theories and methodologies

Theory 911

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IT WAS INEVITABLE THAT THE EVENTS OF SEPTEMBER 2001 AND THE RAPIDLY SHIFTING WORLD PICTURE THEY HAVE GENERATED should force us to reexamine our programs, methods, orientations, and presuppositions. Having set out to address the role played by theory in comparative literature programs, I find myself caught between a wish to anticipate this fast-changing history we half live, half dream, in front of television screens and a need to take more distance, to survey a longer history. Besides, since I completed a book entitled *The Future of Theory* just weeks before these events, I feel the urge to check the relevance of some of my analyses and predictions.

There seems to be a growing consensus in public opinion that the "attack" and the subsequent war, whose possible outcome is a domino effect throughout the world, have heralded the end of a certain naïveté about globalization or multiculturalism. Officials and pedagogues have discovered that we lack good students not only trained in Eastern and Middle Eastern languages but also conversant with emerging cultures that have arisen from the collapse of former "empires," and this in the long run is expected to be beneficial to comparative literature programs. However, the utopia of a peaceful hybridization of cultures is often part of a globalization project that has borrowed the fantasy of the "end of history," which assumes that history does not repeat itself as tragedy or as farce but is a bourgeois comedy whose democratic and capitalistic happy ending was scripted in advance, at least since Alexandre Kojève took it on himself to rewrite Hegel. All this might have been nothing more than a Western projection, a well-meaning entropic daydream about a world in which differences are not abolished straightaway but blend harmoniously to become more pungent and subtle. Alas, in the variegated menu offered by "other" cultures that come with their original flavors, exotic spices may turn to poisons when uneven economic development leads to a struggle to the death between antagonistic fundamentalisms and incompatible foundational creeds. It is then time to rethink the generous utopia underpinning multiculturalism and assess whether we can still cling to a concept of "culture" (whether universalist

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or particularist) that would provide a haven protecting us from fanaticism, bigotry, intolerance, and ethnic suspicion.

From the more limited perspective of the academic institution, it seems that "culture" has had to play too loaded and strained a role, oscillating between the vague plural of "cultural studies" and the slightly more rigorous singular of "material culture." What is culture, after all, but the remains of a language once it is forgotten? A few names, idioms, snatches of songs, blurred literary references—at times just the ability to order rare dishes with the right intonation. However flippant these remarks may be, it is clear that a soft consensus about culture has crumbled and that we have returned to an earlier dilemma familiar to comparative literature departments, the difficult or impossible choice between linguistic skills and theoretical competence. Either languages or theory: such was the forced alternative I found when I became acquainted with comparative literature departments in the United States and Canada in the mid-1980s. There was then a divide between departments stressing linguistic skills, with all the attendant cultural expertise, and those stressing theory as offering a unifying discourse. Since I had been teaching in France, it looked as if I would "do" theory the way Monsieur Jourdain spoke prose—naturally and quite without knowing it. It took me some time to realize that scholars who referred often to, say, Plato, Hegel, Derrida, Cixous, Kristeva, or Lacan were supposed to be "doing theory." So far, I had entertained the illusion that I and my friends were being modern or—to sound less presumptuous—just young, if not radical, by contrast with an older and more humanistic style of literary discourse. Besides, since we were uncomfortably close to major actors in what we just called philosophy and thus were aware of important divergences between camps like the Deleuzians, the Derridians, the feminists, and the Lacanians, not to speak of the phenomenologists, it was more difficult for us to produce a syncretic or global notion of theory as such. When I was invited to teach as a visiting professor in the department of comparative literature of the University of Montréal in 1989, I found numerous traces of this dilemma, although the thriving department insisted on both types of competence for its graduate students. I have to say that two of my distinguished colleagues in Montréal commanded at least eight languages while being fluent in theory—which encompassed a wide spectrum from semiotics to Heidegger, from de Man to Deleuze.

Just as I discovered that I had been doing theory without knowing it, I also realized that I had been a comparatist without acknowledging it. Having devoted roughly one-third of a *thèse d'état* to Hermann Broch, while the rest dealt with Joyce and Pound, all this supervised by Hélène Cixous (not the most traditional type of director) for a doctorate in English literature, I assumed that one could take any amount of liberty with the limits of one's field. Alas, teaching in France, Germany, and England, I realized how exceptional this freedom had been—not to mention the unforgivable sin of attempting to teach authors from another century than one's own (a specifically French obsession). But because I had been reared on a relatively strict definition of theory, I would never have dreamed of teaching it as such then.

One can never insist enough on the impact that Louis Althusser's version of Marxism had on subsequent definitions of theory as a unified and coherent concept. Singlehandedly, Althusser created a Marx who was a living oxymoron, a practical theoretician or the embodiment of theoretical practice. In this reconstruction, Marx was the first scientific philosopher who took practice (i.e., politics) into account. To be a theoretician was no longer a curse as long as one heeded the practical consequences of theory. Marx vindicated Kant's claim that no philosophy is valid unless it protects its a priori rules from empirical conditions while actively seeing to the practical enactment of its principles. Kant

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famously debunks the old "common saying" "This may be true in theory, but it does not apply in practice" and shows how the saying is misleading in ethics, political science, and international relations. If Althusser preferred comparing Marx with Spinoza, it is clear that his Marx lent much savage wit and a broad synthesis of hitherto distinct sciences like economics, philosophy, sociology, history, anthropology, and comparative religion to the constitution of theory as a unique way of searching for truth.

In this process, however, the author (in Foucault's sense—i.e., an "inventor . . . of discursivity" [114]) Marx divided into several Marxes, and the question became, which Marx should one read? Should he be the young Hegelian who in *The German Ideology* devotes brilliant pages of scathing literary criticism to his former colleagues or the mature observer of industrial capitalism who posits an understanding of the economic basis as prerequisite for both philosophical knowledge and revolutionary activism? Whichever Marx one chooses, it is impossible to avoid struggling with ideas developed by Althusser, whose series Théorie at Editions Maspéro was founded on the principle that only theory can bridge the gap between an elaboration of Marx's philosophy and the new scientific discoveries relayed by contemporary epistemology and the history of the sciences. Theory meant removing Hegel and Feuerbach and installing instead Gaston Bachelard and President Mao. What I retain of this intoxicating moment is the idea that theory is *one*—just as there can be only one truth.

Such a unity has tended to boil down to the election of either master thinkers or master signifiers, as Lacan pointed out in his later seminars. This was never more evident than when a *New York Times* article in the summer of 2001 rippled the little pond of theory. The writer begins by contrasting earlier carefree days with current fears of missing the new wave and announces with fanfare that the new buzzword is "empire." Not a review of a recently published work, the article analyzes the rise to fame of a book issued a year earlier: Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt's *Empire* allegedly contains the "next big idea," after the 1960s' structuralism, the 1970s' and 1980s' deconstruction and poststructuralism, and the 1990s' postcolonialism and new historicism. If *Empire*, "a heady treatise on globalization," has been "sending frissons of excitement through campuses from São Paulo to Tokyo" (Eakins B7), the proof of the validity of the "new" theory of globalization lies, by a curiously circular reasoning or self-fulfilling prophecy, in its already global acclaim. Slavoj Žižek compares the book with *The Communist Manifesto* (Eakins B9), probably slyly reiterating those "Soviet jokes" he loves: What is capitalism? The exploitation of man by man. And communism? Just the reverse!

If, indeed, as Fredric Jameson and Žižek claim, *Empire* is "the first great new theoretical synthesis of the new millennium," it is reassuring to note that Hardt's opinion is more measured. Rejecting the idea that he is the "next Derrida," Hardt says that he and his coauthor "don't think of this as a very original book. We're putting together a variety of things that others have said. That's why it's been so well received" (Eakins B9). Such modesty is rare—a previous book by the same authors, entitled *Labor of Dionysus*, was published seven years earlier but did not do as well. This was probably due to the understated way the earlier book introduces concepts like labor, exploitation, class conflict, proletarian struggle, and the Marxist theory of the state as points of departure before asking cheekily, "Do dinosaurs still walk the earth?" (3). What this really original contribution to Marxist scholarship lacked was a new buzzword; *globalization* is absent from the 1994 book but becomes the focus of *Empire*.

This suggests that theory in the United States progresses by jumps and starts, gathering momentum only once it has found a key term, a master signifier; then everything is organized as a commercial promotion of a floating and more and more empty word, until it is discarded for

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another. The same thing happened in the early 1980s when *poststructuralist* was launched to group various "French" approaches. Having had the honor of figuring in a distinguished poststructuralist anthology (Attridge and Ferrer), I remember that the fateful adjective was added quite late not by the editors but by an intelligent marketing director conscious of the competitiveness of the intellectual market.

I believe in the return of high theory despite a demise that has been announced repeatedly in the press and academia, although it cannot resuscitate the unitary model elaborated by Althusser (whose career now appears in all its baffling complexity and whose autobiography is one of the most spellbinding documents of theory). Theory can no longer function as a unifying canon or a set of commonly shared concepts that underpin the diversity of spoken languages and the infinity of visited cultures. Theory will come closer to Derrida's idea that what counts is speaking two (if not more) languages at once (28–29). Theory will not renounce the ambition of discovering a truth while remaining aware that, as Aristotle wrote in a phrase often glossed by Heidegger, "to on legetai pollakhos"—"being is said in many ways." This is why Heidegger's work makes more sense when translated into French (or even into English, despite intractable obstacles) than when read in its original language, believed by its author to be the only contemporary equivalent of philosophical Greek. This is also why Levinas's insistence that one should move away from the enchanted circle of Greek (ontological) modes of reasoning toward a Jewish (ethical) approach of alterity has more resonance when couched in its perfect classical French, a French that was learned at school relatively late in life and is uniquely capable of mediating between Buber, Rosenzweig, Husserl, and Heidegger. Our election of Levinas or Heidegger as master thinker matters, then, less than our awareness that tensions, inconsistencies, or divisions in their works are more productive than are systematic architectonics.

A similar inner division adheres to some of the schools I see emerging out of the demise of monologic theory. I will just give one example to map out the contours of the innerly dialogic theory I see as relevant for this still-young century. In translation studies, I think, one can see an equivalent of the polarity between linguistic skills and theoretical competence I have sketched. From biblical studies to Paul Celan's translations, a wide array of case studies leads students to grasp literary style dynamically. Buttressed by insights from Walter Benjamin and Antoine Berman, the budding science of traductology should be a privileged domain for comparative literature students. It will lead to "global" confrontations between Eastern and Western logoi, starting, for instance, from parallel assessments of the roles of Socrates and Confucius as near contemporaries or comparisons between the functions of science, power, and technology in ancient China and Greece and proceeding into parallels between Buddhist logic and Western negative theology. From such a wide vantage point, it should be possible to view the "religions of the book" with the necessary distance and so to capture how the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim legacies disseminate crucially divergent traditions of translation and literalization.

On the whole, theory must return to philosophy, not as a history of philosophy for literary critics or as a philosophy of history for would-be activists, but as the systematic "hystericization" (as I try to show in *The Future of Theory*) of philosophical problems. One model might be Socrates, who loved nothing like wonder and seduction and who, moreover, believed that any untaught slave could discover the principles of science provided that the right questions were asked. These questions, articulated together, build a problematic allowing one to mediate between the irreducible singularity of given texts and the generality of repeatable procedures underpinned by definable concepts. There lies the theoretical moment that is ineluctably present in any publishable text, not in footnotes but in the first paragraphs, in which

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gambits and stakes appear, a necessary stage without which the legitimacy of our efforts as writers and pedagogues would be doubtful.

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