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Irving Goh, ed., *French Thought and Literary Theory in the UK*. London: Routledge, 2020. xv + 194 pp. Notes, table, and index. \$170.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780367408220; \$48.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9781032087436; \$48.95 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9780367809287.

Review by Michael Syrotinski, University of Glasgow.

This series of reflections on an important and somewhat overlooked chapter in the long and eventful history of what is often referred to by the convenient shorthand “French Thought” is both welcome and refreshing. One often needs the perspectival distance of an outsider to weigh the value and meaning of something that those implicated in it most directly and closely find harder to appreciate, and the editor, Irving Goh, is a self-defined ‘outlier’ whose curiosity in this epiphenomenon was the catalyst for this volume.

His own introduction indeed offers some useful context for his investment in this sub-history: trained in the North American academy where French Thought has had a well-storied and highly visible profile and has been an integral part of the vast and rich tapestry of theory in its many guises for the past fifty years and more, his time as a postdoctoral fellow in the UK helped him understand better the role it has played there, and the very different individual and institutional forms it has taken. Quite rightly, he touches on the rather problematic question of nomenclature and the hesitancy around the name one should give this phenomenon, since it is presented as something of a “counter-history” (p. xii) that challenges the received narrative of the dominance of the field by US-based critics and theorists. The gesture of using quotation marks to foreground this hesitancy (“high theory,” “French theory,” “poststructuralism,” and so on, in order to maintain a critical distance from how others have typically come to reference this phenomenon, this so-called High Theory, this thing we can package and label Poststructuralism, etc.) only takes us so far, and it is really left to the contributors themselves to tease out the threads in more interesting detail. Almost every word of the title of course immediately raises more questions than even a well-directed cast of stellar contributors can answer: what is French about French Thought, when so many of the thinkers take often radically critical positions with respect to France, its history, and its traditions? How does French Thought relate to the Francophone world more generally? What is the relation of thought to theory (indeed, how interchangeable are they or should they be?), and how is this mapped on to the interplay between philosophy and literature? What does it mean to be “in the UK,” especially in light of the present brittle state of the union and the turbulent internal political and national tensions that now define the UK, aggravated by the miseries of Brexit?

Many of the contributors to this volume are of course key and often very influential figures in their own right in this history: Robert Young, for example, is well known for his groundbreaking work in Postcolonial Theory; Judith Still was one of the original and longstanding editors of *Paragraph*, the leading journal of contemporary critical theory in the UK; Laurent Milesi was instrumental in helping Cardiff's Centre for Critical and Cultural Theory become the base for some of the most innovative research and teaching in literary theory in the UK (or "in the UK"); and Nicholas Royle, one of the founding editors of the *Oxford Literary Review*, is one of the best and most strikingly original commentators of Jacques Derrida's work, and a restlessly inventive thinker and writer. It is worth remembering, furthermore, that Royle, along with others in the volume such as Robert Young, have long and deep associations with colleagues and institutions in the US, so one wonders about the usefulness ultimately of circumscribing a history of literary theory in terms of any national borders.

We can bracket this question momentarily, though, since there are no doubt many different cross-border routes one could trace in accounting for the vicissitudes of (what is known as) French theory. The counter-narrative the volume is proposing is read in terms of a very direct contrapuntal response to perhaps the most celebrated instance of the importation of French theory into the North American academic scene, that is, the story of "Deconstruction in America" (p. 161).

On a personal note, this was certainly the main attraction behind my own decision to pursue graduate study in French and Comparative Literature at Yale University when I went from the UK to the US in the early 1980s, already enthralled during my Undergraduate Honours years by the writings of Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man, Barbara Johnson, J. Hillis Miller, Geoffrey Hartman, and Shoshana Felman, among others. I concluded quickly that North America was where the real action was, and many of my favourite critics happened to be teaching at Yale (including Derrida as Visiting Professor), before I was even aware that the "Yale School" was a thing. The academic and intellectual motivation for this transatlantic move was also cultural and institutional, since I was also aware of how much more extensive and in depth graduate study in the US was compared to the typical stepping stone to a career in the UK, where one went from undergraduate study straight into writing an already well-defined 3-year PhD dissertation (this was before the days of Masters programmes and postgraduate courses): the appeal of taking two more years to read around and find my way through the cornucopia of theory before determining what I was really interested in seemed obvious to me. The 1980s were no doubt an exceptional time to be at Yale, and I took full advantage of my good fortune. It helped develop an understanding of the genealogy of French Thought that was more broadly contextualised in relation to other theoretical or philosophical traditions, both analytical and continental, European and more global, and also historically situated in relation to the postwar development of the field of comparative literature in North America, which was in many ways something of a European prehistory of French Thought in France, at least the trends in French Thought that are often still associated with the 1960s and 70s, and the familiar names of Barthes, Foucault, Lacan, Derrida, Cixous, Deleuze, Lyotard, Bourdieu, Althusser, and others. I also discovered along the way that the research-intensive Ivy League and other prestigious public and private universities in North America were by no means representative of what was happening in the vast majority of universities or colleges elsewhere in the US, where theory often met with stiff resistance from the forces of tradition. So the alleged backlash against theory in the 1990s that followed in the wake of the Paul de Man affair after the publication of his wartime journalism was at the least overstated and should not really have been that surprising, though it did mirror

interestingly the controversy at Cambridge University surrounding Derrida's honorary doctorate in 1992.

Robert Young, in his opening piece, is perhaps the contributor most alert to this longer history. As he so rightly points out, French theory and its varied receptions in the UK have been an important part of British intellectual life since at least the Enlightenment, and he does a fine job of presenting succinctly but informatively the broader European cultural context and how it shaped the trajectories and directions of French Thought in British universities from the 1980s onwards. This story of intellectual hospitality towards German and French philosophy and aesthetic theory, which of course flourished thanks in no small part to Britain's accession to the European Union in the 1970s, is at the same time a story of increasing insularity in many ways, in the form of a British analytical tradition that regarded continental philosophy with suspicion, even hostility, and the concurrent professionalisation of a Leavis-inspired mode of literary criticism, thereby revealing a deeper undercurrent that could allow the recent departure from the EU to be read as the result of a certain inevitable historical momentum. It also explains the (English nationalist) mindset informing the more recent profoundly depressing spectacle of the so-called culture wars, which threatens to pull the rug out from so much vital theoretically informed research in the UK, whether this is postcolonial studies, which finally seemed to be making real headway in serious critical reflection on the colonial past of all the European powers (and of which Young gives some excellent examples), or a deeper engagement with continental philosophy, or literary theory more generally.

Several of the contributions echo these concerns closely: Laurent Milesi's chapter is a wide-ranging survey which provides the most comprehensive and informative deep dive into the key texts and moments of the meandering fate of theory in the UK over the last fifty years or so. It is also a trenchant critique of the neo-liberal and instrumentalist ideologies underpinning UK higher education policies, what he calls "the profession's dehumanising marketisation" (p. 24), due in part, ironically in the context of this volume, to the UK adopting US-style curricular changes and job titles, and similar corporate infrastructures of university management and finance. With the added "Euro-derailing" (p. 24) effects of Brexit, Milesi wonders about the sustainability of doing Theory for Theory's sake, while arguing it is more necessary than ever precisely for this reason.

Mark Featherstone's sociological analysis extends to the sorry condition of contemporary Britain more generally, which he reads through the lens of the work of Paul Virilio, offering a strikingly original take on the forces propelling Brexit (as a reaction against the exhaustion or collapse of the accelerationism of neoliberal global capitalism). Virilio's theory in his eyes carries an important lesson, enabling us "to think through our escape from the stupidity of crude information and techno-scientific estrangement into critical thinking about what might reside on the other side of the dromological apocalypse" (p. 109). His chapter is perhaps the most successful in deploying the resources of one French theorist to diagnose the ills that beset university education today, synecdochally linking it to contemporary UK society and culture more generally.

Jane Hiddleston in her chapter reads the fascinating relationship between the work of Jacques Derrida and Abdelkebir Khatibi, which she reframes in terms of what it tells us about the uneasy interplay between Islam and the West, in the context of Derrida as a kind of pre-postcolonial philosopher (taking up an argument Robert Young has made elsewhere). It gives a clear account

of French Theory's resistance to Islamic thought and philosophy, drawing attention to the limits of Derrida's own engagement with it (although Khatibi's deployment of the resources of deconstruction to destabilize and critique Islamic thought from within makes it hard to think about Islam and the West in polarized terms).

The name and thought of Derrida are writ large in this volume. Several sparkling pieces demonstrate in their very critical performance a clear debt to his thinking and are testimony to how irreversibly deconstructive thinking and practise have been internalized in the UK (Royle on Derrida and Cixous, Naomi Waltham-Smith on Derrida and the archive, and Joanna Hodge on Derrida and technology), regardless of the cultural, national, or ethnic provenance of the critical voices, and however tangentially or internationally they are connected to the UK. Royle's argument in particular speaks to a version of what Paul de Man had so presciently analysed as the "resistance to theory," and which Royle names neologistically "lingophobia," as both a symptomatic fear of language and fear of tongue (p. 35). The resistance to theory, then, takes the form of a resistance to language, in all its untameable wildness and radical alterity (of which Royle finds inspired examples in both Cixous and Derrida). This also has everything to do with translation, or rather untranslatability, as Barbara Cassin theorizes it. Indeed, to talk about French Thought in the UK one cannot circumvent the question of translation, as many of the contributors acknowledge, and the role translation has played in the dissemination of theory. Royle's chapter, and his references to Derrida foregrounding the problem of translation, echo Cassin's important and influential *Dictionary of Untranslatables*. Cassin's project places translation front and centre of a rethinking of the history of philosophy and shows the ways in which what we might conversely term lingophilia works interlingually to unsettle or dissolve borders between humanistic disciplines, such as philosophy and literature. This may indeed be one of the most innovative directions in which theory is taking us in the UK, since most of the cutting-edge work now being done in translation studies is taking place there rather than in North America.

There is always, of course, a fine line to tread in theoretically informed writing, which can become off-putting if too indigestibly dense. Most authors in the volume write very well for the curious and intelligent reader, but the chapter that rather overcooks it, in my view, is the one by Simon Morgan Wortham, who tries to do too much in the space available, with an argument that assumes the reader is already very familiar with some quite complex articulations in Lyotard, Rancière, Žižek, Derrida, and others, but which are never explained clearly enough to make a convincing case. It brings to mind the comment Robert Young makes (p. 8) about the writing styles of Homi Bhabha, and also to some extent Lacan and Derrida, which are undeniably opaque, but which repay the intellectual effort of deciphering what they are saying. Morgan Wortham by contrast comes across as dense, but without the payoff, and it seems to have little to do with the overall theme of theory in the UK.

Other contributors demonstrate a range of different aspects, which point to the divergent directions theory has taken in the UK: Martin Parker talks about French philosophy and its connections to business; Clare Connors explores the relation between theory and creative writing, which takes the form of a wonderfully creative experimental manifesto; and Judith Still gives a very interesting overview of recent developments in animal studies from a philosophical perspective. There is a risk, of course, that as these branch out, they are seen as somewhat niche special interests, which takes us back to the question of the sustainability of theory, and not just in the UK. Still's chapter is the most valuable here in this respect, since it directly addresses the question of existential threat, not just of endangered species, but the danger to the humanity of

the human (and by extension to the Humanities, we might add) as we contemplate the very real prospect of the end of the Anthropocene.

So overall, this is a very thought-provoking volume, sometimes almost in spite of itself. While it could never hope (nor does it pretend) to be comprehensive in its coverage, more acknowledgement of politically radical and anti-racist traditions in the UK would have been welcome (for example, Ben Brewster was an important translator of Althusser, David Macey was both a major translator of French Thought and an intellectual biographer of Fanon and Foucault), and more pride of place could have been given to the emergence of Cultural Studies in the UK, with the hugely influential work of Stuart Hall, Raymond Williams, Paul Gilroy, and others. One important occasion that did not get a mention was the Linguistics and Writing conference at the University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, in 1986 that brought together Raymond Williams and Derrida in a memorable series of exchanges, and the conference itself, though largely forgotten, was in many ways as important a cultural watershed for theory in the UK as the much more celebrated 1966 conference at Johns Hopkins University in the US.

To return finally to the question of French Thought in the UK, this volume, though a little uneven, does a good job of celebrating the contribution of UK writers and theorists to French Thought and its many legacies. Homi Bhabha was right to pose the question of culture as a question of problematic and indeterminate location in his *The Location of Culture*, but however or wherever we locate theory, French or otherwise, it seems more urgent today than ever. [1] As most of the authors say, one way or another, the exercise of a deep critical engagement and the importance of close, careful reading, which is now second nature to many of those well-versed in theory, is a good thing in itself. But it never is, or was, about theory for theory's sake, and always about a certain enrichment of our experience of the real world. It is necessary, then, because it lies at the heart of our efforts to find creative and intelligent solutions to saving the world from its own most self-destructive impulses, of which the prime symptomatic example in recent times in the UK has been the catastrophic historical wrong turn of Brexit and all that has ensued in its wake.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Irving Goh, "Opening Remarks from an Outlier: The *Sur-vie* of French Thought in the UK"

Robert J.C. Young, "Theory, Philosophy, Literature"

Laurent Milesi, "'We Are All Theorists Nowadays': The 'Institutionalisation' of (French) Theory"

Nicholas Royle, "Lingophobia"

Clare Connors, "Creative Criticism: A Histori-Manifesto"

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Jane Hiddleston, "'French Thought,' Postcolonialism, and Islam: Jacques Derrida and Abdelkebir Khatibi"

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Joanna Hodge, "Inheriting the Question of Technology: Grammatology, Originary Technicity, Ecotechnics"

Naomi Waltham-Smith, "*Après-coup* -- Deconstruction Is/In the UK"

Notes

[1] Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994).

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