Interlude: the Style of Prescription

From On Paradox: The Claims of Theory

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In the fall of 2018, a graduate seminar on “Theory and Method” at Cornell University allowed me to grapple with many of the thinkers and debates this book engages. In our efforts to assess the “state of the profession,” we dove first into canonical questions, immersing ourselves, for instance, in early texts commonly seen to inaugurate the linguistic turn or later to found affect theory. In such ways, we asked, what is interpretation? What is historicism? What is the aesthetic? All the while taking those inquiries as points of entry into theory today, we thereafter probed current texts and debates, many claiming to launch “new” methodological approaches. Often, we felt actively implicated in the intellectual legacies we encountered. Within the halls of English and Comp Lit and language studies at Cornell, deconstruction and its masters remained objects of great reverence, and so lapsing fidelity to that tradition was not a light or laughing matter. With the Avital Ronell affair still dominating the airwaves as the semester opened, concerns over the yield and ethics of the theory era likewise felt far from abstract or removed. To the contrary, the matter of whether theory had betrayed certain of its founding principles was, at times, personal and urgent. And in the midst of all of this, paradox naturally appeared to me as the writing on the wall sanctioning the caprice of the charismatic thinker.
Within that climate, we found ourselves open to many complaints theory’s internal critics were then venturing, and their diagnoses similarly resonated. How could one not agree that theorists had subscribed to a superabundance of critique and negativity and paranoia, arguably romanticizing those qualities? But while sharing such reservations, we nonetheless felt at the same time dissatisfied with what were instead touted as post-theoretical or post-critical alternatives. Whether arrayed under the sign of affect, or new materialisms, or description, or new formalisms, these emergent approaches left us wanting. This was in part because those ostensibly new theories frequently seemed to repeat the very moves they responded to. For instance, we were sufficiently convinced by Toril Moi’s concerns about the machinations wrought by the linguistic turn that we then despaired when Eugenie Brinkema left us with a portrait of affect that sounded more like deconstructive semiotics than anything terribly original or surprising. In other cases, we were haunted by the certitude and speed with which attempts to escape the bunkers of theory were shot down, such as by the trotting out of a well-worn dialectic.\textsuperscript{1} Hence, while we were (to varying degrees) convinced by the need for a methodological about-face, we left the semester profoundly uncertain of what such an altered orientation should look like.

Some of our discontent was catalyzed by issues of style. In canvassing a spectrum of efforts to escape theory’s usual purview, we recurrently seized on their tone, demeanor, modality, affect, and tenor of presentation. On the one hand, the manifesto seemed to have regained fashion, with that genre’s bold, often visionary pronouncements of the need for radical rethinkings and departures. This recourse to the manifesto could certainly seem ironic, given its usual association with the ethos of the avant garde. Yet
rather than in service of insurrectionary transgressions, many of its recent tacticians instead deployed that genre directly to contest the onus to *épater les bourgeois*. Further irony surrounded the manifesto’s enlistment to serve what some have characterized as forms of minimalism, incrementalism, and modesty (whether one appreciates those labels or not).² That the genre’s conventionally grand, theatrical, exhortatory ambitions and rhetoric would be used to advocate for something like a downsizing of theory, or an espousal of clarity and commonsense, itself seemed a telling discordance symptomatic of our current moment.³

On the other hand, one unifying theme in recent theory has been exactly such a return to the basics: to the rudimentary, foundational, and for some heretofore understudied building blocks of theoretical labor. Of late, there had been calls for simplicity, clarity, ordinariness, surfaces, the obvious, description, plain meaning, new formalism, straightforwardness, attention, realism, and so on. Many of those pleas have, not surprisingly, sought to expose theory’s cult of difficulty and complexity as either a dereliction or sham. Yet one common strategy connecting those efforts has involved the enactment of that return on the level of rhetoric, mood, and style (at times, even to perform such restraint within a manifesto’s parameters). Even while promoting a given quality (often as a corrective to theory), many recent texts have sought through their own stylistics to actualize and thereby verify what they advocate, often in a kind of reality check.

Yet, here, too, this stylistic recalibration gave my students and I pause. For one, it seemed to repeat a highly familiar gesture—namely, to identify a problem and latch onto its near-binaristic inverse not merely as a fix but as independently meritorious. We
worried: just because reading to unmask what’s buried or hidden might be misguided, that does not render its inverse the surface inherently replete with untapped value. And just because the critical stance has become burdened by its excesses does not necessarily mean we should celebrate plenitude or attachment or affordance in an uncritical fashion. Relatedly, while a vortex of paradox and complexity indeed may have consumed too much, that does not absolve one of the onus to make a self-sufficient, stand-alone case for whatever might replace that ethos. So while attractive, the reasoning feeding into many emergent discourses at once felt overly tidy, as it perpetuated highly familiar habits of either/or thinking that worked by emptying out the vast middle ground. That middle ground is one I’ll examine in the next chapter.

In another sense, then, we were struck by the rhetorical sleights of hand enabling such appeals to the plain or uncomplicated. Beyond the risk of simplifying difficulty and nuance, they often assumed a feint of common sense. The “of course you’ve always known this” tenor of their arguments seemed coyly to re-naturalize the exact phenomena theorists had spent the past decades vigilantly debunking. While refreshingly undoctrinaire, this theory seemed to requisition the very rhetorical moves long castigated for the propensity to smuggle in, mask, and shore up power and its accomplices. It was one thing to cast a weary eye on the knee-jerk equations presumed to connect critical denaturalization with a pedagogy of the oppressed. But then to actively recuperate and don that veneer of realism and common sense seemed another matter. Moreover, that mantle of re-naturalization felt deceptive on another level, as it downplayed the force of those incitements. Although issuing bold rejections and corresponding calls to arms, to do so
the name of the taken-for-granted seemed strangely deflationary, giving short shrift to its own radicalness.

Like others, we therefore praised thinkers like Eve Sedgwick for her successful negotiation of what increasingly looked like a near-impossible balancing act. But we also wondered whether our frustrations were indicative of a larger intellectual impasse. While attentive to theory’s many shortfalls, we were nevertheless unable to conceive of a viable exit beyond them. Although the stylistic and other formal conventions of theory had been exposed to us as lacking, we suffered a failure of imagination in our ability to fathom a different conceptual matrix as well as repertoire of moves. Hitting this roadblock seemed itself important to mark and to take stock of. It was one thing to lament the routine garb of theory (still worn long after its heyday), but how to cloak our ideas within different garments?

These conversations, naturally, made me anxious, since I was at the time striving to carry out the exact kinds of writing that raised my students’ hackles. As I’ll delineate, prescription is this book’s attempt to redress my own disappointments with the traditions of theory. But before even trying to enumerate its goals and features, I was faced with a conundrum: how to write prescriptively? What should a prescriptive style look and sound and feel like? If the materialization of an intellectual rift, did prescription necessitate not only an altered orientation but also a different modality and genre? And how to write as such without alienating my readers?

These questions will never—and probably should never—feel easy. For me, they have therefore persisted in refusing clear-cut answers. By venturing a prescriptive theory, I certainly did not want to revert to the dry, analytic thinking that initially drove me from
legal scholarship and into the arms of the humanities. It seemed important to retain some handle on the exuberance of our encounters with literature and art. But I also felt compelled to escape the gridlock produced by a valorization of paradox and indeterminacy. However, that agenda, too, seemed to pose a double bind: how to outfox paradox without trying to beat it at its own game, thereby conceding that game’s authority?

In the end, I settled on a mode of writing that, despite the foregoing cautions, will likely trigger my students’ (and others’) allergies. Given how we all live according to prescriptions (I’ll argue), it seemed important to underscore the matter-of-fact ease such ambitions might assume for theorists. Likewise, it seemed far from drastic to propose that we make our implicit criteria explicit, while further actualizing them via our lived practices. I was advocating for types of experiential and intellectual integrity and trust, so there, too, it seemed crucial to model those priorities in my own writing. In sum, it could see no alternative but for my prose to mirror the relatively straightforward, unvexing philosophy I was calling for. This seemed particularly crucial in light of this book’s central argument that the difficulty of paradox has, albeit ironically, robbed theory of both precision and sophistication, rendering thought overly programmatic and categorical. In such a climate, the pursuit of stability, clarity, and reliability could, perhaps unexpectedly, furnish theory with greater methodological variety, agility, and influence.

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1 See Carolyn Lesjak, “Reading Dialectically,” Criticism (Spring 2013).