

Theory That Matters:

What Practice After Theory

Edited by

Kacper Bartczak and Małgorzata Myk Theory That Matters: What Practi

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PREFACE	

A book of manners for imitators

Might sell like hotcakes

To twins

If we could only write our theory down

Oh, theory

Yes

There is nothing better

Than a theory

But confess

What?

You know...

We will eat anything

Anything?

The book, the idea

Or the product

—Carla Harryman, “There Is Nothing Better

Than a Theory”

The above fragment excerpted from Harryman's 1989 *Animal Instincts* articulates a sense of discomfort, irony, and suspicion towards a theoretical impulse.

1

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

1

Harryman, *Animal Instincts*, 94–95. *Theory That Matters: What Practice After Theory* ix
Seven years after the mid-1990s high-water mark of the loudly announced "end of theory," the debate over the value, efficacy, usefulness, and ethics of theoretical practices is not nearly over. While numerous indictments of theory's both minor abuses and cardinal sins continue to be published, a conspicuous example being Daphne Patai and Will H. Corral's 2005 739-page tome tellingly titled *Theory's Empire: An Anthology of Dissent*, it appears that despite the momentous watershed of what looked like its final throes, theory may have paradoxically survived its own death. Dissenting or not, the reader of this book will find here a rich

and varied collection of essays whose authors absorbed the pronouncement of theory's death only to move on and discover not merely that there is still life after theory, but, as cleverly suggested by Michael Payne and John Schad, the editors of another post-theoretical reflection in the format of a series of extensive interviews with some of contemporary theory's major figures, Jacques Derrida, Frank Kermode, Christopher Norris, and Toril Moi, titled *life.after.theory* (2003), now life appears to be "after" theory, not in the sense of simply following it in time but also, perhaps, being "in pursuit of" theory, if not "in imitation of" it.

2

Life in

pursuit of theory, therefore, would mean seeing past the by now somewhat worn-out and outdated dictum of the end of theory, and instead suggest an attempt to reinvigorate the task of a theorist by encouraging a more positive engagement with theory's contentious potentialities.

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

Following Judith Butler's reminder that "[t]heory is an activity that does not remain restricted to the academy. It takes place every time a possibility is imagined, a collective self-reflection takes place, a dispute

over values, priorities, and language emerges,”

3

this book adopts a broader

interdisciplinary purview and takes a more practical stance than most like-

2

Payne and Schad, *life.after.theory*, x.

3

Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 175–76. x Preface

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

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

The text that sets the tone for the entire volume is Tadeusz Sławek’s

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

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

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

Agata Preis-Smith, Tomasz Dobrogoszcz, and Sumit Chakrabarti

venture into the territory of postcolonial studies to explore its uncomfortable yet unavoidable entanglement with the workings of ideology, the discourses of postmodernity and psychoanalysis. In her insightful essay, Preis-Smith examines Chicana critic Chela Sandoval's reappraisal of Roland Barthes's canonical "Myth Today" to substantiate her argument that there is an irreducible ideological element in every text. While authors and theorists alike are always inevitably implicated in the hegemonic discourses, encounters with theory, as Preis-Smith further argues, should make us alert to its political and ideological implications so that we continue to practice it critically and make it socially useful. Along different lines, Chakrabarti's contribution focuses on Homi Bhabha's meta-theoretical brand of postmodernist anti-identitarian and nonrepresentational politics of "enunciation" as an alternative to the positivist

dualism of theory and practice. Dobrogoszcz, who is also the translator of *The Location of Culture* into Polish, carefully unpacks Bhabha's psychoanalytical baggage tracing the ways in which the theorist is engaged with the ideas of Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, and Franz Fanon to finally suggest a deep-rooted indebtedness of postcolonial theory to psychoanalytical discourse.

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

David Waterman encourages us to look more deeply into Cultural

Studies' liaisons with cross-disciplinarity vis-à-vis their currently overly rigid academic status, via the ideas of Richard E. Lee and Werner Heisenberg, arguing that theory should become more adept at inciting both its practitioners and readers to become social critics in a broader understanding of the term. This would entail, at least in the case of xii Preface literature, going beyond the text and venturing into the non-dialectical territory where a dynamic and productive synthesis of multiple perspectives could coexist. In this way, theory can and should stick to its potential of defying the rigidly formative influence of power.

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

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

4

Much in the spirit of building bridges between literature and theory, Antoine Cazé's thought-provoking essay focuses on the communal act of thinking through writing and privileges the hybrid text as potentially effectuating destabilization of the stiffly demarcated boundary between theoretical and creative practice. Drawing from the theory of Jacques Rancière and the writing of Lyn Hejinian, who explicitly rejects the distinction between theoretical reflection and poetic practice, central to Cazé's essay is the significance of the landmark collaborative project of a group of major Language writers, *The Grand Piano*. He proposes to read

this theoretical and creative collaboration as an exercise in developing a theory of writing in the form of collective autobiography and simultaneously as a processual act of recollecting and recording the emergence of the community founded on the “shared and shareable” common sense, in Hejinian’s meaning of the term.

5

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

4

Felski, *Uses of Literature*, 2, 11.

5

Watten, *Grand Piano*, 3, 60. *Theory That Matters: What Practice After Theory* xiii
Evoking Derrida’s famous reading of Paul Celan, Wit Pietrzak investigates, via Richard Rorty, an active role of the critic who leaves an indelible mark on the text he explicates. Through such active explication, as Pietrzak suggests, an extended moral potential is revealed for both literature and criticism. Somewhat similarly ethically-oriented are the ways in which Grzegorz Czemieli’s essay examines the poetic language that simultaneously performs a critical and argumentative gesture. Here,

the questions about poetry's forays into the realm of philosophy form the thrust of a reading of Ciaran Carson's book of poems *For All We Know*. Czemiel sees Carson's poetry as deeply preoccupied with epistemological issues, which invites a discussion of the challenge presented by this poetry for modern literary criticism.

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

With Part III we move to the visual media. The axis of this section is formed by theoretical encounters with film narratives, beginning with Marek Wojtaszek's illuminating creative-critical reading of Joe Wright's 2009 film *The Soloist*. Wojtaszek takes the film to be exquisitely illustrative of what he terms, via Deleuzian thought, immanent critique; criticism as creation that reveals the univocity of theory and practice. Preoccupied with pressing issues of feminist theory and practice, and by way of examining selected films portraying bathroom space as a new symbolic locus of women's entrapment, Katarzyna Poloczek identifies the reasons for the present-day crisis of feminist theoretical thought in oppositional rather than dialogical continuations of feminist theory and political practice, which has had a detrimental effect resulting not only in the movement's internally hampering antagonisms but also a more generally observed backlash wave against women. With the particular focus on psychoanalytic feminist film theory, Nina Czarnecka-PaŃka reflects on the uncertain promise of psychoanalysis for feminism, looking closely at what appears to be only a partial success of psychoanalytically

oriented film criticism to move beyond its essentially phallogocentric thinking.

Robert Westerfelhaus, author of the final essay in this section, in his case-study of eight peer-reviewed journal articles devoted to the Bravo TV series *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, contends that the continuing xiv Preface potential of Critical Theory derives precisely from a variety of contested readings and critiques, an argument that has been frequently used to discredit and undermine the efficacy of theory.

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

Finally, we decided that the readers of the volume should also hear from writers, who, in their mature artistic pursuits, are even more

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

—Małgorzata Myk and Kacper Bartczak