10 years or so.

Of course, the repetition — whatever professional considerations it might express notwithstanding — belies the deed. If theory must be repeatedly killed anew, it is because it stubbornly survives its death. In fact, given the cycle of reviling and reviving theory — for every “Against Theory” or *In Theory* there is an equal or greater *Theory as Resistance* or *The Future of Theory* — I think we are obliged to draw the conclusion that theory has assumed the restless, even perpetually agitated, status of the living dead. Theory is not simply in Limbo, it *is* Limbo in the sense that it has come to designate the zone of indistinction, the *limbus*, between life and its others. This legacy of theory, precisely to the extent that it haunts its contemporary pedagogy, is one that deserves more of our attention.

But what precisely are we trying to think about when our thinking proceeds under the heading “Legacies of Theory”? No doubt others have their own answers to these questions. Here is mine. Whatever thinking we undertake should in some way seek to engage the two etymologically marked fronts that structure the concept of legacy. On one side we have the paradigm of empire. That is, legacy as the assignment or responsibility given, specifically in the era of imperial Rome, to the *legatus* or provincial delegate of the emperor, in effect of the sovereign. On the other side, we have the paradigm of the will or testament. That is, legacy as the property bequeathed to an heir whether familial or not. These fronts converge, obviously enough, in the Latin *lex* or law where legacy is indexed to the right to assign or bequeath. No doubt less obviously, these fronts also converge in the Latin *lego* where what falls into the foreground is the analytically fraught act of sending and receiving. One is at once sent to maintain a legacy, and identified as one to receive a legacy. As with any post, one struggles to come and go, to accept what is given and to return what can only remain. Not quite *fort/da*, but close. Very close.

Thus, thinking about the legacies of theory, especially the one involving the recurring death of theory, can hardly avoid the fluctuation, the semantic syncopation alive within legacy. We will have to think about both the empire and the testament of theory, the assigning as well as the bequeathing, the gifting of theory. It is precisely in order to signal this latter concern that the term “offering” appears in my title. After all, language and literature departments offer theory (or they withhold it) and thereby either assign or consign it. Indeed, in consulting the “Job Information List” of the Modern Language Association (its printed form dates back to 1968), one notes that departments have been doing so for some time. Already in the early seventies

one finds solicitations for specialists in “critical theory,” and while the number of postings for “theorists” has steadily declined (only one in 2004), theory has now been metabolized as the thoughtful texture of the descriptions themselves which have grown from a few laconic lines in the early 70s to the short essays of today. Departments give theory courses, and in thereby sending theory insist, or at the very least, expect it (hence the rituals of examination) to be received. In so doing they involve themselves not simply in the legacy of theory, but, one way or another, in the production of its contemporary “dead man walking” status. How, and whether this is necessary are both questions worthy of better answers than they are likely to receive from me. The questions, as always, are nevertheless worth posing.

Of course, another sense of offering is active within my title, and because the two senses are intimately connected this too deserves comment. What “offering theory” also calls to mind is sacrifice, in other words, the act of offering theory up in sacrifice for something or to someone, perhaps even “everything” and everyone. In underlining this, I wish to make explicit that certainly one way to think about the recurring death of theory is in terms of the ritual of sacrifice where, in effect, theory becomes totem, but also where — does it not — thinking about the legacy of theory is also thinking about religion, or what, to invoke another legacy — that of Said — might also be called the failed emergence of secular criticism. Perhaps because the repudiation of “system” and the repudiation of grand theory were never sufficiently differentiated, the task of finishing the secularization of criticism remains.

Before you dismiss the association of theory and sacrifice as sheer exaggeration, please recall that Adorno once insisted that in psychoanalysis *only* the exaggerations were true, and while I in no way aspire to the fraught legacy and stature of Freud’s plague, I do think something worth thinking about is on offer within the theory/sacrifice matrix. First of all the stakes in the fight over theory are deadly serious, by which I mean that they are about what partisans regard as crucial discernments of value — at once use and exchange — and as such they are also about disciplinary power. In effect, when “grand theory” is attacked (as has been done by David Bordwell and Noel Carroll at Wisconsin) it is explicitly in order to identify what sort of professional training should guarantee disciples (the subjects of disciplines) careers, that is, lives after graduate school. Recall that Knapp and Michaels conclude “Against Theory” on much the same note: if literary theory is devoid of consequences, that is, use value, we (by which they mean

educators and academic intellectuals) should simply stop doing it. Although intended (gold in their theory) to cause the theoretical enterprise to simply “come to an end,” the profession somehow misinterpreted their call by precipitating the theory boom (eight postings in 1982 to a high of 19 in 1987) of the 80s. Surely further testament to the uncanny vitality of theory’s death, but also to the stakes of struggling over it.

And there is more. Emphasizing the link between death and value places us squarely on the turf of sacrifice precisely because — as everyone from Frazer and Mauss to Bataille and Lévi-Strauss attests — sacrifice is irreducibly ambivalent. That which is sacrificed pinpoints and thus produces a value that is unassailable as a result. Or, as Lacan laconically put it, it is precisely because God is dead that she is God. When earlier I referred, albeit in passing, to the rhythm of reviling and reviving theory, it was precisely this link between death and value I meant to invoke. And while one may object that these gestures are typically carried out by different parties and are thus devoid of ambivalence, de Man’s still resonant identification of theory and resistance largely preempts such reservations. Moreover, and I will return to de Man at greater length, an especially striking feature of the theory attacks executed by, in a certain sense, Zarvazadeh and Morton, but certainly Ahmad, Said (especially in his presidential attacks on obscurantism), and most recently Eagleton, is precisely their ambivalence. All, albeit in very different ways, are challenging the value of theory precisely in order to intensify it, or at least sanctify a certain reorganization of it. This is perhaps captured with the greatest concision in the title of Eagleton’s recent jeremiad, *After Theory*, where he goes after theory so as to lay hold of, or at least smell, what comes after it. Not surprisingly, the after of theory actually came before it, that is, a Marxism not yet complicated (Perry Anderson might say, further “westernized”) by its encounter with the four “posts.” It is, however, still theory, but now invested with even greater totemic powers, indeed powers sufficient to ward off its historically destined descent into political apathy, and, in these dark times, reaction.

Indulge me as I linger here, for it is emphatically not enough to observe that Eagleton’s project helps to sell the assertion that the theory/sacrifice matrix is as compelling an exaggeration as those to be found in psychoanalysis. It is not enough because there could hardly be a more urgent and troubling topic than that of the relation, let me even go so far as to say the ontological relation, between theory and politics. This is especially so at an international conference convened under the title “Legacies of Theory.”

After all, thinking about the legacies of theory is also thinking *after* theory. But, settling for what amounts to a self-justification is likewise inadequate because it is a mis-reading, one that in misrecognizing what Eagleton is doing and saying deprives itself of the means by which to not simply answer him (and those in his camp), but to answer the more insistent question: what are we trying to think about when thinking about the legacy — remember, its empire and its testament — of theory? And, to return to my central preoccupation: what can this thinking teach us about teaching theory?

Forgive me now as I execute what can be called, properly I think, a left turn. My earlier evocation of the sovereign (the emperor who posts the *legatus*) was deliberate. Specifically it was to prepare the following consideration of Agamben's study of sovereignty, *Homo Sacer*. My interest in this text lies not in the fact that it exemplifies the genre of theory. It does, of course, and in doing so it reminds us that Gramsci and Eco are not the only Italians writing in the last century who should matter in the global North. But in fact, what matters most about *Homo Sacer* in the context generated here is that it exposes what I have called my mis-reading of *After Theory*. Ultimately, Eagleton's text is not about sacrificing theory. It is about casting theory in the position of what Agamben calls, *homo sacer*, that is, the embodiment of life that can be killed, but *not* sacrificed.

It is safe to say that after Schmitt and Bataille, Agamben's is the most theoretically ambitious discussion of sovereignty to have been produced in the last century. While much could be said about its appearance in the mid-nineties, when, as you will recall, history had ended and globalization had begun, I'll forego this guilty pleasure. Instead, what deserves brief elaboration here is the important pressure the discussion of sovereignty places on the concept of sacrifice.

Early in *Homo Sacer* Agamben reenlists Aristotle's distinction between voice and language. I stress this both to underline the important struggle in *Homo Sacer* (and not only there) to, as my colleague Cesare Casarino puts it, displace the linguistic turn with a properly biopolitical one, but also to draw attention to the concept of the threshold; in this case the zone traversed by voice in its encounter with language, a trajectory regarded by Aristotle to found politics as such. Think Howard Dean's primary scream. It was voice, not language. Indeed, the status of his subsequent relation to politics has haunted even his assumption of the chair of the national democratic party. As this suggests, the threshold matters fundamentally to sovereignty because of its relation to politics, a relation which is at once historical — in acquiring

language the human animal becomes a properly political animal — and theoretical — in founding the political on the threshold (and not simply the one enjoining language and voice) Agamben extends politics into the ontological register of life as such.

A chief feature of the threshold — and we must not overlook the fact that three sections of Agamben's essay bear the name — is that it designates what earlier I referred to as a zone of indistinction. As such, it fields many relations — that between *zoe* and *bios*, life and death, the state of nature and the social contract, but centrally, between the rule of law and the state of exception. This last is what makes the threshold matter, and matter fundamentally, to the concept of sovereignty. Following Schmitt, Agamben insists upon the sovereign's decisive political role in deciding upon — Heidegger called it a “resolute decision” — the state of exception. Because deciding upon the state of exception requires a legal suspension of the rule of law, the sovereign is both inside and outside — or as Kafka put it “before” [*vor*] the law. In a series of deft maneuvers that finally outdistances Schmitt's investment in the earth as the ground of *nomos*, Agamben situates both the sovereign and all that the law takes exception to in the same zone of indistinction or threshold. Although I am not convinced he has thought through the full implications of this, it does eliminate many loose ends. On the outer lip of the third and final threshold Agamben summarizes his analysis thus:

Three theses have emerged as provisional conclusions in the course of this inquiry. One, the original political relation is the ban (the state of exception as zone of indistinction between outside and inside, exclusion and inclusion). Two, The fundamental activity of sovereign power is the production of bare life as original political element and as threshold of articulation between nature and culture, *zoe* and *bios*. Three, today it is not the city but rather the camp that is the fundamental biopolitical paradigm of the west. (Agamben 181)

Condensing as this does an erudite and provocative discussion, I'll make no pretense of elaborating its myriad claims. Rather I want to draw attention to three terms or phrases: threshold, zone of indistinction and paradigm. All three not only enable Agamben's articulation, as he says, of the original (elsewhere “originary”) political relation, but they also, in effect, do as they say. This strikes me as vital first because it points us toward an insight about the relation between sacrifice and politics that belongs to the debate stirred

by Eagleton. About which more in a moment. But also, threshold, zone of indistinction and paradigm (this last discussed in “The Logic of Sovereignty” chapter) are all properly dialectical, that is, they point at once inside and outside Agamben’s own text. Doubtless this is why the first threshold section invaginates the text by folding over on its opening and why the last threshold section, the one that physically stages the passage from writing to reading, book to earth, ends on a catastrophic note. The stanza turns and returns.

My point is not the usual deconstructive one, or at least not only that one, but rather that in extending the threshold, wherein is situated the original political relation, into the diexis of his own text, Agamben not only restates his earlier point about our all — even theorists — having become *homines sacri*, but he also traces the presence of bare life, *zoe*, in writing, in the commodity of his text. In doing so he clarifies why Eakin may well have felt entitled, if not compelled, to engrave her remarks on a tombstone. Yet, beyond the local effects of necro-phobo-philia, Agamben’s discussion also invites us to situate the text of theory in relation to the prosopopeia at work in *Capital I*, when Marx writes:

If commodities could speak they would say this: our use value may interest men, but it does not belong to us as objects. What does belong to us as objects, however, is value. Our own intercourse as commodities proves it. We relate to each other merely as exchange values. Now listen how these commodities speak through the mouth of the economist. (Marx 176-77)

The ventriloquy that ensues clarifies not only that commodities, *qua* commodities, have passed from voice to language, but that in doing so they have acquired a distinctly Marxian politics. Not to put too fine a point on it, Marx hears dead people, that is, the dead labor congealed as labor time in commodities who when provided a medium, speak the theory of Marxism. Many have commented on the distinctly gothic register of Marx’s text, so let me make a different point. Namely, that all those of us who give agency to theory — as do, for example, Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callus when they insist that “theory has had to punish itself” (Herbrechter and Callus 8) for its disciplinary success — do so honestly. We, and here I include emergency response teams like Herbrechter and Callus, act as though theory has a life to give/lose. Has theory thus become the name for where reification, to

invoke Lukács' breakthrough concept, situates the life of labor power once it circulates socially as the objective relations we mistake for our selves?

My point is that Agamben's text, both in and as theory, helps us recognize what is at stake here. Put summarily, he asks us to consider that the camp, that is, the space wherein life can be taken without being sacrificed, is encroaching upon all zones of indistinction, and that in doing so it is confronting us with the need to articulate a politics up to the task of displacing this space. In effect, Agamben is placing the question of sovereignty and the paradox of sovereign power squarely on our desks.

This detour through *Homo Sacer* was motivated by what earlier I described as my misreading of Eagleton's *After Theory* (presumably *not* modeled on Erwin Rhode's reply to von Willamowitz's critique of *The Birth of Tragedy*, "Afterphilologie" with its punning allusion to the anus). I return now to this thread to elaborate a more knowing misreading.

In her review of the book for *The Chronicle of Higher Education* Elaine Showalter, an unabashed friend of the sartorial commodity, captures one of the text's central paradoxes, namely, Eagleton's dual insistence on theoretical openness and orthodoxy. Earlier, I gave my own version of this problem in noting from whence comes the "after" of theory. But these are hardly telling blows. More serious is the gauntlet thrown before us regarding the politics of theory, a challenge we leave to the ebb and flow of academic fashions at our peril and one typically urged by the partisans of a distinctly tenured *amor fati*. To convince us of the urgency of this question Eagleton (consulted, by the way, by Eakin) situates what he calls "cultural theory" in the historical moment of its gestation, arguing that while its advent was marked by engagement with struggles of varying aims and ambitions — anti-colonialism, anti-sexism, anti-racism and so on — in our moment, a moment post-scriptively located in the post-911 world — theory has abandoned these engagements, transferring their energies into such teapot tempests as "the culture wars." Postmodern theory, virtually without attribution, is singled out for special ridicule and is effectively converted into a symptom of cultural theory's general decline.

Once it is established that theory partisans owe a debt to history, Eagleton trudges on to the heart of the matter. Specifically, and I will add, tellingly, he finds there the body and death. Like Agamben, Eagleton appeals to Aristotle, indeed to *The Nicomachean Ethics*, not to probe the founding exclusions of politics, but to show how ethics and politics converge in Aristotle's thought. His aim is not unlike Žižek's in the latter's *The Puppet and*

the Dwarf, but what postmodern theory is explicitly criticized for is its denial of the materiality of the body, and, by extension, death. For Eagleton, the only coherent stand against relativism that does not lapse into fundamentalism, is a stand that in accepting the facts of pain, suffering and death proceeds so as to minimize the general human encounter with such facts. In effect, if the algorithm of capital is C-M-C, then Eagleton proposes M-M-M, that is, mortality is morality is Marxism, as the algorithm of communism.

This is unfair, I know, but what is very clear about *After Theory* is that it is deeply invested in what Agamben calls the “politicization of death.” This does not first and foremost concern the politics of killing (who, for example, authorized the interrogations that led to two deaths in Afghanistan, etc.), but to the sovereign power over the zone of indistinction wherein life and death brush up against one another. Agamben’s discussion wanders off here in the fascinating though unhelpful direction of considering the phenomenon of “neomorts,” but in its wake one reads Eagleton’s persistent rhetorical appeals to death and blood (the basic binary is “bloodless” bad, “full blooded” good) with pricked ears. Even correcting for a certain Lawrentian identification, Eagleton is clearly involved in struggling over the matter of the political meaning of death, proposing both implicitly and explicitly that the blood of theory (his figure is that of the “bloodstained coin” [Eagleton 161]) will be on the hands of those who, in denying the blunt empiricity of the body, abandon any means by which to protect themselves (not to mention others) from a death unchecked by moral condemnation. Like the fundamentalist martyr, the postmodern theorist is always already hurling toward the instant but empty paradise of self-immolation. There are moments, alas, when Eagleton appears to have a piece of this action.

Stated perhaps a little too bluntly, theory — perhaps uniquely in its postmodern incarnation — assumes the status of “bare life” in Eagleton’s analysis. Precisely to the extent that it has become bloodless, or is otherwise already dead (“cold-blooded” in Eagleton’s parlance) it cannot be sacrificed. It cannot be sacrificed because it has no nothing to give, it has nothing of value to secure its status as a totem. Teiresias is left too parched to speak. Even if we parse Eagleton’s argument to say that theory must be sacrificed to or for politics, what seems clear is that in aspiring to an articulation of sovereign power, that is, the authority to exempt from life that which menaces it, he founds his politics on the very zone of indistinction that distinctly complicates the difference between theory and politics. What or

who is being sacrificed to whom? Or, why not sacrifice that which is not distinctly politics to that which is not distinctly theory? At the risk of squandering what indulgence you have extended me regarding exaggerations, permit me to suggest that this dilemma suits Eagleton to, as we say, a T, the very letter, need I point out, whose introduction converts morality into mortality, the very letter *tau* which in the so-called Semitic alphabets marked the brand, indeed brand x, that rendered an animal, for example *taurus*, one's property. T, it so happens, also sounds out the name with which Eagleton signs *After Theory*, "TE" (Eagleton 227).

Less perversely, what deserves emphasis is that despite Eagleton's eloquent insistence on the vital importance of politics, his study forecloses on the matter. If Agamben is right that politics depends for its specificity on a founding exclusion of bare life, then a politics of theory that seeks to politicize death, precisely to the extent that it avoids interrogating, much less undoing, the founding exclusion of bare life, ends up repeating the act it is meant to forestall. As with the sovereign itself, the Marxism that comes after theory is thus already in the dead zone, and frankly, Marxism deserves better. It has a right, as Derrida has argued, to its specters. To be sure, the "politics freed from the aporias of sovereignty" (Agamben 44) called for by Agamben, is not yet articulated with, or as, a new spirit of Marxism, but the limits such a call draws around the principled but ultimately wounded posturing of Eagleton are there for all to see.

Appearances notwithstanding, the lesson offered by Adorno in "Bach Defended from his Devotees" applies equally to theory. Indeed, in tracing my mis-readings of Eagleton — someone whose professional life has long been supported by his ambassadorial status in the empire of theory (indeed, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* is one of the University of Minnesota Press's best selling non-regional books) I hope I have prepared you for such an assertion. But more particularly, I want to bring these remarks to conclusion by thinking briefly about what Homi Bhabha once called "the commitment to theory," especially as that commitment expresses itself in pedagogy. Thus, my question about teaching theory now assumes the form of: how should we "offer" theory? And, in case it is not obvious, my over-arching concern is that it is perfectly possible to reduce theory to the status of bare life through the expression of one's devotion to it. Sacrificing oneself to theory is no more enabling than sacrificing theory to one's career. If theory has indeed achieved the status of the undead, this is in part because of the rhythm,

already mentioned, whereby friends and foes routinely resuscitate it in order to eliminate it, or banish it in order to rediscover it.

While I hope I have clarified that there is no easy way out, or as Lacan used to say, that the only way out is the way in, I do want to propose that de Man's reformulation of ambivalence as resistance is an important one especially when considering the offering of theory. It may seem odd to invoke "The Resistance to Theory" in this context, but let me remind us that it opens by marking its failure to rise to its occasion, that is, an invitation "to address the question of teaching" (de Man 3). In the course of the essay this failure to rise reiterates itself in the discussion of Keat's enigmatic "The Fall of Hyperion," and in the concluding sentence where the value of de Man's failure to discuss teaching is weighed. As such, the piece urges us to recognize in its failure, a triumphant engagement with teaching, but now as an activity as different from pedagogical practice as reading is from interpretation. Key then is sorting out what reading teaches us about teaching theory.

In "The Resistance to Theory" de Man invites us to consider the implications of the redundancy of three formulations: one, "the resistance to theory is a resistance to the use of language about language" (de Man 12); two, "the resistance to theory is in fact a resistance to reading" (de Man 15); and three, "the resistance to theory is a resistance to the rhetorical or tropological dimension of language" (de Man 17). Ultimately, this redundancy gathers in the formulation referred to earlier whereby the resistance to theory is a resistance "inherent in the theoretical enterprise itself" (de Man 12). Here ambivalence is recast not as a killing that deifies, a fall that lifts, but as a resistance to theory from within the routines of its own ruinous empire. What this effects is a certain neutralization of the friend/foe dyad, for, as I earlier observed, partisans in both camps are understood to engage theory in the mode of resisting it. Or, to do something de Man did not say, theory assumes what specificity it has by designating where, in any text, reading encounters resistance. By the same token (only different), reading designates that activity through which one encounters what resists theorization. In effect, to invoke Agamben's vocabulary, theory is a zone of indistinction not between itself and practice, but between theory and the reading that separates it from itself.

I will close then with this thought about the offering of theory. Instead of preoccupying ourselves with devising the pedagogical means by which to preserve its legacy, perhaps our time would be better spent teaching reading,

reading theory to be sure (as long, that is, as we are not interpreting or surveying it whether perfunctorily [abridged “greatest hits”] or fetishistically [extend play “golden oldies”]), but more importantly, teaching reading as a way to encounter what politicizes theory, that is, the struggle to make sense of and intervene within the founding conditions of the vanishing present. We gain nothing by repudiating or otherwise circumscribing the dead, especially once theory, in all its uncanniness, has come to occupy the zone of indistinction that has broken out between capital and thought.

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