Marc Redfield, Theory at Yale: The Strange Case of Deconstruction in America. Review by Taylor Schey

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Most than thirty years after his death, Paul de Man continues to strike a cultural nerve. The 2014 publication of Evelyn Barish’s biography The Double Life of Paul de Man generated a surprisingly large number of reviews in major media venues such as The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, and New Republic. Many of these reviews took the opportunity to denounce the theoretical writings of de Man as well as his person; one in particular not only attacked the scholar (violently defacing an image of his face with words such as “embezzler,” “anti-Semitic,” “liar,” “forger,” “fraud,” and “bigamist”), but also disparaged so-called “Dead-ender theory types.” A similar brand of outrage fuels customer reviews of Barish’s book in popular venues like Amazon.com, where one review that exclusively ridicules deconstruction inspires a commenter to write, “Damn Paul de Man! Damn him!”

Marc Redfield’s Theory at Yale: The Strange Case of Deconstruction in America not primarily focused on this brouhaha, but it is focused on the peculiar way in which deconstruction has been produced and received as a scandal both in the media and in the academy. While this is a book about “theory” in the 1970s and 1980s and its relation to the “Yale Critics” (focusing primarily on de Man, Geoffrey Hartman, and Harold Bloom), the scare quotes around both are important: Theory at Yale does not offer an objective historical account of literary theory or a systematic overview of the work of these thinkers. More compellingly, it carries out a deconstructive reading of “the mediatization of theory-as-deconstruction” (1) to query why “theory” came to be equated with deconstruction, embodied in “a semi-imaginary collective” (2), and condensed in the figure of de Man, who, as Redfield shows, had already become “the ultimate personification of theory as scandal” (4) well before the 1987 discovery of his wartime journalism. Redfield, in other words, analyzes “theory” as a cultural event that occurred in specific institutional contexts and through specific processes of tropological mediation.

Nevertheless, Theory at Yale suggests that the texts of theory and “theory” cannot really be separated. The book’s basic argument is that “theory” became a scandal personified as “de Man” because de Man’s emphasis on the epistemological unreliability of
language challenged the prevailing aesthetic–humanistic ideals and rationales of the American university system. Accordingly, for Redfield, the angry and absurd caricatures of deconstruction as a “threat” to the humanities nevertheless speak, symptomatically, to “the threat of the unreadable” (17) that rhetorical reading emphasizes, while the personification of theory indicates a cultural desire to humanize and denounce aspects of language incongruent with human desire. For readers of de Man, this line of argumentation will sound familiar: Theory at Yale more or less retraces and expands the thesis of de Man’s 1982 essay “The Resistance to Theory,” treating the often violent misreadings of deconstruction as displaced symptoms of a resistance to the rhetorical dimension of language that theory reveals—and resists. Consequently, Redfield’s analysis is somewhat predictable, as rhetorical readings tend to be (at least according to de Man in that essay). Yet the book’s individual case studies and close readings wander in the best of ways, cumulatively offering an absorbing and well-researched account of the phenomenon of deconstruction in America.

After its long opening chapter, which narrates the history of “theory” and charts the institutional and cultural contexts within which the scandal of deconstruction emerged, Theory at Yale devotes individual chapters to the theory polemics surrounding Wordsworth’s “A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal” and to Hartman’s extraordinary reflections on the Wordsworthian imagination, both of which will be of interest to all scholars of Romanticism. Subsequent chapters then focus on Bloom (who, in his ability to incorporate the Western canon, comes to personify aesthetics as the allegorical counterpart to theory-as-de Man), de Man (as well as John Guillory’s reading of de Manian theory as a sociological symptom), and a fascinating pair of Mark Tansey’s so-called “theory paintings” (159), Derrida Queries de Man and Constructing the Grand Canyon. In each case, Redfield attends to “scatterings of textual density” that drag the other Yale critics “into the orbit of (de Manian) theory” (11), but such partisanship is neither unexpected nor infelicitous: like all of Redfield’s work, Theory at Yale showcases artful rhetorical readings that illustrate the continued relevance of de Man’s insights. In particular, the readings in the last three chapters considerably expand our understanding of the workings of personification—“the governing trope of the discourse of theory” (49)—and demonstrate why the phenomenon of “theory” necessitates a rhetorical analysis.

As an authoritative analysis of this phenomenon, Theory at Yale is a significant contribution to scholarship. Redfield convincingly shows how the perennially hostile reception of deconstruction itself reiterates “the lesson that Paul de Man famously formalized as the equation of theory with self-resistance” (22). And yet, in the end, such a de Manian “lesson” would also have to resist formalization. In that vein, it is worth noting that the question from “The Resistance to Theory” that informs Redfield’s entire analysis—“what is it about literary theory that is so threatening that it provokes such strong resistances and attacks?” (11)—could just as well be read rhetorically, not as asking for the essential link between hostile responses to theory and “the threat of the unreadable,” but as stating that there is nothing inherently threatening about the impossibility of knowing what language is up to. Certainly, many scholars such as Redfield have found the linguistic instabilities de Man insists upon to be much more thought provoking than threatening (see, for example, the Romantic Circles Praxis Series volume Legacies of Paul de Man, edited by Redfield). Perhaps what remains to be explained, then, particularly after Theory at Yale, is why so many defenders of deconstruction continue to follow its critics in insisting upon a theoretical threat that de Man at once evoked and displaced.

Works Cited

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