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**WHITHER THEORY?
OÙ VA LA THÉORIE ?**



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The Stakes of Theory

What is at stake in theory today? What are the burning issues that something called "theory" today cannot or should not be unaware of, and how do the historical-critical trajectory and rhizomatic inflections of its emergence, development, evolution, reconfigurations, etc. impact on the very conceptual definition and remit of "theory"? But also, in the light of the increasing disaffection towards it - the latest surge in a periodic movement, whose last noticeable crest was triggered off by the Heidegger and de Man affairs in the mid-to-late 1980s and their subsequent exploitation by theory's detractors - why is theory periodically burning at the stake? Or worse then: why is it *passé* according to some, even former practitioners, for whom we have entered *de facto* a *post*-theoretical age, with the no doubt reassuring reinstatement of value judgments, empirical procedures, etc. - a notion which does not need the added irony of being contemporaneous with our supposed entry into post-humanism to ring hollow and, since anti-theorists were usually so on liberal-humanist grounds, of being of a historically suspicious complicity? To merely hint at these momentous questions within the confined space of an essay, I would like to analyze the mechanics behind the crystallization of an anti-theoretical backlash in the 1980s, following the revelation of de Man's "collaborationist" articles in the Belgian press in 1941-42, as an implicit critical parallel with the apparently more benign, yet subtly pernicious dissatisfaction with theory in the current academic climate, and pit the ultimately not

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dissimilar reactionary politics of these two eras, some fifteen years apart, against two landmark interventions on the nature of theory: "The Resistance to Theory" (1986) by Paul de Man himself and Jacques Derrida's "Some Statements and Truisms..." (1990) in the collection *The States of "Theory"* as well as his *Resistances of Psychoanalysis* (originally 1996). Rather than taking my turn at assessing the states of "theory", I shall therefore look at the stakes of theory today.

1. The Stakes Against Theory: The Case of Paul de Man

*the stakes are enormous*¹

In August 1987 a young Belgian Ph.D candidate, Ortwin de Graef, uncovered the existence of some 180 articles written by Paul de Man between February 1941 and October 1942 in two patriotic, if not pro-Nazi, newspapers, *Le Soir* and, to a much lesser extent, *Het Vlaamsche Land*. Among them "Les Juifs dans la littérature actuelle" (4 March 1941), written under personal and political pressure,² was singled out for the more pronounced anti-Semitic vein of its argument, which played down the contribution of Jewish writers to belles lettres and endorsed the creation of "a Jewish colony isolated from Europe" as "a solution to the Jewish problem" since the West "would lose, in all, a few personalities of mediocre value and would continue, as in the past, to develop according to its great evolutive laws".³ Coming in the wake of the dramatized resurfacing of Heidegger's complicity with the Nazi regime and ideology thanks to Victor Fariás's *Heidegger et le nazisme* (also 1987; translated into English in 1989) and, in the same year, Jacques Derrida's courageous analysis *De l'Esprit: Heidegger et la*

¹ Paul de Man in conversation with J. Hillis Miller; quoted in J. Hillis Miller, "An Open Letter to Professor Jon Wiener", *Responses: On Paul de Man's Wartime Journalism*, ed. W. Hamacher et al., 341.

² Cf. the editors' "Paul de Man: A Chronology", *Ibid.*, xv. Also noted by C. Norris in "Paul de Man's Past", 7.

³ Quoted in J. Derrida, "Like the Sound of the Sea Deep Within a Shell: Paul de Man's War", 203-4.

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question (English: 1989), the shocking exposure of de Man's Darwinian scheme helped crystallize a change in North American academe that had been brewing, with several degrees of intensity, since Said's "The Problem of Textuality: Two Exemplary Positions" (1978), but whose first signs may be traced back to Fredric Jameson's famous early anti post-structuralist metaphor of the "prison house of language" in a similarly titled book (1972): away from textuality and language (Derrida, deconstruction; a certain complicity between poststructuralism and postmodernism) to culture, praxis and politics (Foucault, cultural studies and also postcolonialism).

I will not retrace the incessant ping-pong of bitter denunciations and strained apologetics, the unscrupulous agenda-ridden muckraking passing itself off as criticism as well as the contorted, not to say contortionist, denegations exchanged by detractors and defenders. Nor will I probe further into the set of historical circumstances but also coincidences - the sequence of events, discoveries, revelations, interventions and publications in 1987 - that precipitated this crisis within and against theory. Rather, I would like to dwell on some of the symptomatic mechanisms that were deployed in this feud and frame them within the context of that watershed decade in order to try and understand what theory "was" or was becoming, why it was thus demonized by its opponents, and what its responsibility should entail for its advocates.

(Dis)continuities and failed encounters

Whether for or against, the drive to establish or deny a link between past (juvenile journalistic writings, autobiography) and present (mature, sophisticated theory that gained widespread respect and academic recognition) was constantly at work, though in a revealingly "asymmetrical" way. Thus those sympathetic to de Man's cause could either resort to claiming the mutual independence of autobiography and theory, exonerating the accused from guilt and debt, or, conversely - and more surprisingly (but ultimately a perverse backfiring strategy aligning itself with the accusers' one-sided approach) - they could insist

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on the necessity of a "continuity in utter remoteness" as a purgatorial process, a redemptive dialectical reworking of the autobiographical into the theoretical staying "in memory of" and yet effecting a cure or *Aufarbeitung* of sorts. Such a position was exemplified by Christopher Norris's argument that one could

*view the entire production as an attempt to exorcise the bad memory, to adopt a critical standpoint squarely opposed to that mystified philosophy of language, tradition, and organic national culture*⁴

A discontinuous continuity, as it were, which was soon assimilated to the opponents' more one-sided view that high-falutin, sophistic(ated) theorizing is but a justificatory cover-up or smoke-screen to disguise a murky past beyond detection and identification by translating and transcending it into a respectable, impregnable theory. Thus the DeManian view that literature names the gap between sign and meaning, which is suspended between the literal and the "metaphoric" (the "rhetorical"; cf. *Allegories of Reading*), and therefore that criticism occurs in the mode of crisis, transvalues the duplicitous disjuncture of the young Belgian journalist and the successful North American professor, and ideologizes the necessary caesura between the personal / past and the professional / public / present. Where the (pro-) theorist "complicates and differentiates",⁵ the anti-theorist assimilates, amalgamates, homogenizes and totalizes...⁶

⁴ C. Norris, "Paul de Man's Past", 7. This passage is singled out by Stanley Corngold in "Paul de Man on the Contingency of Intention", *(Dis)continuities: Essays on Paul de Man*, ed. L. Herman et al., 32.

⁵ Cf. J. Derrida, "Like the Sound of the Sea Deep Within a Shell: Paul de Man's War", 173.

⁶ Such an uncritical amalgamation conflated the Heidegger and de Man affairs, despite the disjunction between the contiguity of an allegiance to National Socialism with a lifelong meditation on language, culture and the destiny of authentic thought in the former and the latter's distance from his earlier aesthetic-cultural positions, with their implicitly disastrous political extensions.

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This arguably deconstructive gesture is taken up by Derrida himself in the above-mentioned essay subtitled "Paul de Man's War" - an appendix to the revised edition of Derrida's three Wellek Library Lectures given at the University of California, Irvine in 1984 after de Man's death (1983).⁷ Derrida's oscillating series of "on the one hand" / "on the other hand"'s strategically remind us, if need be, that criticism, i.e. the serious issue of decision-making (what *krinein* meant, from which "crisis", "criticism" and "critique" originated - leaving aside here Derrida's own indication that deconstruction is not a critique⁸), is always such a "critical" forking of the paths that should never be prejudged and adjudicated in advance. Here is a summary of this balancing movement between "two more or less symmetrical errors":

One would consist in interpreting the rupture between the two moments of de Man's history and work as an interruption of any passage: an interdiction against any contamination, analogy, translation. In that case, one would be saying: no relation, sealed frontier between the two, absolute heterogeneity. One would also be saying: even if there were two moments, they do not belong to history, to the same history, to the history of the "work." [...]

I would also try to avoid the opposite error: confusing everything while playing at being an authorized prosecutor or clever inquisitor. We know from experience that these compulsive and confusionist practices - amalgam, continuism, analogism, teleologism, hasty totalization, reduction, and derivation - are not limited to a few hurried journalists.⁹

Indeed... In fact, whereas, through ever-widening gyres of sinfulness reminiscent of Dante's hell, the anti-theorists used the (re)discovery of one-time collaborationist prose or commitments by Heidegger and de Man (the latter being slandered as the "academic Waldheim") to

⁷ The essay first appeared in the March 1988 issue of *Critical Inquiry* and was subsequently revised for the new edition of *Mémoires pour Paul de Man* (1988).

⁸ J. Derrida, "Letter to a Japanese Friend", 273.

⁹ J. Derrida, "Like the Sound of the Sea Deep Within a Shell: Paul de Man's War", 231, 232.

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discredit the individual thinkers, what they stood for (a strand of "existential" philosophy that led to deconstruction), then, by vested extrapolation, to "demanize" Theory, accused of nihilism, pessimism, anti-liberalism and anti-humanism, it turns out that they could do so only by relying on the kind of totalitarian, indiscriminate sophistry that they were hurriedly laying at the theorists' door. Worse: the uncritical, semi-tabloid language of "apoplectics", apotheosis and apocalypse which was often resorted to by academics and "intellectuals" to depict the bulldozing of cultural values by deconstruction is hardly a plea in favour of the continuity of the traditional creed of humanism such crusaders readily abrogated for themselves. Witness the following snippets, from Hirsch's *The Deconstruction of Literature: Criticism After Auschwitz*:

And is it not to the shame of current Anglo-American criticism and philosophy to be goosestepping to the Franco-Prussian drum, diminishing what was noble while glorifying and elevating to dogma the ignoble, the cowardly, and the deceitful?

*Those who are familiar with the Nietzsche-Heidegger-derived theories of Michel Foucault will have noticed that there is not much distance between Hitler's disdain for bourgeois "legal proceedings" and Foucault's attempts to discredit bourgeois ideas of justice in *Discipline and Punish*. But in *Auschwitz* we see where that contempt for "legal proceedings" led.*

Before accepting the program of indiscriminate destruction offered by Franco-Prussian postmodernist antihumanism it might be useful to remind ourselves of what Alexis de Tocqueville observed 150 years ago, that "In the French Revolution there were two impulses in opposite directions, which must never be confounded: the one was favourable to liberty, the other to despotism [...]" In deconstructionist ideology augmented by Heideggerian antihumanism we find what de Tocqueville described as that "populism] ... united with hostility to the right of the people" in which

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"the professed lover of freedom" turns out to be "the secret slave [and promulgator] of tyranny."¹⁰

But of course it is only the Germans that had been "intoxicated by Hitler's "beautiful words"", not the benighted deconstructed reader by such heady prose, and elsewhere Hirsch makes a distinction, in equally ranting terms, between the humanists' direct transparent idiom and the obfuscatory sesquipedalian circumlocutions of theorists... like myself, no doubt.

If one takes a more powerful historical telescope, one will rediscover that some of the most vocal vilifiers of de Man and deconstruction happened to be key founders of theory in English Studies - namely René Wellek (of the Lectures mentioned above), co-author (with Austin Warren) of *Theory of Literature* (1942), which introduced a "philosophical" dimension into literary criticism, against Leavis and *Scrutiny*, from which "literary theory" was fashioned - or, on the French side, protagonists in the successful development of the new *théories de la littérature* of the 1960s, like narratology and poetics - namely Tzvetan Todorov, editor of a reader in French literary theory for an English readership as late as the early 1980s.

Wellek's career as a theorist "officially" ended in late 1983 with an essay called "Destroying Literary Studies", the lead article in an issue of *The New Criterion*, where one can read the following glib recycling of the by then prevalent reductionist account of theory glimpsed before: "The new theory [mainly deconstruction, represented by de Man, Derrida and Hillis Miller] asserts that man lives in a prison house of language that has no relation to reality"¹¹ - and by 1985 he

¹⁰ D. Hirsch, *The Deconstruction of Literature: Criticism After Auschwitz*, 96 (as a climactic rhetorical end to the chapter), 258-9 and 267-8 (end of chapter [square brackets in the original]) respectively. Other candidates for such grandiose inflammatory rhetoric include those journalistic pieces often ominously titled "Deconstructing X", such as Jon Wiener's "Deconstructing de Man" and David Lehman's "Deconstructing de Man's Life: An Academic Idol Falls Into Disgrace", both from 1988.

¹¹ R. Wellek, "Destroying Literary Studies", 2; the Jamesonian metaphor is repeated on p. 8.

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had relegated deconstruction as irrelevant to literary studies because it was (bad) philosophy! Wellek's ultimate inability to "evolve with theory" and similar smear campaigns are the focus of Herman Rapaport's *Theory Mess: Deconstruction in Eclipse*, one of whose central leads is that of the *faux-bond* or failed encounter, not so much of the theorists with the real, in the ironically Lacanian-sounding accusations of the one-time theorist(s) turned anti-theoretical humanist(s) – Wellek again, voicing the common anti-poststructuralist complaint against the new theory's bending of Saussure, "who considered the referential function of language irrelevant for a science of linguistics but who did not doubt language's relation to experience and reality" – but between the anti-theorists and especially deconstruction... and sometimes within the sympathizing ranks of deconstructionists themselves.¹²

So have the old theorists become anti-theoretical humanists because they have been superseded by newer, more radical theorists? What is also at stake here in these generational scholarly wars in which the avant-gardists of yore, ousted from a position of intellectual supremacy, have become the reactionaries of today?¹³ If, as Derrida famously and succinctly stated in his epoch-making "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences", originally given as a lecture at the 1966 conference on structuralism at Johns Hopkins University, "coherence in contradiction expresses the force of a desire",¹⁴ and desire is arguably motivated by, and accretes according to, the power conferred on the academic and the intellectual by the media - a phenomenon which partly dovetailed with the emergence of

¹² H. Rapaport, *Theory Mess: Deconstruction in Eclipse*, especially 29 ff. for his analysis of Wellek's dissensus (quotations from Wellek's "Destroying Literary Studies" appear on pp. 29-30).

¹³ Wellek even reminds his readers of his co-authorship of *Theory of Literature* with Austin Warren and of the opposition to Leavis's anti-theoretical empiricism in 1937; see "Destroying Literary Studies", 7-8.

¹⁴ J. Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 279. In "An Open Letter to Professor Jon Wiener", J. Hillis Miller similarly notes the unholy alliance between a so-called Marxist historian (Jon Wiener) and "a conservative like Wellek" (*Responses: On Paul de Man's Wartime Journalism*, 341).

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theory into full swing (one may remember the mini-scandal surrounding the issue of the renewal of Colin McCabe's tenure at Cambridge in the early 1980s) - then one starts constructing an intellectually more disingenuous picture of those power struggles and anti-theoretical self-denials within academe which would have us return to the prelapsarian heydays of humanist literary studies...

Spectacle versus silence: The issue of responsibility

Despite the fact that, *a minimo*, "theory", like ideology, necessarily and inevitably frames any idea, method, procedure, concept, analysis, etc., it would seem that the one-time theorists or downright humanists no longer know they have a theory (or, for some, never knew they had one), and that ideology in particular, like a foreign, alienating accent, is always what the other is accused of having and what oneself is immune to... Thus, as Barthes judiciously remarked: "the capital sin in criticism is not ideology but the silence by which it is masked", a statement Hirsch himself is happy to enlist to his support, albeit via Frank Lentricchia's *After the New Criticism*, to mount the customary indictment that silence-as-denial - what Hirsch calls "consensus of silence" - has too often been the default strategy and shelter for this tainted generation of thinkers, rather than the mediatized spectacle of a confession called for by an inquisitorial tribunal of outraged humanists.¹⁵

So what was theory again?

W. W. Skeat's *Etymological Dictionary of the English Language* reminds us that "theory" comes from Greek *theoria*: beholding, contemplation, speculation; itself derived from *theoros*: spectator. In his introduction to Paul de Man's *The Resistance to Theory*, Wlad Godzich expands on the specifically discursive function and articulation of *theoria* as the putting into speech of something seen that the observer (*theoros*) despatched to the scene could therefore attest to and was in a

¹⁵ D. Hirsch, *The Deconstruction of Literature: Criticism After Auschwitz*, 118 and 122.

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position to verbalize for the community or *polis*, thus reconciling language with politics in this ancient, more generalized, model of *theorein*, which did not yet choose between *théorie* (connected with language) and *theory* (more akin to politics): such would be, etymologically, the "politics of theory".¹⁶

Yet the critical choice - one of responsibility, therefore - between oratorical spectacle (or written confession) and silence is never a straightforward one for the accused, and, as a circumspect Ortwin de Graef eloquently shows, silence can also be a performative decision to be "observed", always already a taking of responsibilities. Framing his analysis within a careful examination of rhetoric and especially irony in "Excuses (*Confessions*)", the last chapter of de Man's *Allegories of Reading*, de Graef sees this silent confession of a refusal to confess thus:

*De Man is in fact accused of not having done the obvious thing, but at no stage is there a critical appraisal of the possibility that that may well have been the heart of the matter: that it is in the silent act of his refusal to exempt himself from accusations he would himself have produced, that he has allowed us to appreciate how much more difficult the issue is than such a compelling apology could reasonably be expected to reveal.*¹⁷

Thus the "rhetorical continuity" that de Graef conjectures, whose ultimate consonance is irony's undoing (or "defacement") of itself in de Man's reading of Rousseau's *Confessions*, becomes perhaps the only possible, if aporetic, responsible way out of all the prejudged, programmed solutions to this ideological mock-trial, for, as Derrida notes in *Resistances of Psychoanalysis*, "[...] without the ordeal of

¹⁶ W. Godzich, "Foreword: The Tiger on the Paper Mat", in P. de Man, *The Resistance to Theory*, especially xiii-xv. From this perspective, Heidegger's and de Man's silence versus such a putting into speech of an attested event would therefore be "untheoretical".

¹⁷ Ortwin de Graef, "Silence To Be Observed: A Trial for Paul de Man's Inexcusable Confessions", *(Dis)continuities: Essays on Paul de Man*, ed. L. Herman et al., 68. Cf. P. de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*, especially 293.

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aporia [...], there would only be programs in causalities, not even fated necessities, and no decision would even take place. No responsibility [...].¹⁸ Not making the obvious choice: the feebly motivated responsibility of the orchestrated confessional spectacle - whose subsequent outcome would have been an even more acute ideological warfare against deconstruction and "new theories" at large - but a *de facto* more remotivatable, if highly problematic, silence, de Man points the way to an ironic performative of *resistance* (including of/to/within responsibility), which I would now like to examine in relation to theory.

2. Pièces de résistance

what is it about literary theory that is so threatening

*that it provokes such strong resistances and attacks?*¹⁹

It is a somewhat perverse twist to de Man's consummate use of the trope of irony, with which Derrida himself equated him (and which is aptly selected as the epigraph of the introduction to the edited volume *(Dis)continuities: Essays on Paul de Man*),²⁰ that one of his posthumously published collections of essays should be called *The Resistance to Theory* (1986), one year before the discovery of his juvenile wartime journalistic writings in Nazi-occupied Belgium gave the opponents of deconstruction in North America and elsewhere the weapons they never knew they had to wage their relentless war on theory. De Man's title essay, thus renamed from an earlier commissioned and unpublished piece in 1981, adumbrates in broad strokes - and, from our vantage point, offers an uncanny critical rehearsal of - the "negative politics" of the humanists' "united state" against theory and in particular deconstruction, and endeavours to

¹⁸ J. Derrida, *Resistances of Psychoanalysis*, 37.

¹⁹ P. de Man, "The Resistance to Theory", *The Resistance to Theory*, 11 (hereafter "RT" with page numbers in the text).

²⁰ "Paul était l'ironie même", in Derrida's In Memoriam address, originally published in *The Lessons of Paul de Man*, ed. P. Brooks *et al.*, 14.

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approach what in theory is the object of a "resistance" in scattered glosses of its title:

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. ("RT", 12-13)

Within his view of literature as an opaque event which thwarts the traditional demarcation between the medium and the message, hence one requiring the critical intervention of language on its own language in order to deal with its literariness - "the use of language that foregrounds the rhetorical over the grammatical and the logical function" ("RT", 14) - the resistance to theory is thus

a resistance to the rhetorical or tropological dimension of language, a dimension which is perhaps more explicitly in the foreground in literature (broadly conceived) than in other verbal manifestations or [...] which can be revealed in any verbal event when it is read textually. ("RT", 17)

De Man's essay concludes that "Nothing can overcome the resistance to theory since theory is itself this resistance" ("RT", 19), for "the language it speaks is the language of self-resistance" ("RT", 20).

Derrida indicates a similar possibility when he reads one of de Man's war articles:

This labyrinthine task [the revolution of mentalities] would be both theoretical (abstract) and more than theoretical. It resists its own theorization and the massiveness of the schema I have just outlined.²¹

Somewhat provokingly, despite his unambiguous adversarial stance against de Man, Stanley Corngold concludes his prosecution on a convergent note, though he puts it to work to another end: "the

²¹ J. Derrida, "Like the Sound of the Sea Deep Within a Shell: Paul de Man's War", 184.

resistance engendered by the totalitarian theory to its own realization is engendered by itself."²²

The issue of de Man's later resistance to the totalizing, if not totalitarian, ideology behind his earlier organicist conception of (the relation between) language, culture and national destiny was indeed a common theme of reflection for those eager to appease the polemic and truly understand this dramatic "lesson of Paul de Man". Here is Norris again:

*it is in de Man's resistance to this appropriative drive in Heidegger's reading [of Hölderlin] that we can make out the earliest signs of his own distinct "turn" toward a form of implicit ideological critique.*²³

More audaciously, Richard Klein links the belated DeManian turn to "literature's critical resistance to ideological appropriation" to a more daring hypothesis: the continuity of a form of resistance to totalitarianism right from the earlier conception of literature - and its autonomy from political reality - that led de Man to collaborate in *Le Soir*, in a historical context in which the pre-war resisters and collaborationists were changing sides under the threat of a radically new political enemy (Communist Russia, then Nazi Germany).²⁴ In his analysis of the famous passage on "vulgar antisemitism" which opens "Les Juifs dans la littérature actuelle", he further recalls the article's covert allusion to a culture and nation's salutary resistance to foreign invasion, a theme which is uncannily contiguous with the more subtly

²² S. Corngold, "Paul de Man on the Contingency of Intention", *(Dis)continuities: Essays on Paul de Man*, ed. L. Herman *et al.*, 40.

²³ C. Norris, "Paul de Man's Past", 7. Cf. also Geoffrey Hartman's nuanced "Blindness and Insight", which concludes: "In the light of what we now know, [...] his work appears more and more as a deepening reflection on the rhetoric of totalitarianism. [...] De Man's critique of every tendency to totalize literature or language, to see unity where there is no unity, looks like a belated, but still powerful, act of conscience" (31).

²⁴ R. Klein, "De Man's Resistances: A Contribution to the Future Science of DeManology", *Responses: On Paul de Man's Wartime Journalism*, ed. W. Hamacher *et al.*, especially 287.

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ironic issue of the conservative resistance against the invasion of foreign French theory into Departments of English in "The Return to Philology", some forty years later...²⁵

After these various reversals and aporias, we seem to have reached the paradoxical point of the resistance of/to resistance as nonresistance, that philolytic remaindering (*restance*) at work within and against analysis (as *restanalysis*) which Derrida had tried to isolate in *Resistances of Psychoanalysis* - *restance* and resistance being elected as the joint axes of deconstruction in "Some Statements and Truisms..."²⁶ Like the ambivalent genitive of Keats's *The Fall of Hyperion*, which de Man muses about in "The Resistance to Theory" ("RT", 16), or Derrida's own inflections in "*la guerre de Paul de Man*", the resistance of theory may thus designate not only how the rest of the academic world inimically resists / is resistant to theory but also theory's own inner unconciliatory resistances to itself, "analysed" by Derrida in relation to (psycho)analysis's necessarily unified concept of resistance in *Resistances of Psychoanalysis*,²⁷ and which it is precisely the task of deconstruction as "the interminable drama of analysis"²⁸ to work through (*auf/durcharbeiten*).

Because historical totalization has indeed been deemed impossible "after Auschwitz" - cf. the end of grand narratives and the impossibility, yet the necessity, of the linkage after Auschwitz (Lyotard) or the fracturing of community's *Mitsein* in post-World War Two history (Nancy) - Theory needs to promote within itself a "critical" resistance, including to itself, not only as a former collaborationist's safeguard sealing off the earlier contaminating writings from the later theory, "the

²⁵ P. de Man, *The Resistance to Theory*, especially 22 (the essay first appeared in 1982 in the *Times Literary Supplement*). See R. Klein, "De Man's Resistances: A Contribution to the Future Science of DeManology", *Responses: On Paul de Man's Wartime Journalism*, ed. W. Hamacher et al., 288-9.

²⁶ J. Derrida, "Some Statements and Truisms About Neologisms, Newisms, Postisms, Parasitisms, and Other Small Seismisms", 87.

²⁷ J. Derrida, *Resistances of Psychoanalysis*, especially 23-24.

²⁸ J. Derrida, *Ibid.*, 29; cf. also "Like the Sound of the Sea Deep Within a Shell: Paul de Man's War", 229.

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organization of a defensive resistance" exposed as a retrospective, even retroactive "diplomatic translation"²⁹ of the autobiographical past, but in order to safekeep itself interminably, without end: the *avenir* of theory always to come, even against itself.

And within our own international academic contexts of theories at cross-purposes - "Whither Theory?" is and is *not* "Où va la théorie?"... - such an "absolute resistance" could also leave room for the resistance of/through translation, both in de Man's endorsement of Walter Benjamin's theory in "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers" (i.e. the task but also the giving up / renunciation of the translator)³⁰ and in Homi Bhabha's more postcolonial performance of a "cultural translation".³¹

3. Pre/post-colonial: the more preposterous "steaks" - and chips - of theory

*"This is also extremely funny"*³²

What is the difference between a stake and a [steik]... especially when these are no longer quite the same two "stakes" I have been talking about so far? What of another, anagrammatized steak, after Skeat and Keats, and why should this cheap play of *différance* be more than a facile Derridean trick to wind up such serious historical wars or academic polemics?

²⁹ J. Derrida, "Like the Sound of the Sea Deep Within a Shell: Paul de Man's War", 233 and 232.

³⁰ Cf. J. Derrida, "Ibid.", 196, about the national idiom's resistance to translation in Benjamin - for which see especially de Man's concluding essay on "The Task of the Translator" in *The Resistance to Theory*, 73-105 - and, as a common theme in Derrida's writings, *Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, among others.

³¹ For a first attempt at such a critical articulation, see L. Milesi, "French Thinking / Thinking French - In Translation".

³² Derrida's subtitle to the interview on the "affair" of the Cambridge *Honoris Causa*, in *Points... Interviews, 1974-1994*, 399-421 (399).

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In order to penetrate further into what is ultimately at stake in national(ist) pastimes, I could not think of a better, more concise guide than Roland Barthes's post-colonial mythology *avant la lettre* on "Le bifteck et les frites". As I reread this juicy vignette, I rediscovered the joys of cultural essentialism - that much maligned doctrine in the Anglo-Saxon academic world, which never had to suffer from the ideological outrages of the omnipotent existentialism that raged on the Parisian side of the Channel - and read that steak is "meat in its pure state".³³ But also:

Like wine, steak is in France a basic element, nationalized even more than socialized.

Moreover, it is a French possession (circumscribed today, it is true, by the invasion of American steaks).³⁴

A tongue-in-mouth-watering quip whose *saveur* one may choose to prolong in Derrida's recall, in "Some Statements and Truisms...", that theory, more specifically in the context, new historicism, "gr[e]w in Northern California after transplants from French vineyards"...³⁵ But one may also hear the more sombre and, alas, characteristically un-tongue-in-cheek declarations of Roy Harris, another "liberal humanist" with a nationalist chip on his shoulder - though clearly not a French fry - in "Fiddle Fiddle Fiddle" (published as late as 21 March 1997 in the *Times Literary Supplement*), that Derrida should have been denied the Cambridge honorary degree on nationalist principles at the very least...!³⁶ Yet another (double) paradox since the supposed master theorist and originator of so much of what became exercised in the name of "theory" *outside* France had wittily kicked off "Some Statements and Truisms...", written in the wake of the de Man polemic, on the deceptively facetious misreading of a singular title for the

³³ R. Barthes, *Mythologies*, 62 ("Steak and Chips").

³⁴ R. Barthes, *Ibid.*, 63. Cf. also "Wine and Milk", *Ibid.*, 58-61.

³⁵ J. Derrida, "Some Statements and Truisms...", 68.

³⁶ Mentioned and briefly discussed in H. Rapaport, *Theory Mess: Deconstruction in Eclipse*, 153.

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conference "The States of "Theory"" to hint at the narrow (re)territorialization of theory in the state of California, soon after stating *in French*, in the English translation of *Mémoires pour Paul de Man* (thus emphasizing the points made in the earlier interview "Deconstruction in America" (1985)): "L'Amérique, mais *c'est la déconstruction*".³⁷ Drawing boundaries to isolate the "state" of theory is thus a reactionary, colonizing "circumscription", political in its institutional effects - like a political *circonscription*, always carved out in such a way as to endeavour to preserve the power of those in command - nostalgic and patriotic (nationalistic, geopolitical and colonialist) in essence. There is thus, potentially, as much of an ideological threat of a totalitarian slippage in an academic politics that wants to erect watertight nationalistic frontiers as in an intellectual climate in which, like nowadays, some would find solace in returning to the secure fold of entrenched traditions and more empirical practices, including sometimes within theory "itself".

Without wanting to further pit the *bifteck* against the *rosbif* for a final showdown, and talking about wars of all kinds, political as well as culinary, let us finally recall Marx's aphorism that history first happens as tragedy and repeats itself as *farce*, as a backdrop to the following anecdote, emblematic of what always risks happening to theory and especially to theorists themselves: the new-fangled reappropriation of "French fries" as liberty fries in the United States, to stigmatize the French decision not to back up the US in their latest crusade against Iraq, turned out to be a largely unknown resurfacing of its meatier, beefier counterpart on the (French) plate: the hamburger, called "liberty steak" during World War One... Whether one likes it hot or cold, even theory (and the politics thereof) can be served on a plate years later, most oblivious to its own self-mut(il)ations and inner resistances when its goose is cooked and the chips are down...

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³⁷ Cf. H. Rapaport, *Ibid.*, 34-6.

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