

“POWER FAILURE IN PARIS”: DETHEORIZATION OF THE CENTRE

0.1. If any one could doubt the ironical character of the mock front-page headline used as a beacon in the title of this paper, I trust this doubt will be short-lived. But a joke is of little worth if its intrinsic ambiguity is absorbed and lost in light-hearted laughter, or if it is dramatized to the point of reversing the essentially progressive dynamics of comedy. The point of parody can hardly be local, first of all because it is double, quoting another utterance at the same time as it recontextualizes it in order to at once restate it and turn it against itself. Its undermining of certitude or faith in one domain of belief would be sterile if it did not reverberate and contaminate adjacent and more remote areas of thought. Throughout this process, it will discover and test its own postulates, derive additional hypotheses from concrete historical situations, redesign the object of its critique, verify that it does not fall prey to common sense or conversely to the provocative mirages of counterfactuality, it will seek certainties against certitude, or faith. In brief, parody and irony should be understood as primary questioning and reorganizing acts of the scientific mind rather than purely destructive weapons or mechanically pulled revolutionary levers¹.

The title of this paper, like parody and theory, tries to do more than two things at once: I mean to describe, at least summarily, the present humbling of the productions of an intellectual network that was widely supposed to be a site of power not long ago, but I will also relativize this effacement. Conversely, while questioning the actuality of any such power, we should evoke the possible causes and circumstances of its apparent loss. Finally, an ethical commitment requires to seek solutions with a view to restoring or establishing the relevance and efficiency of theory in the framework of new commons: commons that, by definition, must never be privatized or exclusively localized – even when localization results from a subversive act of appropriation and empowerment, as in the case of Frantz Fanon or other fathers and mothers of postcolonial theory.

Theory can be seen as a kind of currency, designed to purchase data

¹ I fully agree with Linda Hutcheon on the point that “through a double process of installing and ironizing, parody signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference” (Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, New York, Routledge, 1989, p. 93). This is also in keeping with Margaret A. Rose’s insistence on the temporal dimension of parody and her definition of it as “the comic refunctioning of preformed artistic or linguistic material” (Margaret A. Rose, *Parody: Ancient, Modern and Postmodern* [1979], Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 52).

certification and systemic correlation, hence a provisionally valid understanding of phenomena that would not make sense by themselves, separately: the very existence of theory is dependent on circulation and exchange. It has no absolute point of origin, it has moments and places of emergence and traffic nodes. Its only legitimate and logical location is where it operates in movement, at crossroads or at the bus stop.

0.2. This last statement is obviously theoretical, in the sense that it is both epistemological and meta-epistemological; it does not rely on the too-often wielded magic of supposedly performative acts of speech; it involves repeatedly close contacts with human praxis, whether psychological, social, political, economic, or all this at once; it involves an interaction with this praxis. When philosophy breaks free from its theological and metaphysical bonds and gives itself a constructed object rather than accepting a given object, it comes close to being theory. But, when theory is not of something *constructed* thanks to experience and against the resistance of things, it remains philosophy. I think it is my duty to present a summary list of the meanings (in terms of semantic comprehension and extension) in which I can or cannot use the term 'theory' in the framework of our questioning of 'localization': this amounts to (tentatively) *locating* theory as a preamble to *localizing* it (or not).

0.2.1. The noun [Theory], θεωρία in Greek, seems to have had two very different meanings, sometimes separated in distinct dictionary entries, as if it was a case of homonymy. On the one hand, it would refer to point of view, contemplation, intense observation or consideration; on the other, it is a procession of flesh-and-blood people. This double-entendre is fortunate, I have been building on it.

0.2.2. As used in modern European languages, theory is a *logical construct* devised to accommodate selected data that it also helps identifying and interpreting as related horizontally, vertically or obliquely between them; these data will also be related to other data not already present in the field of inquiry. Since it is a *process*, not a static set of laws or self-sufficient propositions, it will privilege oblique and lateral (not literal) thinking, abduction rather than deduction and induction. Theory cannot have the shape of a syllogism. A static theory is a dead theory.

0.2.3. Theory cannot be objectless, it cannot be of a *given* object, it cannot be of a *single* object. Theory is dynamic, evolutive and expansive. The concepts it produces and reworks do not amount to 'the essence of it' but to partly open sets of shared properties and functions. Thus, if the most basic object of 'literary theory' is called 'literariness' in English, a term that may not have an exact counterpart in another language or culture, at least some components, considered as essential, of the set of properties and functions covered by [literariness] must be

translatable into that other language or culture for us to be able to say something in English about the literature of the latter, and therefore about English literature itself.

0.2.4. Theory is *comparative*, in an enhanced sense, not just in the sense in which all cognition results from acts, experiences and experiments of comparison. I will use an easy analogy: polysemy is a fact of natural languages, because there cannot be a name for each thing, because a totally rigid syntax would not produce new thought, and finally because connotation, in any case, is context dependent; this polysemy, that I will call passive, runs against the felicity conditions of a ‘referential’ act of speech (in Jakobson’s sense), it must be not only reduced but eliminated in technical communication; but the rhetorical, aesthetic and speculative uses of natural languages (that we call literature at large) *activate* linguistic polysemy to *gain* from it. It is in this zone of uncertain balance between accuracy and indeterminacy that literary action operates and generates (or not) the pleasures of discovery, exertion, mastery and modesty. Theory consciously activates *comparison* and plays with it as the literary text activates polysemy and plays with it. It is this feature that places theory in the field of fictionality, contrary to the objectivist assimilation of ‘fiction’ to fictitious falsity (lack of existence in the “real” world) or non-serious statements.

0.2.5. In academic and some literary circles, ‘Theory’ has often been taken, in the last 20 years, as the short name of ‘French theory’, itself an ill-defined aggregate of unconventional and oppositional philosophies (whatever they opposed) that, under the ‘post-modern’ label, cut across the fields of the humanities, linguistics, psychology and the social sciences, with a pronounced fascination for literary and artistic thought processes. If we can accept that Barthes, Derrida, Cixous, Deleuze, Foucault, Lyotard, Baudrillard, the early Serres, and some lesser known others, shared transdisciplinarity and a taste for complexity, it would be extremely reductive to limit Theory to a narrow moment and especially to the ephemeral success of ‘deconstruction’ – not in France but mainly in the USA, where it was mixed or coexisted with other, very different approaches: Bakhtin, the Tartu School of Social Semiotics, the legacy of Formalism, the polysystem theory from Tel Aviv, etc. I will use ‘theory’ with an extension that can include normative and descriptive poetics, rhetoric and formal approaches to social discourses, as well as structural approaches to aesthetics. ‘Theory’ must not even be limited to its manifestation in an explicit metacritical discourse. It can be embedded or inscribed in novels, history and autobiography, it can take the form of poetry and drama. Like parody again, it is translational (in Serres’ sense) and re-creative, across genres and media.

0.2.6. Indeed, since ‘theory’ is comparative or *is* not, it relies on transmission – transfer, translation, transreading (and their limits) – for its very existence. For many theorists, until quite recently, transfer or even transcreation were fully enclosed within the limits of ‘interpretation’, in a broad and rather weak sense,

somewhere between hermeneutics and its glosses, and execution/re-enactment (as in ‘interpreting a piano sonata’). For these reasons, theory could be considered as a ‘gesture’ rather than an ‘action’, and the ‘gratuitous’, self-contained pleasure of it would be more important than any end result, such as additional sense produced². But there would be no need for theory if we did not have to “remunerate the defect of languages” (of genres, cultures and histories too), in that they are plural – to re-use once more Mallarmé’s famous phrase. For this reason, I will begin my theoretical trip with a motivating critique of Antoine Compagnon’s anti-theoretical gesticulations, and a necessary examination of Jean-Michel Rabaté’s positions on the topic. We will be glad, after this, to travel safely *away* from the defensive Centre.

1.1. Seventeen years after *Le Démon de la théorie*³, Compagnon has become an easy target. But this book and some of those that followed remain widely influential, probably because the author provides apparently ‘reasonable’ support, presented as a ‘third way’, to many traditionalist and uncritical teachers who feared for their lives with the onslaught of ‘Theory’ and who also felt threatened by impinging ‘new’, militant and insurrectional disciplines such as Postcolonial Theory, Gender Studies, or even World Literature... Since Compagnon’s Restoration of uncritical ‘criticism’ and middle of the way literary pedagogy are fraught with contradictions and blind spots, I will be content with attacking the hastily rebuilt fortress on two particularly awkward points among many.

On p. 24 of *Le Démon de la théorie* we can read this firm (theoretical) statement: “For literature to exist, five elements are indispensable: an *author*, a *book*, a *reader*, a *language* and a *referent*.” If Compagnon means by “author” something else than a figure, constructed by readers, of the producer(s) of a text, then the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the Bible, all foundational ancient epics, much ancient poetry (including Sapho’s), most early medieval literature and generally all anonymous texts are excluded from the literary field. With the requirement of ‘a book’, oral literature is negated (it becomes literally literature only when it is transcribed!), folk tales, songs, lyrical and devotional poetry miraculously happen as literature when transcription empties them of most of their substance...

² This is what Yves Citton explains in an interview: “What should be stressed is that literary studies enable us to turn the interpretative exercise into a pleasure and an end in itself, a self-justified activity rather than one justified by its end product. In this respect, interpreting a text is of the same kind as interpreting a dance: it consists as much in making a series of gestures as in ‘the production of meaning.’” (my translation). If interpreting single texts and sets of texts are different processes, according to Citton, the former being an experimental manipulation and the latter theory-building, both remain ‘gestures.’ http://www.fabula.org/atelier.php?Theoriser_experimenter#_ftn2 (last updated 19.05.2013, consulted 5.05.2015)

³ Antoine Compagnon, *Le Démon de la théorie: Littérature et sens commun*, Paris, Seuil, 1998.

Moreover, isolated short texts, fragments, cannot count as literature unless they are bound together. Performed rather than printed drama is eliminated, since it does not have a *reader*. If we are atheists, we should also consider that any book about God or Gods, any book about angels and wandering souls does not belong to literature since it has no proper referent. The lesson from *The Hunting for the snark* has not been learnt. Finally we cannot but be struck by the repeated use of the singular in this list of requirements: ‘literature’ would thus be made of single works, single versions by single authors in a single language each, about a single topic in the world-out-there, and read by an individual (single) reader. The conditions of existence of literature imposed by Compagnon should nevertheless not be treated as a prescription to heal a literary pedagogy grown insanely erratic in the last third of the 20th century, or even as a self-defensive plea in favour of home-cooked criticism, they *are* a highly normative theory, a toxic theory; they are determined by a historically and geoculturally located paradigm, a miniature chronotope reduced to caricature by the correlative amplification of its features: namely, the Western European literate bourgeois society of the later 19th and early 20th centuries (prefigured by Don Quixote), a *temps des équipages* when Gustave and Emma, Nana and Émile, followed by Albertine and Marcel, were secretly reading romantic novels and melodramas – with the name of the (famous) author printed on the cover. This is bad theory, not only because even the culture on which it relies was much more varied, complex and segregated than implicitly depicted here, but because such an exclusively, narrowly *localized* theory should not aspire to a comprehensive, let alone a universalist anthropological dimension. When, a few lines down, Compagnon distinguishes between two aspects of ‘the literary tradition’ (also in the singular): “its dynamic aspect (history) and its static aspect (value)”, everything becomes ideologically clear. The critic (not the theorist), while claiming a large share of it, pretends not to produce value, which is transhistorical, always already there, not even added, not surplus; the critic is the guardian priest of the temple, and the temple an authored Parthenon or Pantheon.

In the chapter on ‘value’ of *Le Démon*, Compagnon was still making a few strenuous efforts to criticize the later, patriotic Sainte-Beuve, opposed to Goethe’s universalism, but in his inaugural lesson at the Collège de France, *La Littérature, pour quoi faire?*⁴ this mask falls, or his debts to Barthes and Riffaterre can no longer be acknowledged, if they are not forgotten, in front of Fumaroli or Michel Zink. Although Beckett and Kundera are mentioned, together with Celan, Primo Levi and Calvino, it is all as if the identity and the supremacy of French literature, of French and Western concepts, categories and theories, could not even be questioned. We have to reach the second last page of the booklet to find a brief disclaimer, or denegation: “But I have too much done until now as if there was

⁴ Antoine Compagnon, *La Littérature, pour quoi faire?*, Paris, Collège de France – Fayard, 2007.

only one literature and as if it was essentially narrative. No, and reading is not always a solitary action either”⁵. The perfunctory ‘no’, without any example to support it, falls short of an excuse. With Compagnon it is clear, at least, that, if theories ever travel, they are exported *from* a Centre located between place de la Sorbonne, rue des Écoles and quai de Conti, and return home unscathed, laden with American or colonial spoils.

1.2. Jean-Michel Rabaté, who mentions Compagnon only once, in disagreement⁶, cannot be accused of playing a similar game. His books *The Future of Theory* (2002) and especially *Crimes of the Future: Theory and its Global Reproduction* (2014) would deserve a detailed reading in the framework of our present inquiry. But I must refrain again from offering a complete analysis or even an overview of a reflection that is arranged in a systematically unsystematic fashion around the ‘Future’ – an elusive object par excellence, not because it is unpredictable, but because its location and therefore its duration escape its writing. Writing, like philosophising according to Althusser, only meets an end, re-classified as a goal, when it falls into itself⁷.

1.2.1. Chapter 1 of *Crimes*, “How Global Should Theory Be?” is where to find not only key declarations of intention, such as “following Derrida’s questions”⁸, but some incident, undeveloped remarks that will alert us to Rabaté’s hesitant attitude toward ‘localizing’ theory, confronted to the theorist’s “quasi-hysterical demand for truth”. Just before recalling the seminar on Plato he gave in the morning of 9/11, and just after a reverie on “the emerging of a new culture”, involving Nietzsche, Emerson and Habermas among others, we find this piece of non-committal insight: “[...] Diogenes would repeat: ‘I am a citizen of the world,’ a *cosmopolites*. However, cosmopolitanism will not suffice for theory to justify itself, to find a legitimation”⁹. I wish Rabaté had paused to explain what he meant, just then, by legitimation, law and legitimacy, and what political belonging other than to world citizenship, or what *other* factor is needed to justify theory (also to make it just, that is fair). Or was that a veiled, euphemistic critique of cosmopolitanism? Or yet a form of self-justification for an apprehension of ‘theory’ that relies almost exclusively on a ‘Western’ history of ideas? An overwhelming majority of references and theses discussed belong to the philosophical and literary corpus prevalent among postmodern or post-humanist French philosophers and psychoanalysts, from Plato to Heidegger through Kant, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, and from Dante to Beckett and Blanchot

⁵ Antoine Compagnon, *La Littérature, pour quoi faire?*, p. 75 (my translation).

⁶ Jean-Michel Rabaté, *The Future of Theory*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2002, p. 145.

⁷ See Jean-Michel Rabaté, *Crimes of the Future: Theory and its Global Reproduction*, New York and London, Bloomsbury, 2014, p. 240.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 37 (my translation).

⁹ *Ibidem*.

through Mallarmé, Proust, Rilke, Kafka, Joyce and Broch. German philosophy and modern or modernist European literature, limited to three languages (French, English and German) have the lion's share, and therefore delimit a familiar, *de facto* territory of theory beyond the borders of which the unknown and its dispassionate exploration might begin. Although Edward Said is not mentioned, there may be a certain fear of Orientalism and exoticism in Rabaté's discretion about 'non-Western' thought and art; but, if he is content with a few allusions to modern Japan and ancient China, and one cursive – and erroneous – appreciation of Tagore, we might as well detect a genuine lack of interest for anything non-Western-European. Without having to follow in the steps of the advocates of Third-world and visible minority militancy, or fall into Walter Mignolo's proud self-hatred, this author should have left doors ajar to peep into the role possibly played by non-Western thought and art in European and Eurodependent changes of paradigm. It is definitely not enough to add a 20% dose of non-European stuff to a reading list, without investigating how much the remaining 80% is indebted, positively, in reaction or even deliberate ignorance, to 'the rest of the world'. We can respect the caveats of 'untranslatability', but they should never lead us to keep silent about what we know for sure exists outside 'our' institutional realm, without knowing exactly what it is – a mode of existence that is exactly that of the conceptual real.

1.2.2. Theory is a risky, innovative business, it must dare talk of what it doesn't know and will never exhaust, of what lies elsewhere, in a trial and error process. Theory should speak in tongues, not as a gift but as a conscious experiment. This is where translation, transfer, transposition make their grand entrance with all the equivocal aura of analogy. But, while interlinguistic translation and transcreation are positively evoked at the beginning of *Crimes of the Future*, in relation to Mallarmé, Lacan, Badiou and the compensation of Barbara Cassin's conceptual untranslatables, they come to be largely forgotten in the rest of the book except on two occasions (about Joyce and Kafka). Curiously, when Rabaté discusses Wittgenstein's wavering statements about style and his disappointment with his own style, the *Tractatus* is quoted in an English translation – no questions asked –, without problematizing the status of a discussion of style and thought by a *bilingual* writer. The journeys of theory, however limited they are in Rabaté's implicit History of Ideas are not examined in the light of pragmatic situations but in that of an overarching pre-set philosophy of language, leaving untouched the policies of theoretical closure, transmission, domination and appropriation.

2.0. *Live* theory (theorization) needs to place together in the same space of thought large batches of information from varied sources that it will filter in the name of scientific field reduction or framing, in order to treat some as relevant data and discard others. It then correlates again these data in order to construct and

apply abstract grids of interpretation to them; it will also let the outcome of interpretation modify the grids and question the processes of thought that made the grids possible in the first place. Live theory, as such, wields potentially considerable amounts of power over how humans understand the world about them and themselves, over collective and individual decision-making and practice, through two different correlations: representations may dictate action, but, even more importantly, action needs representations to justify, legitimate itself. Interest is always bi-directional.

When theories are *live* (emergent, struggling to find their place and displace other theories, or actively resistant, or re-emerging), their bearers aspire and need to build them as a solid, productive body that will not perish for lack of nurturing and maintenance (data flow, researchers, archive, recognition). Successful theories thus become institutional, whether they obtain the means of developing their own institutions, or they colonize and substitute existing institutions. It is also in this phase of their existence that they pretend to abdicate in favour of ‘history’ and are often prone to declaring themselves dead¹⁰. The more institutionalized, the more static, the less exposed to challenge they become in a limited space, the less value theories retain, since they can no longer purchase intellection in the wider world; until the same theories are abandoned to decay and derision by the community that made their emergence and development possible. The community (in the shape of a church, a nation, a capital, a lobby, a party or a masonry) that had acquired the power of theory, that had become a Power Centre through the development of theory, is then *de*-theorized. This is what I have called “Power Failure in Paris” in the title of this paper. In which Paris does not exactly coincide with the French capital city, but, without being reduced to a mere handy metaphor, must be taken to point at the seat of a Republic of Theory similar to the Republic of Letters identified by Pascale Casanova as the central character, the protagonist of ‘modern’ literary history. Whether the entity called ‘Paris’ in these pages includes or not London, Vienna and, later, Cambridge Mass., Berlin or Frisco is not of the utmost importance at this stage.

2.1. Recent anti-imperialist thought, whose latest, radical and deviant avatar is self-labelled “de-colonial”, holds it true that the European Renaissance and the Enlightenment, coinciding with two decisive, capital(ist) steps of European expansion, was purposefully devised as a weapon to justify the exploitation or extermination of entire populations, and therefore that ‘civilization’ in a humanist sense (like ‘democracy’ today), was a thin mask designed to impose the law of European or ‘white’ executioners over the self-rule of other peoples conveniently

¹⁰ As Hayden White recently noted, we should “question whether ‘history’ can serve as a curb on ‘theory’ as if it (history) stood out there, given and observable, as ‘nature’ was once presumed to be. It is not as if we could evaluate theory by going to look at history” (posted by White on his Facebook “timeline” on April 16, 2015).

demeaned as 'barbarians', 'savages', or simply 'aliens'.

Unfortunately, this 'Occidental' vision, ready to be used in support of the most vicious dictatorships and terror, as long as they seem to be rooted in a local tradition, has it all wrong from a theoretical point of view, since it ignores at once the confrontational process of the emergence of theories and the internal contradictions within a Theoretical Power Space, without which Theory would not be alive, would not be Theory qua historically mutable thought process. I am suggesting that, without the forms of thought that were penetrating Western Europe at a time of increased direct and indirect trading with the three Asias (Middle East, South Asia and Far East), humanism could not disassociate itself from its opposite, the vindictive spirit of the crusades, and therefore it could not be used to support the Conquistadors from outside, or to indict them, as did Bartolomé de las Casas, trying to re-inject into Christianity the respect of mankind as such. Humanism, in a word, was first of all ex-centric, not only because it was exported, but primarily because it resulted from increased cultural distances that happened shortly before its emergence. A similar story could be told about the second major phase of globalization, coinciding with the Enlightenment. The point I want to make is that, although Theories do not emerge in an aseptic space, free from ideology (in the Freudo-Marxian sense), far from it, they *are* not bagged ideologies, because they are mobile, they result from a mobility of ideas and they mobilize, hybridize and miscegenate ideas to the point of changing their shapes and functions, in terms of representation and pro-action.

But, when a Theory becomes too successful (in terms of its acceptance or even its 'unavoidable' character), either in its original space of emergence or in another space that has imported it (bought or stolen) and acclimatized it, making it patrimonial, 'saving' it from new challenges and the risks of renewed confrontations with the origin and its probably different horizons, it ceases to be a Theory and becomes Ideology, Religion, Dogma, a totalitarian phenomenon, or it just withers and fades away because it is now so commonplace that it does not need to be believed in and can be freely derided as 'just a theory' among others, mocked by 'reality' that follows its own course as usual. In both cases, *localization*, topicality (from *topos*, place), is key to this perversion and this decadence. The two possible stories are not always mutually exclusive in actual situations, as Marc Angenot shows it very lucidly in a section of his just published masterwork on *L'Histoire des idées*¹¹. So far, I am not saying or trying to say anything strikingly original, I am just emphasizing what we should all know happens to Theories if and when they are 'localized' and stabilized, made immune, territorialized in a narrow sense. Theories can remain healthy as long as they are

¹¹ Marc Angenot, *L'Histoire des idées: problématiques, objets, concepts, méthodes, enjeux, débats*, Liège, Presses Universitaires de Liège, 2014, pp. 271-277.

errant, exilic or diasporic. Alexis Nouss¹² and Djelal Kadir¹³ converge on this key point.

2.2. It would be tedious to describe at length how Neo-Structuralism, on the one hand, and so-called French Theory, or more specifically Post-Modern Deconstruction, after developing as a result of the confrontation of older local Marxism and Existentialism with foreign linguistic formalism, theories of discourse, dissident anthropologies and historiographies, etc., met with different fates in 'Paris'. Neo-structuralism, reduced to its tabular mechanics and a quasi-scientific terminology, was taught at school, especially in the form of Gérard Genette's early narratology; French theory was ignored, despised or violently attacked by most of the educational establishment in Western Europe, while it flourished in the North American academia and even in the influential cultural press or in the arts. In both cases, we could see the lights coming out, one by one, in 'Paris'. No alternative energies, no new technologies of thought, among all those available in the World, have been adopted or even seriously tested as substitutes for the Linguistic Turn and Nietzschean anti-hegelianism. On the one hand the 'intellectual' media stage is held by older former pseudo-revolutionaries such as Philippe Sollers, and middle-aged populists such as Michel Onfray and Alain Finkielkraut, who ape in degraded forms the gestures of the organic intellectuals of yore; on the other hand, only a handful of actual theorists (professional philosophers and writers, initially), such as Michel Deguy, Jean-Luc Nancy or Jacques Rancière, prolong an active but scarcely noticed afterlife in academic retirement. Echoes of Italy in the rest of Europe (Giorgio Agamben, Carlo Ginzburg, Roberto Calasso) are somewhat marred by the dubious political image of the country and the aberrant allegiance of some public intellectuals to terrorism (lately, Gianni Vattimo). Feminist thinking has become residual or invisible. Large sections of the Humanities look up in amazement at the cognitive sciences. This is exactly what I call *de-theorization* of the Centre. It does not imply that the Centre is decentred as a result (a centre can be empty) or that it has lost all power, but it tends to be ruled and to rule its peripheries by other means than critical and comparative thinking, it reverts to *authority*. And 'market' is the sacred name of this authority.

More than one political, cultural and economic factor contributed to de-theorize "Paris" from the 80s onwards. Unable to do justice to their combination in a few lines, I will merely mention one factor that can be read both as a symptom

¹² See, among other works: Alexis Nouss, *La Condition de l'exilé*, Paris, Fondation de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 2015.

¹³ See Djelal Kadir, *Memos from the Besieged City: Lifelines for Cultural Sustainability*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2011, and my review article around the same book: "Une chronique du siège de la Littérature Comparée", *Acta Fabula*, 16, 2015, 5, May.
<http://www.fabula.org/revue/document9294.php>

and a participating cause in the process: I mean post-imperial linguistic nationalism, without an intelligent cultural policy to support it; one could call it the 'Toubon syndrome'. While the share of translated literature (mainly contemporary international best sellers, but also works of better quality, not produced for the current market) has been ever growing in the Francophone space and the share of works translated from English (half of them American) reaches over 60 per cent of these translations, the number of translated works in the Humanities remains very small. In the field of Literary and Cultural Theory, this deficit has always been striking. Few major works are translated from any language, even English, into French, while they are widely translated into Spanish or Portuguese; they are often translated with immense delays, up to twenty or thirty years (Propp, Jolles, Käte Hamburger, Ashcroft et al.). Consequently the few works that get translated often receive disproportionate attention, out of context. Not one major non-French treatise or dictionary of narratology (whether in English, German or Portuguese) has made its way to France. There are two large and well-documented histories of (Western) Literary Theory in Spanish (by Carmen Bobes and Manuel Asensi), and uncountable anthologies and handbooks in English. Nothing is translated and nothing equivalent is produced in French. An even sadder case, perhaps, is that of *Metahistory*, the book by Hayden White, but also the whole historiological school of meta-historiography that combined discourse analysis with narrative theory and the rhetoric of genres. These ideas were introduced in France in the 1980s thanks to Ricœur's interpretation in *Temps et récit*, but there has been no translation at all of White's works, and the latest fashion of redrawing a firm boundary, if not rebuilding a wall between the confused and confusing aggregate [facts/ "reference"/ history/ truth] and a supposedly antonymous 'fiction', takes sides with American conservative neo-positivists and analytic philosophers to attack White without a fine perception of his writings or any precise knowledge of the intellectual context, thus depriving the Francophone public of their free judgement. I would call this crime of the present 'misuse of non-translation'.

One might think that this kind of protectionism resists a hegemony, but it is not so. In fact, it is useless and even counterproductive both in the Francophone space and in the wider world: in the former, giving a severe beating to an unknown quantity appears either pointless or as an easy trick to promote one's own vision; in the latter, it will have no audience, even if an author tries to buy publication and applause. If 'Paris' was ready to engage seriously again with Theory, it should mobilize non-French sources by bringing them to its own linguistic and cultural field, and Francophone thought by making it able to dialogue and struggle with English and other alien speakers on their respective grounds. It is, alas, significant that, while Postcolonial Studies, Cultural Studies, Translation Studies were early embraced, like Literary Theory itself, in the Spanish and Portuguese speaking worlds, allowing these intellectuals to have a not negligible say on many questions

neglected by the French intelligentsia, these same key trends, many of which do not originate in North America or in the 'First World', appear very belatedly, in a distorted and summarized manner on the Francophone scene, impoverishing it further.

2.3. While 'French Theory' was, involuntarily but widely exported – after existentialism and neo-structuralism, in different circumstances –, making inroads, often through the USA, into the rest of the English-speaking world, notably in India and Australia, and also, to a slightly lesser extent in the Hispanic world, there was hardly any *return* of the creative or critical appropriations of those theoretical streams to the French-speaking world, whose absence in the lively ongoing debate at world scale has become remarkable. I do not regret it much for metropolitan France, it has forgotten the very meaning of theory that made much of its intellectual glory, usurped or not. But I am sorry for France's satellite countries, the former colonies and overseas territories, especially, and more generally for a blocked node in the World Theory Network. When theories travel today, they make only a brief pious stop over at the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme or at ENS, Ulm. Francophone thinkers/ researchers, not encouraged to enter these last international circles, have a better chance of being involved in creative, mutual learning encounters, in Delhi, Baton Rouge, Toronto, Buenos Aires, Lisbon, Brazil or Romania than in Paris, Oxford, New York or Heidelberg. 'Paris' and other Centres, or components of The Centre, have not adapted to the lesser but useful role given them by the 'writing back' of Empire. Western Europe and even North America have effectively become intellectual peripheries of their former Empires, but, reluctant as Western Europe is to feed from them, it hampers theory globally.

3. Rather than weeping over the de-theorization of the Centre or draw radically pessimistic conclusions about the future of theory and theories of the future, *avenir* or *à-venir*, I would now like to *act* more theoretically in the last words of this introductory paper. This theory can and should only be outlined in a programmatic but not utopian manner, hence with a good measure of openness and a portion of enigmaticity. Namely, 1) expressing what and how I am expecting to *learn* from a receptive contact with Romanian researchers who had to struggle for decades to gain access to thinking outside the fold, living distance as an iron curtain rather than a vista on themselves, 2) interpreting the former theoretical glory of 'Paris' and its present decay in terms of a positive lesson for the production of theory, 3) seeking some pattern, both localized and mobile, that could help mummified theory (bad, disfigured, recessive theory) out of its age-old crypts, 4) naming the process of liberation that we are trying to identify.

3.1. STEPS

– From my earliest contacts with the organizers till the eve of the *Localizing Theory* conference, with a number of abstracts and all the titles of accepted papers in hand, the key-words around which something useful could be elaborated in my mind evolved and grew in number. The local-travel-global triad, first understood in terms of disciplinary *location* or allocation, was considerably altered to become much more concrete, in terms of a dynamic cartography of thought power, while taking into account the ever-threatened, decreasing share of this power in the global balance of power. My feeling is that the very question of a locus of theory, instead of a time for theory, for example, is emblematic of the paradoxical nature of the remaining and the new power of theory today: if theory can be powerful now it will be because it stems from minority situations, and its *modus operandi* is rather clandestine. Then, as the prevalence of Romanian concerns and the keyword “postcommunism” became salient, I realized the ambiguity of the word ‘localizing’ and I began wondering if any theory can or must be rooted and/or adopted and acclimatized, and what it gains and loses with this temptation, this effort against the double resistance of theory to localization and of the local to being theorized.

– Now, considering that the great theoretical moments of the Centre in pre-modern and modern times took place in the Renaissance, in the 18th century and at the turn of the 20th century, and that these moments were highly publicized and influential, does it imply that political and economic domination are necessary conditions to the emergence of successful theories? And that the loss of supremacy entails a theoretical loss? Would it not be wiser to consider that, in many respects, Humanism, Secularism, Scientific Epistemology, Democracy, Dialogism were theoretical inventions that arose from local minority situations and minority cultures and languages, at world scale? Is it not, therefore, the illusion or the realization of being ‘majority’, in any sense, that blocks a two-way and criss-crossing mobility, essential to the emergence and persistence of Theory? Exceptions, negligible data, aberrant facts are the sites to be interrogated. There is no theory without a strategy of errors and a diasporic nostalgia of knowledge. Theory lies on the tip of the tongue, it is what needs to be (re)written because it is about to be forgotten. It is a matter of “what was I going to say”. Theory is the kind of thinking that takes place in the form of emergence because it faces emergency, it is not insured against natural disasters or its own shortcomings, it takes place now rather than somewhere, since it will soon be too late, or maybe it is too late already. Theory can show the serenity of the last recourse that is the other face of what Rabaté calls its hysterical desire for truth.

– Theory is experimental. Both voluntary and involuntary displacements – not mutually exclusive –, what Huiwen Zhang, Alexis Nouss and Jean-Pierre Dubost would respectively call, under differing perspectives, “transreading”, “exilience” and “disorientation”, or what I used to see as oppositional and contrastive re-writing, *all* these attitudes or dispositions of the pro-theoretical subject, and many

more, with their particular inflections, are born of physical and/or linguistic displacements. I believe Romanian intellectuals, like Catalans, Slovenians, Irishmen or, at an altogether different scale, Indians, have an inbuilt advantage that they should not lose (and it is obvious that they are not ready to do it): they are *obliged* to think and write in more than one language, they are conscious, and visibly glad and proud to practice constant exo-translation as well as in-translation. Linguistic and cultural dualism and pluralism, whether they are forced upon the dominated or isolated subject or a means of liberation from an asphyxiating, collective territorial mastery, have always been and remain more than ever essential factors of theory as *inventio* of meaning. Supposing that we had only one “native” language and culture (which is less and less true, worldwide), we *could not* theorize, that is derive potential or virtual hyper-meanings from the confrontation of otherness; the assigned ‘native’ language must be spoilt of its evidence, its illusionistic transparency, it must become, in its turn, acquired, experimental, de-mastered, inexhaustible and re-mastered from outside.

3.2. TRACKS

Finally, I want to propose two modest tracks for further investigation, presented separately, but not unrelated between them. The order of presentation is arbitrary. There is no precedence, logical or chronological, of one over the other. Theory is an experimental *montage* before it can read a hierarchical or a causal sequence into its own disposition.

– Theory, whenever it happens, is modern. Doing away with the idea of progress (which is not at all necessarily linked with grand, linear, teleological narratives), as ‘post-modernism’ would have it, is incompatible with theoretical thinking. Theory is a march, it must go, with or without a pre-defined goal. Whether it eventually finds that it has landed somewhere else or returned wiser to its point of departure, or yet it sinks or founders, whether its hero is Columbus, Ulysses or Icarus, theory, as an aesthetic and alethic act, is the only form of transcendence that is not servile to the Divine unreal. For this reason, proper Theory should be understood as *avant-garde*, with all the dangers and contradictions of the *avant-gardes*, so thoroughly analysed by Renato Poggioli, Mary-Ann Caws and many others.

– Theory, contrary to fundamental postulates, on the one hand, and self-contained formulas or verified scientific laws, like equations or physical laws, on the other hand, arises, develops, changes and dies within the sphere of *fictionality*, where it occupies an unstable space between imaginary and real universes of reference, where it is threatened by the undifferentiated pole of myth and by its regressive potential adscription to the universe where the sacred vs. profane pair of opposites is the order of the day. By this statement I do not mean that Theory is nothing but ‘Fiction’, in the simplistic but resistant sense of non-referential, unverifiable utterances, I do not even suggest that it *is* Fiction in the sense of the

literary genre of narrative discourse so labelled in publishers’ catalogues. I mean that, like parody, it operates on a principle of uncertainty rather than of ascertaining, of infinite semiosis rather than eventual monosemic reduction. And, to end, I propose that theory, as abs-traction, ex-traction and dis-traction, is not to be found exclusively in the guise of argumentative discourse, but also, at its most dynamic, in the shape of the speculative literary genres of narrative fiction, poetry and drama. Among many exciting examples that could be studied in an (impure) theory seminar, I would thus propose four, tenuously but variously connected:

- the novel *Mad Girl’s Love Song* (2013) by the exceptionally gifted Indian theorist and poet Rukmini Bhaya Nair,
- the duet formed by Mircea Eliade’s *Bengali Night [Maitreyi]* (1933) and Maitraye Devi’s autobiographical response to it some forty years later, *It Does Not Die [Na hanayate]* (1974),
- Jacques Roubaud’s second grand elegy, *La Pluralité des mondes* de Lewis, to be translated into various languages and in transmedial forms,
- *Le Ton Beau de Marot* by Douglas Hofstadter (1997), being an elaborate, digressive but never circular variation on translation, mourning and mosaicic thought process and writing.

Not to the exclusion of more traditional surveys, but as an introduction to them, this is a tempting syllabus for a graduate course (in Romania, in India, in the USA or a number of other locations – except ‘Paris’, I guess), a Theory seminar in which books known as belonging ‘naturally to the genre of Theory would only pop up incidentally, as hypertext, when their style and propositions can be enlightened, clarified by literature. Theory is comedy, not tragedy, it enjoys being turned upside down and inside out. Its temporal mode is that of being reborn in its old age, unhurriedly insofar as it has left Apocalypse behind.

Hofstadter’s (not Murphy’s) law runs as follows:

“It always takes longer than you expect, even when you take into account Hofstadter’s Law”.

Bout it is never too late to start discussing the wiseness of the Gau of the Indies with William (Blake)¹⁴.

¹⁴ See Rukmini Bhaya Nair’s *Mad Girl’s Love Song*, Noida, Harper Collins, 2013, pp. 195-196.

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"POWER FAILURE IN PARIS": DETHEORIZATION OF THE CENTRE

(Abstract)

Theory, in the broad field of the Humanities, Literature and the Arts, should be understood as both an intensive examination and a travelling, comparative point of view. It is akin to parody, due to its displaced, ironical and re-creative character, that it shares with interlinguistic and transmedial translation. It cannot and should not be firmly rooted in a particular place or historical moment without dying in the form of doctrine or dogma. But the exercise of theoretical power also depends on the relative stability of its institutions. From the 1980s onwards, the Centre called 'Paris' lost this power because it ignored both the de-centred appropriations it unwillingly made possible and the exotic origins of its own emergence. This de-theorization is nevertheless dangerous, because the place it leaves vacant is managed by the brainless and insensitive law of 'the market'. Theory is not ideology, it is the responsible self-consciousness of the interests involved in comparing and linking. Formerly marginalized cultures, such as those of Eastern Europe, India, China or Latin America have the need and appetite for theory that should allow them to build an alternative network of theoretical shuttles able to re-think the functions of the local in a globalized world.

Keywords: Theory, Parody, Translation, Migration, Empire, Republic of Letters.

PIERDEREA PUTERII LA PARIS: DETEORETIZAREA CENTRULUI
(Rezumat)

În domeniul larg al științelor umaniste, al Literaturii și Artei, teoria ar trebui înțeleasă deopotrivă ca examinare intensivă și ca punct de vedere comparativ, migrator. Ea este înrudită cu parodia, prin caracterul său distopic, ironic și re-creativ, împărțită și de traducerea interlingvistică și transmediatică. Teoria nu poate și nu trebuie să fie ferm înrădăcinată într-un anumit loc sau moment istoric, riscând astfel să dispară în formele ei doctrinare sau dogmatice.. Dar exercițiul puterii teoretice depinde și de stabilitatea relativă a instituțiilor sale. Din anii 1980 încoace, Centrul numit „Paris” a pierdut această putere, pentru că a ignorat atât posibilitatea aplicării decentralizate pe care a înlesnit-o involuntar, cât și originile exotice ale propriei sale apariții. Această de-teoretizare este totuși periculoasă, având în vedere că locul lăsat vacant rămâne în seama nechibzuitei și insensibilei legi a „pieței”. Teoria nu este ideologie, ci conștiință de sine, responsabilă de interesele implicate în actul comparației și al relaționării. Culturi marginalizate în trecut, precum cele din Europa de Est, India, China sau America Latină, demonstrează o vizibilă apetență pentru teorie, ce ar trebui să le permită elaborarea unei rețele alternative de modele teoretice capabile a regândi funcțiile localului într-o lume globalizată.

Cuvinte-cheie: teorie, parodie, traducere, migrație, imperiu, Republica Literelor.