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Offering (Up) Theory

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Although Adorno's feelings about Nietzsche are hard to pin down, his approach to die Liebhaber in "Bach Defended Against his Devotees," seems clearly to channel the sentiment found in Nietzsche's stinging aphorism (number 298) from the first volume of Human All Too Human: "In every party there is someone whose far too credulous expression of the party's principles provokes others to defect" (Nietzsche, 2010, 198). Regardless of whether Nietzsche is his source, Adorno's "devotee" is arguably the Doppelgänger of the thinker who knows how to assimilate tradition by "hating it properly." Frankly, I am not especially concerned here to sort the matter of influence. Instead, the point will be to situate Theory in the context of a thinking—as my title clearly suggests--about how its offering participates in the logic of devotion challenged by Adorno. More particularly, in a straightforwardly pedagogical mood, my discussion explores within the semantic resonances of "offering," how one might work with Theory so as to, as it were, sacrifice it properly. Drawing initially on Terry Eagleton and Giorgio Agamben I consider here how Theory is exposed, even risked through its offering, and examine what grasp of Theory emerges from thinking its offering as an act of sacrifice. Theory not as on offer, but Theory as offering, or as I will propose, Theory as "giving a reading." How does one handle that? When and where does that handling take place?

Not long ago the medievalist Andrew Cole told us everything we do not need to know about the "birth" of Theory. A more emphatic and thus persuasive account of why Theory ought not be profiled, that is, handled as having an identity would be hard to

imagine. And, so as not to be misunderstood, Cole's text is a very good one. However, as with any sort of achievement it exacts a price and here this takes the form of the text's seduction. His text is properly seductive in that it leads one astray—thinking here of Freud's Verführung, whether actual or not. More directly, what concerns me in Cole's approach is its devotional tone, a tone that manifests not only in his historicism, but in his conviction that Theory is best grasped as exhibiting an identity. So as to cut to the proverbial chase, in order to sacrifice theory properly, it must not be profiled, it must not be given an identity that one can "historicize" or not. This is especially important when thinking about handling theory in the gray era of "the peace," that is, in the moment that has survived the Theory Wars, a moment, I will argue, during which Theory obliges us to be especially thoughtful about when and where we handle it, especially now that Theory has been reduced to a cinder glowing with the ardour of a Cole.

Perhaps then a more immediate interlocutor here is the late Wolfgang Iser whose, How To Do Theory, with its explicitly pedagogical orientation, falls more directly in the path of these reflections. What Iser and Cole share—and Cole makes only a passing reference to him—is the inclination to treat Theory as a type, a genre of academic discourse. Iser's text is textbook-like in its effort to demonstrate not how various theoretical traditions ought be applied to objects of scholarly attention (although a bit of this occurs), but how theoretical traditions might be taken in their own right as objects of scholarly attention and, decisively, presented in the context of the graduate or undergraduate classroom. The organization of his study says it all. Chapter two, Phenomenological Theory, chapter three, Hermeneutical Theory, chapter five, Reception Theory (no surprise), and so on

culminating in a postscript dedicated to "Postcolonial Discourse" (not theory) represented by Edward Said. In his preface Iser somewhat nervously separates himself from his text by stressing its commissioned status and, by noting the more or less persistent coaxing of his editor to do this or that. Anyone who has published a book will know that Iser is not making this up. Editors do behave this way. But the issue here is not who actually wrote the text, but rather of what is its existence a sign? To respond succinctly: its existence symptomatizes the type casting, the "profiling" of theory. As his introductory chapter makes plain: Theory is now (it was written in 1992) something academic intellectuals can't avoid, so we might as well be clear about how to do it. To be frank, I actually think "do" is the most provocative word in Iser's title for the attention it directs to the practice of offering and if I am dissatisfied with his text, and I am, it is because he doesn't do enough with "do," starting with the problem of treating it as a verb that simply precedes a noun. Doing Theory shields Theory from the doing, so as to set Theory off from the work of doing, of offering. Put differently, Iser wants us to understand different types of Theory so as to offer them competently, he does not want to offer them theoretically, a sure path to a low score on RateMyProfessors.com.

We come then to the crux of the matter. Namely, what should or even can we do with the Theory in the era of "the peace?" As my opening paragraphs will have clarified, the strategy of deepening our devotion to this discursive identity is not a viable option. In their most piquant manifestations such strategies manifest as cock fights spurred by the schoolyard idiom of: "is so, is not," or, in Gerald Graff's more refined idiom, "the conflicts." Are those of us who embrace the materialization of Theory that manifests in

university curricula, in pedagogical practice, left with no other option than to reanimate and defend a corpus whose expiration date has passed? I'll not linger here, but a significant part of what is at issue in what could be called the "passing" of Theory is precisely the reorganization of the university as a business, begun—if we are to believe James Buchanan's Academia in Anarchy—during the student movements of the 1960s whose 50th anniversary many around the world began marking last year.

Let us then bear down a bit more systematically on the senses of "offering" in my title. As with "passing," "offering" invites two distinct but related glosses. At least two. Perhaps its more immediate sense arises when we speak, as so many of us do, of "offering" classes or seminars. Here "offering" means presenting or giving, and my title certainly aims to posit the notion that Theory should continue to be available as an area of inquiry in any and every setting that regards itself as a locus of education. Indeed, at the risk of moving too quickly, I would even go as far as to propose that in the absence of Theory education ceases to be about learning. It becomes about training.

The less immediate sense of "offering" is surely the sense of it that arises in the Biblical formulation of a "burnt offering" where it touches immediately on the matter and practice of sacrifice. Thus, my title is also a call to "sacrifice" Theory, to treat it precisely as a "burnt offering," whence my earlier invocation of Derrida's (and earlier T.E. Hulme's) figure of the cinder. But now what does this imply given that I have also just parsed the title to posit the necessity of offering Theory as part of what it means today to educate? Am I talking, for instance, about sacrificing the Theory that Theory has passed into, that

is, a largely Northern, Western canon of "great ideas," a canon long valued for its role in initiating certain people, largely but by no means exclusively white men into the cult of knowledge? Yes, of course. But one understands vaguely if at all what it might mean to sacrifice Theory properly if we leave it at that. Setting aside the distinctive theoretical profiles of the four posts—postmodernism, postfeminism, postmarxism and postcolonialism—the concept of Theory that follows in their wake is one whose papers are patently not in order. It is, as Hannah Arendt said about the refugee, stateless. In effect, just passing through. Passing through its own peace.

But sacrifice? Really? A few more dates; same cautions as before. In 1995 the first of Giorgio Agamben's multi-volume treatment of homo sacer appeared. Although much effort of late has been devoted to tracing the daylight that separates these studies, they can all be said to explore how political sovereignty founds its constitutive instability on a particular type of political actor, the figure of homo sacer. Brazenly collapsing a host of subtleties, I will parse Agamben's discussion of sovereignty by foregrounding its provocative juridical character. Following Carl Schmitt, the one who is sovereign, the decider, is the one who is in a position to suspend the law in order to preserve it. In the rhetoric of statecraft this constitutes a declaration of "a state of emergency" where the state, to protect the identity given it by its ruling oligarchy, violates the principles on which it is founded in order to eliminate what the state believes threatens it. In other words, the "one" (the unity of the state) is almost always more or less than one. Significantly, for Agamben, this structure of standing outside and above the law in order to preserve the essence of its rule, is the very same invaginated structure that isolates

homo sacer as the one whose expulsion from society, from the human community, is precisely what preserves that community as a biopolitical formation. Although Agamben has himself offered numerous incarnations of such a figure, he has consistently placed important stress on the occupants of the extermination camps during WWII, especially the living corpse called "the Muselman," the Muslim. What does this stress clarify?

It clarifies the simple fact that homo sacer is not and cannot be a "burnt offering." As Agamben writes: "The protagonist of this book is bare life, that is, the life of homo sacer (sacred man) who may be killed and yet not sacrificed" (Agamben 1998, 8). Indeed, the whole point of this inaugural volume is that homo sacer is one (or ones) who can be eliminated by the sovereign without sacrifice, that is, without producing a significant relation to something, or someone, absolutely other. The sovereign may sacrifice him or herself to the potent instability that sustains it, but homo sacer is beyond sacrifice. It is precisely un-sacrificeable. Those exterminated in the death camps may have been "completely burned" (holocaustos) but they were not sacrificed. They were purely and simply slaughtered. So, if in offering Theory, we sacrifice it, we precisely do not treat it as an incarnation, however uncanny, of homo sacer. We do not treat it as a practice we can expel from the socio-political order without effect, without losing our constitutive relation to someone, or something, absolutely other, even or especially when this otherness might designate the bio-political plane of immanence on which life itself slips and slides.

Although Eagleton, in the 2003 After Theory, has a somewhat different point to make when invoking the "bloodlessness" of Theory (he predictably deplores its a-political abstraction), the adjective "bloodless," nevertheless invites comparison with Agamben's discussion of homo sacer, who as we have seen, is a figure whose sacrifice offers nothing vital to the gods, a figure whose sacrifice secures no relation to anything or anyone absolutely other, in effect, a figure whose sacrifice is not one. As if anticipating such concerns, Eagleton published last year a small book with Yale University press, titled, Radical Sacrifice. In general terms this text continues Eagleton's examination of conscience begun in his first book, New Left Church, indeed it is dedicated to the "Carmelite Sisters of Thicket Priory," and builds steadily to an argument about the deep convergence between radical sacrifice and proletarian revolution. Indeed, the text ends with the sentence: "Seen in this light, revolution is a modern version of what the ancient world knew as sacrifice." (Eagleton 2018, 180-81) While it is hard not to resonate to Eagleton's utopianism—surely the world can't get much worse—a sticking point arises in his discussion of Agamben. In concentrating on the figure of the Muselman in Remnants of Auschwitz Eagleton lets slip through his clasped hands the difference between the Muselman and the other internees. In effect, if homo sacer is the one who is simply murdered rather than sacrificed, then the Muselman does indeed qualify as sacred because in an important sense s/he is already dead, s/he contains nothing to offer to anyone or anything. S/he is bloodless. But this ought to complicate rather than confirm the correlations being drawn by Eagleton. In any case, there is nuance here worth preserving and it bears on the sense of "offering" as a means of "doing" Theory.

So, Theory must be offered and not merely offed (or, "doffed"). But where does this leave us? In the spirit of such a question, re-consider the well-known formulation that concludes Roland Barthes' "The Death of the Author": "We are no longer so willing to be the dupes of such antiphrases, by which a society proudly recriminates in favor of precisely what it discards, ignores, muffles or destroys; we know that to restore writing to its future, we must reverse the myth: the birth of the reader, must be requited by the death of the Author" (Barthes 1986, 55). "Requited" here is a translation for "doit se payer." In an alternative Howard translation it is also rendered as "ransomed," but either way the notion of paying for a birth, is here connoted in the register of what I have been calling sacrifice although perhaps more like a pawn than a son. Something offered so as to secure something other. The author must be sacrificed for the reader. It is not therefore sacred.

What begins to crown here is not simply the reader, but reading as such. It is not therefore uninteresting that precisely in his function as an educator Barthes, in 1972, addressed a group of lycée teachers on the topic of what he titled, "For a Theory of Reading." Such talks were designed to bring high school teachers up-to-speed with developments in the university, and it is therefore proper that Barthes opens by informing them that the traditional and thus familiar pairing of "work and author," has passed. Perhaps more startling, however, is his subsequent declaration that: "there has never before been a theory of reading" (Barthes 2015, 157). Barthes' remarks, brief though they are, quickly then capitalize on this feint by advancing not only a grid of the four levels of reading and their correlative disciplinary stakeholders, but, as if acutely aware

of the chiasmus of his title, a Theory of Theory. Theory does not mean, he insists, either "'a philosophical dissertation' or 'abstract system'" (Barthes 2015, 158). Instead, the term designates a "description" that examines problems in their "infinite reach," one "open to criticism", in a word, "responsible." This segues immediately to a bracing attack on interdisciplinarity.

Of particular pertinence to the task of sacrificing Theory properly is the chiasmus, that is, the proposition that a Theory of reading is at one and the same time a reading of Theory, or, to nudge this toward the motif of offering, that Theory and reading are two words for the "same" act of giving. Less one think that this nudge is utterly without textual warrant, that there is nothing here about sacrifice, about offering, consider not only the context (an address to educators), but even more importantly the following:

> Reading, as we know, is a social object/issue; it is prey to instances of power and morality. [. . .] For my part, I shall formulate the ethical question in the following way: there are dead readings (subject to stereotypes, mental repetitions and sloganizing) and there are living readings (producing an inner text, homogeneous with a virtual writing on the part of the reader). Now, this living reading, during which the subject believes what he reads emotionally while also realizing its unreality, is a split (clivée thus divided and shared) reading (Barthes 2015, 160).

Barthes goes on to associate this split with Freud's account of the 'splitting (Spaltung) of the subject (le moi, so the "self" or "ego")," and concludes: "'living reading' is a perverse activity and reading is always immoral" (Barthes, ibid.). Now, if reading can be either alive or dead, if it can be perverse, this is because a Theory of reading is obliged to treat

it in a way that solicits, that invites, the recognition that we are no longer here talking about mere literacy. We are talking about offering; offering as a way to think the practice of separating the living from the dead, of producing the occasion for learning how to "do" Theory by sacrificing it to the reading that Theory becomes.

But what does it mean to treat reading as an offering of Theory that is "theoretical?" Derrida has, with his usual abandon, aligned reading and mourning (see, The Work of Mourning), and here Barthes, as if channeling Bataille, aligns it with perversion and ultimately immorality. Whether it is best aligned with one or the other is not as interesting as the following question: what makes such formulations seem outlandish, or what have we misread in reading when failing to recognize the possibility of such alignments? My response is at least direct: we have failed to recognize what reading does, when and where it brings about what it brings about. Reading theorizes in carrying on within the encounter between the text and a possible world. Put differently, what we offer in sacrificing reading to this encounter is Theory, and yes, at a very basic level I wish to underscore the obvious, namely, that if Theory has mattered for however long it is has mattered, it is because it grips and deeply rattles the way reading takes place. In short, to offer Theory is to offer (its) reading, neither close nor distant, slow nor fast, but reading. Implacably, this pushes us toward what I take to be opening generated by sacrificing Theory properly, namely, what Barthes sought to delimit, in another more semiological context, through the test of commutation, or in my more pedestrian jargon, the when and the where of Theory. When does the reading that theorizes start and stop? Where does this take place?

These evocations of genealogy and geography are, I will propose, helpful ways to think through one of the more generatively enigmatic formulations in Barthes' corpus. It derives from the section named, "Interpretation," in S/Z and reads (in my translation): "To interpret a text is not to give it a (more or less grounded, more or less free) meaning, but on the contrary to discern of what plural it is made" (Barthes 1974, 5). Piteously crushing the hopes of my students who want to read here license for any interpretation whatever, Barthes pressures the "plural" in ways that matter to the chiasmus of reading and Theory. Specifically, the plural designates a generative potentiality in the gesture of reading that enables theories of the typological (for example, "Marxist" or "Feminist") sort to emerge. Or, to retrieve a few additional formulations from "For a Theory of Reading":

> What goes on in the total act of reading? Where does reading begin? How far does it extend? Can we assign structure or boundaries to this production? We shall have to draw on many disciplines to answer such questions. Reading is an overdetermined phenomenon, involving different levels of description. Reading is what does not stop (Barthes 2015, 158)

The invocation here of "over-determination," obviously anticipates the turn to Freud, but also therefore urges us to bring the concept of a "split reading" into urgent proximity with the "plural" of which the text is made, which in turn, drives one to consider how the reading that is Theory, its when and its where, is what makes it impossible to know when a reading has begun, while at the "same" time to be convinced that it does not stop.

All such propositions underscore that at some vexed point in the reading/Theory chiasmus the Theory we offer happens when and where we least expect it. While on the one hand this reminds us that pedagogy and improvisation have much in common, it also shuffles back to one of the more provocative moments in the meditation on reading that opens Reading Capital, a text also evoked by Barthes' invocation of "over-determination," but not for that reason alone relevant here. Instead, attention ought be directed to the footnote in Section 10 of Part One that reads: "The same applies to the 'reading' of those new works of Marxism which, sometimes in surprising forms, contain in them something essential to the future of socialism: what Marxism is producing in the vanguard countries of the 'third world' which is struggling for its freedom, from the guerillas of Vietnam to Cuba. It is vital that we be able to 'read' these works before it is too late" (Althusser et al. 1979, 34). Setting aside the romance of a now jaded "Third Worldism," what insists here is an acknowledgement that the reading that Marxist theory is offers itself to "works" that are well off the page. To be sure this resonates with the Althusserian principle of "theoretical practice," but it channels practice more carefully into the gift, the giving, of reading, suggesting perhaps even positing that what reading reads is itself re-organized by the reading/Theory chiasmus. To put the matter bluntly, the oft-heard dismissal of theory as a linguistic phenomenon ekphrastically isolated from things beyond language is at best, nonsense, and at worst sheer ideology. Whatever can be read can be theorized, and whatever can be theorized is read. So, to conclude abruptly, to sacrifice Theory properly, to offer it, is to offer reading. Not reading in the sense of literacy (however indispensable it may be), that is, the competence for decoding

messages structured by linguistic codes, but reading in the sense of the handling, working in, on and with the split, the plural that makes every text a text.

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