

TEACHING THEORY

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When I was a graduate student in the humanities at Brown in the heady theory decade of the 1980s, it seemed as if all the men were studying Marxism and all the women were studying psychoanalysis. There were a few border-crossers here and there in the graduate program, and quite often the Marxist theorists and the Lacanian theorists coalesced around deconstruction, but, for the most part, the men were in steady search of the real and the women were in hot pursuit of fantasy. While my male compatriots investigated material conditions, my female colleagues and I explored psychological emotions. The battle lines were drawn: hard and soft, economic and affective, public and private. Looking back, I find these highly gendered binaries surprising, especially in light of virtually everyone's shared interest in feminist theory, one of the great attractions and strengths of the Brown Ph.D. program, staffed at the time with some of the smartest gender scholars in the academy (Mary Ann Doane, Ann Fausto-Sterling, Ellen Rooney, Naomi Schor, Kaja Silverman, Elizabeth Weed . . .). And yet still we found ourselves splintering off into predictable byways, caught up in artificial theory debates largely of our own making: Foucault vs. Freud, Habermas vs. Irigaray, Marx vs. Derrida. Where our theoretical resistances found common ground was on the point of resistance itself: if you were not resisting something, we believed, then you were not theorizing. Theory *is* resistance.

Over twenty years later, the ghost of Paul de Man continues to haunt me still. For years his remarkable essay on "The Resistance to Theory" was my credo. De Man's great insight was to see that the resistance to theory is not

something outside the act of theorizing but inside it. Resistance, he insisted, is intrinsic to the theoretical enterprise itself. Theory works as a practice that raises questions about itself, and resistance operates as nothing less than its built-in precondition. Can the resistance to theory ever be overcome? For de Man, the answer is no: "Nothing can overcome the resistance to theory since theory is itself this resistance."¹

De Man's foundational essay is a tour-de-force piece of logic, a way to claim for theory the power of resistance while overcoming all our own. For a long time the paradox of this masterful definition of theory escaped me; only when I began to teach did I discover that the best way to lessen students' immediate opposition to theory was to show how their concerns were themselves resolutely theoretical. Ironically, de Man became useful as a strategy to mitigate student resistances rather than to cultivate them. De Man's "The Resistance to Theory" became the most effective weapon in my own theoretical arsenal for resisting the students' resistances.

There is no question that de Man was onto something. The best I have read, taught, and perhaps even written over the years is theory unafraid to resist itself, to challenge its own assumptions. Yet my thoughts on *how* to theorize have changed dramatically since I became a professor, largely because of my experience teaching theory to undergraduate and graduate students. I no longer think that resistance exhausts all the many possibilities and practices of theory. If I have a new theory of theory, it is far less resistance and much more persistence. My new credo, forged in the crucible of the classroom, sees invention where I once saw only subversion. It embraces theorization over theory, an intellectual labor that goes beyond uncovering and resisting dangerous old ideas in favor of venturing and testing responsible new ones.

Even today, the reigning approach to theory tends to privilege resistance and a host of related concepts, chief among them refusal, subversion, reversal, and displacement. For me these strategies of reading, writing, and debating remain useful, but they are just one set of practices I rely on in the classroom for teaching students how to theorize. At the end of the teaching day, the pursuit of resistance, when practiced in isolation, is too agonistic to produce lasting theoretical contributions, let alone productive classroom discussions. Speaking only "the language of self-resistance" (30), as de Man puts it, sets students in continual opposition to themselves and to each other, often blocking the opportunity to build on the strengths of their own best insights. While resistance makes good politics, it does not always make effective pedagogy. Good teaching involves fluency with a range of techniques, including elaboration, evaluation, clarification, amplification, explication, imagination,

and collaboration. My own best experiences in the classroom have come when a class has collectively worked through resistance to reach the point of inventing something unusual, unexpected, or even uncanny. To be sure, resistance and invention comprise their own specious binary, for in truth each presupposes and relies on the other in order to do its work well. Yet resistance that stops short of invention, that settles for merely saying “No,” is a theory devoid of action, a safe mode of theorizing that risks nothing because it resists everything. Every theory classroom needs eventually to make the critical and momentous shift from talking about theory to finally doing it; only then, in my experience, does theory really begin to happen.

Given the influential role Paul de Man has played over the past quarter century in shaping literary scholarship, it is easy to forget that his signature essay on “The Resistance to Theory,” which first appeared in a 1982 volume of *Yale French Studies*, was originally intended for a volume on teaching.² Commissioned by the MLA for inclusion in a book called *Introduction to Scholarship in Modern Languages and Literatures*, de Man’s assigned task was to provide, for an audience of literature and language teachers, both a definition of theory and a discussion of its implications for pedagogy. Since for de Man the “main theoretical interest of literary theory consists in the impossibility of its definition” (3), the assignment to produce a teachable definition of theory was doomed from the start. Summarily jettisoned from the volume, “The Resistance to Theory” quickly became its own compelling demonstration of the power of theory to challenge the academy’s reigning orthodoxies on literature and language instruction.

None of this is to say that de Man was uninterested or uninvested in the practice of teaching. On the contrary, the entire book that emerges out of de Man’s classic essay, also entitled *The Resistance to Theory*, offers a thoughtful and sustained meditation on the difficulty of teaching and the teaching of difficulty. Reading this energetic collection of essays more than two decades later, what now strikes me most forcefully is not what de Man says about theory but what he says about teaching, and indeed about the relation between theory and teaching. Whenever the question of pedagogy arises, which it does frequently, de Man waxes aphoristic. Consider these words of scholastic wisdom, culled from a single paragraph of the book’s title essay:

- the only teaching worthy of the name is scholarly, not personal
- scholarship has, in principle, to be eminently teachable
- as a controlled reflection on the formation of method, theory rightly proves to be entirely compatible with teaching

- a method that cannot be made to suit the “truth” of its object can only teach delusion
- it is better to fail in teaching what should not be taught than to succeed in teaching what is not true

(4)

All five of these pronouncements are claims as contestable as they are quotable. (Is there really no place for the personal in teaching? Must all scholarship be teachable? Is theory always compatible with teaching? Do methods not suited to their object only teach delusion? And isn't teaching what is not true one of the things that should not be taught?) I am less concerned here with refuting de Man point by point than with highlighting the invitation that these aphorisms extend to do precisely that, to become the kind of resisting theorist de Man himself exemplifies. De Man's very predilection for argument by aphorism—with all this genre's air of unquestioned authority and claim to certain knowledge—cannot help but to bring out the resisting reader in me. De Man the aphorist is de Man the gadfly, goading his readers to further acts of theorization, challenging us to resist his own teachings on resistance.

But resistance is not an end or termination in itself, it is simply a place where the process of theorization starts. “The attempt to treat literature theoretically may as well resign itself to the fact that it has to start out from empirical considerations” (5). Over and over again in *The Resistance to Theory* de Man tells us that to be good theorists we must first be good empiricists, committed pragmatists. What de Man the theoretician values above all turns out to be the practical, which is to say, the pedagogical. For de Man, theory begins in practice—not just any kind of practice but a very particular kind of practice: the exercise of close reading.

In the most surprising section of a book that insists that the only teaching worthy of the name is scholarly and not personal, de Man suddenly shifts, in his essay on “The Return to Philology,” from the worldly aphorism to the personal anecdote. Recalling the late Reuben Brower, author of the 1951 New Critical classic *Fields of Light: An Experiment in Critical Reading* and teacher of a popular general education course at Harvard called “The Interpretation of Literature” (Humanities 6), de Man pays tribute to a teacher who knew nothing about “high-powered French theory” but everything about the pragmatics of excellent pedagogy:

Students, as they began to write on the writings of others, were not to say anything that was not derived from the text they were considering. They were

not to make any statements that they could not support by a specific use of language that actually occurred in the text. They were asked, in other words, to begin by reading texts closely as texts and not to move at once into the general context of human experience or history. Much more humbly or modestly, they were to start out from the bafflement that such singular turns of tone, phrase, and figure were bound to produce in readers attentive enough to notice them and honest enough not to hide their non-understanding behind the screen of received ideas that often passes, in literary instruction, for humanistic knowledge.

(23)

For a new teacher just learning the ropes, this simple rule of close reading—call it “Brower’s Rule”—was electrifying. “I have never known a course by which students were so transformed,” de Man writes in admiration; “henceforth, they would never be the same.” Here, de Man suggests, was a course utterly devoid of theoretical pretensions, yet more successful in subverting and transforming critical discourse than any self-proclaimed theory class. The point is clear: the best theory is not always practiced by theorists. For de Man, the proof is in the pedagogy:

Reuben Brower had a rare talent, not out of respect for the delicacy of language, for keeping things as tidy as a philosophical investigation ought to be yet, at the same time, entirely pragmatic. Mere reading, it turns out, prior to any theory, is able to transform critical discourse in a manner that would appear deeply subversive to those who think of the teaching of literature as a substitute for the teaching of theology, ethics, psychology, or intellectual history. Close reading accomplishes this often in spite of itself because it cannot fail to respond to structures of language which it is the more or less secret aim of literary teaching to keep hidden.

(24)

Because the practice of close reading cannot help but to respond to the figurative play of language, it also cannot help but to be theoretical. For de Man, the turn to theory was a turn away from theology and back to philology, and the turn against theory was a refusal of the power of rhetoric, at the very moment rhetoric was “being used and refined as never before” (25). Thus, to teach the pragmatics of close rhetorical reading through a strategy like “Brower’s Rule” is to teach students to be theoretical, without “the conceptual and terminological apparatus” that, de Man admits, can sometimes interfere with the empirical demands of teaching.³

What de Man seeks vividly to demonstrate with this affectionate tribute to his former teaching mentor is not merely how the seemingly least theoretical of pedagogues can in fact be the most theoretical, but also how terminology is less crucial to the practice of theory than methodology. De Man's own thoughts on teaching methodology were quite specific, an outgrowth of his conviction that theory can only be accessed through a careful study of language and figuration: "literature, instead of being taught only as a historical and humanistic subject, should be taught as a rhetoric and a poetics prior to being taught as a hermeneutics and a history" (25–26). De Man went to his death thinking that the teaching of literature as rhetoric or poetics could never be successfully institutionalized, for such a radical change would require a fundamental shift in the practice of teaching away from standards of cultural excellence "always based on some form of religious faith" and towards a more subversive "principle of disbelief" (26). And yet this is exactly what has happened since *The Resistance to Theory* first appeared in book form in 1986. College teachers of literature, some in fact trained by de Man, have introduced courses, curricula, and even programs devoted to the teaching of rhetoric. While I myself am wary of the near pure distillation of language assumed by an exercise like "Brower's Rule" (which, like the New Criticism that inspired it, tends to isolate the literary text from the cultural, historical, and political contexts that produced it), it is certainly the case that the attention to figuration de Man so passionately espoused is now no less a common pedagogical practice than the historicism and hermeneutics it was meant to challenge. De Man's "principle of disbelief" has become its own kind of faith, though de Man himself professed to have lost faith in a profession he believed was fundamentally incapable of serious institutional reform.

So what is theory to me now, and what do I think I am doing when I teach theory? Theory is practicing self-consciousness about how I think. And teaching theory is showing students how to be self-conscious about their own thinking. There is a difference between self-resistance and self-consciousness, a distinction we may have lost sight of over the years. To assume that self-consciousness is always a form of self-resistance is also to assume that the self is an errant, guilty, or correctable self—the very kind of Puritan or theological subject that de Man rightly and repeatedly warns teachers to avoid falsely embodying and mimetically reproducing in their students. If de Man had any particular cautionary example in mind here it was surely Austin Warren, whose vision of the pedagogue as pastor powerfully shaped the New Critical understanding of "The Teacher as a Critic," the title of Warren's contribution to the original "My Credo" symposium in *The Kenyon Review*.⁴

By critical and pedagogical self-consciousness I mean an approach to thinking about thinking that takes the *how* as seriously as the *what*. Good theorizing, like good teaching, attends not just to content but to process. The most important element of responsible theorizing is also the most crucial element of successful teaching: attending not just to arguments but also to methods of argumentation, not just to posing answers but also to framing questions. If I have learned one thing in my years of teaching theory, it is that students learn best when they are answering their own questions.⁵ In a theory classroom, the trick to getting students to theorize lies in creating exercises that allow them to generate their own problems of study, and ideally a set of terms and methods for tackling them. This means approaching theory more inductively than deductively, starting with the problems and examples that are meaningful to the students and bringing in more explicitly theoretical work as needed along the way.

Let me pose an example. My favorite teaching assignment to date, selected from a range of different theory courses I have taught, is an exercise popular in feminist classrooms, and with good reason. Easily adaptable to the teaching of race and class as well, the “gender diary” was the perfect starter exercise for a semester’s worth of theorizing on gender and sexuality. In a class so cross-disciplinary that no two students seemed to share the same critical vocabulary, I decided to begin the seminar by asking students, for their first assignment, to designate a single twenty-four hour period in which they would keep a gender diary. Students were required to carry a notebook with them at all times, and to keep a careful record of every act that they believe engendered them. I suggested that, eventually, we might think together about how, when, where, and why they were performing gender or others were assigning gender to them. But for now we would embark on a more pragmatic fact-finding mission, simply observing and recording the play of gender in our daily lives.

This single exercise—more “personal” than “scholarly” de Man would no doubt argue—yielded more theoretical insights more rapidly than any other pedagogical activity that I can recall. When we reconvened to discuss the gender diaries (I did not read them but rather invited students to volunteer their favorite entries) the results were fantastic. In keeping their hourly logs, some students questioned if they could ever escape their gender while other students wondered if they would ever find theirs. Some felt that gender explained almost everything about them while others thought it explained almost nothing. Some found themselves asking what or where gender is exactly, while others found it all too recognizable and ubiquitous. The one thing

everyone agreed on was that keeping a gender diary was far more exhausting than anticipated. Learning to become self-conscious about how gender operates moment to moment was fun but fatiguing, an insight that further led the class to ask whether it was even possible to be a gender 24/7. I could have simply assigned, say, an essay by Judith Butler to suggest that one cannot be a man or a woman all day long, but offering the class an incentive to formulate questions of relevance to them immediately transformed the students from spectators patiently watching other people theorize to participants actively theorizing on their own. We did eventually cover selected readings by Butler, at which point her questions about gender performativity met with more head nodding than head scratching. Exercises like these are so galvanizing for students, I think, because the hard-earned moments of insight belong to them. Such collaborative group thinking creates a forum for theory in action, an environment in which students' interactive and inventive theorizing constitutes its own best form of teaching.

Putting theory to work, inciting students to theorize, doing theory rather than just talking about it—this is my own credo for “teaching theory” in the twenty-first century. In the end, the title I have chosen for this essay is nothing if not tautological, referring not just to the teaching of theory but also to the teaching that is theory. If theory is to teach us, and not just resist us, one can do no better than to experiment with a pedagogy that practices what it preaches, offering students the opportunity to be every bit the theorist Paul de Man once witnessed, and himself soon became, in the classroom of a committed teacher.

NOTES

1. Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 19.
2. “The Resistance to Theory” became the lead essay in the journal’s special issue, “The Pedagogical Imperative: Teaching as a Literary Genre,” and was situated in the opening section on “The Lesson of Teaching.” See *Yale French Studies* 63 (1982): 3–20.
3. Not everyone saw Reuben Brower as the inspiring and transformational teacher de Man remembers; another graduate teaching assistant for Humanities 6, William H. Pritchard, provides a less flattering description of Brower’s pedagogical methods. Whereas de Man

focuses exclusively on Brower's rigorous and rewarding writing assignments, Pritchard also discusses his lackluster and disorganized lecturing style. Interestingly, de Man himself appears to have been the best teacher in Humanities 6, his four lectures on Yeats so original and powerful, Pritchard writes, that they were met at the end with spontaneous student applause (Pritchard, "Hum 6. and Reuben Brower," in *English Papers: A Teaching Life* [Saint Paul, Minn.: Graywolf Press, 1995]). Geoffrey Hartman further notes that de Man, in the tribute to his New Critical teacher, composes a "little family romance" in which he "forgets to mention, for example, that Reuben Brower still believed there was a 'key' that would emerge from all textual bafflement to unlock a particular literary work" ("Looking Back on Paul de Man," in *Reading de Man Reading*, ed. Lindsay Waters and Wlad Godzich [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989], 12). Famously resistant to psychoanalysis, de Man never questions his own idealizations of his former teacher in "Resistance to Theory," an essay Laurence A. Rickels later retitles "Resistance in Theory," precisely in order to lay bare the transferences between student teacher and master teacher that de Man himself entirely forecloses (Rickels, "Resistance in Theory," in *Material Events: Paul de Man and the Afterlife of Theory*, ed. Tom Cohen et al. [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001]). Finally, Elaine Showalter, citing Pritchard, identifies a clear discrepancy between Brower's exacting literary practice and his much looser teaching style in her *Teaching Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003).

4. Intellectually reared by "theologians and philosophers of religion," Warren saw the teacher's role to be not so much the priestly transmission of the past as the priestly prophecy of the future. His "devotion" to close reading in the classroom Warren understands variously as an expression of mystic vocation and a form of pastoral care ("The Teacher as Critic," *The Kenyon Review* 13, no. 2 [Spring 1951]: 230).
5. Currently the best pedagogy book I know, Ken Bain's *What the Best College Teachers Do* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), is based on a similar premise: "people learn best when they ask an important question that they care about answering, or adopt a goal that they want to reach" (31). Interestingly, Austin Warren also embraces the self-questioning mode in his early "catechism" of teaching when he writes that "the best criticism is the critic asking himself questions he finds hard to answer, and giving the most honest (even if tentative or uncertain or negative) answers he can" ("The Teacher as Critic," 228). It is worth noting, however, that in Warren's "The Teacher as Critic" the person posing the questions and answering them is always the teacher, never the student.