



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## Theory after “Theory.” (review)

Nicholas Birns

Modernism/modernity, Volume 19, Number 4, November 2012, pp.  
831-833 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press  
DOI: [10.1353/mod.2012.0084](https://doi.org/10.1353/mod.2012.0084)



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/mod/summary/v019/19.4.birns.html>

to texts, let alone the logic of the argument. This concern is compounded by the final section on postmodernism, which ranges from deconstruction to “the revalorization of nihilism . . . within a more general postmodern tendency.” The conclusion drawn is as follows:

Like aesthetic modernism, then, aesthetic postmodernism thematizes nihilism, with the difference in treatment lying above all in the attitude or mood taken towards it . . . The difficulty of establishing a clear distinction between aesthetic modernism and aesthetic postmodernism becomes all the more evident when their respective attitudes to nihilism are taken into account. For nihilism can be said to haunt aesthetic postmodernism just as it haunts aesthetic modernism, and to do so in ways that render both the overcoming of nihilism and an identification with it highly problematic. (164)

By the end of the book, it is not clear what “Our Only Chance”—the title of the final chapter—might actually refer to; “nihilism” becomes everything and therefore maybe nothing.

### Note

1. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1968), 17.

**Theory after “Theory.” Derek Attridge and Jane Elliot, eds. London: Routledge, 2011. Pp. xxiv + 321. \$145.00 (cloth); \$39.95 (paper).**

### Reviewed by Nicholas Birns, The New School

It is an amusing gesture to have me write a review of this book, since I am the author of a book called *Theory After Theory* (without the quotation marks). The difference is perhaps in the word “after,” which can be both spatial and temporal. My book, which tried to combine a sense of iterability in the Derridean sense with the traditional continuity of intellectual history, used “after” in the more serial sense; this collection uses the word more in the successive way.

Thus one might find here, as expected, a focus on theorists who reemerged in the English-speaking world after 1990: Agamben, Žižek, Badiou, Rancière. Of these only Žižek is really of a generation subsequent to Derrida and Foucault’s; Agamben, Badiou, and Rancière were all born only a few years after Derrida, and indeed Badiou was born earlier than figures such as Kristeva and Todorov, who were given full membership in the first wave of theory. Indeed, Rancière and Badiou are mentioned as younger but comparable colleagues in Louis Althusser’s memoir *The Future Lasts Forever*.<sup>1</sup> Their Anglophone currency, however, came later. Of the new big names only Quentin Meillassoux, born in 1967, is a veritable baby as far as European high theorists go. This sort of late theoretical eminence has even been achieved by some of the contributors to the book: namely, Bernard Stiegler, Adriana Cavarero, Elizabeth Povinelli, and Brian Massumi. In their introduction, though, Elliot and Attridge make clear that this will not be simply “Theory”: *The Next Generation*. Although all these thinkers, especially Agamben and Meillassoux, figure prominently in the arguments of several of the contributors, Attridge and Elliot assert that their volume will not “draw obsessively on the work of certain oracular figures,” and that if certain famous names come up with regularity, they are likelier to be “far from new” (3). In this regard, the editors mention Amanda Anderson’s citations of Lionel Trilling, Rey Chow’s mention of Brecht (and for that matter Benjamin), and Adriana Cavarero and Linda Zerilli’s citations of Hannah Arendt. To this could be added Laurent Dubreuil’s discussion of the poetry of D. H. Lawrence, Henry Staten’s and Stiegler’s respectful evocation

832 of the aesthetics of Paul Valéry, and even Staten's unlikely revival of Leon Trotsky as providing, intriguingly, "the best brief statement of the relative claims of formalism and history" (235).

Indeed, the book's primary effect is to make the twentieth century the backdrop to contemporary theory. True, writers such as Borges and Proust had prominent roles in, say, the work of Paul de Man. But romanticism and the long nineteenth century were at the core of the emphases of the Yale school and the work of Edward W. Said and Fredric R. Jameson. The thinkers anthologized by Attridge and Elliot, though, privilege the short twentieth century, its ethical gaps and formal challenges—it is this period that offers the theoretical imperative. As Peter Hallward's essay perceptively asserts, this is a gesture of hope, not of resigned despair to the permanence of post-1980 global capitalism. Arendt's work is central to this, bridging what Zerilli called the "generative power of imagination" (127) and what she, in late-Wittgensteinian mode, calls "the mutual attunement of language" (130). Subjectivity, personhood is reasserted, though not naively, as Roberto Esposito's brilliant treatment of the latter concept shows.

With this Arendtian turn comes a revised sense of the political. In the 1980s, what sufficed as "the political" was a vague Marxism combined with a rebuke of formalism (disappointingly, this vagueness recurs towards the end of Staten's essay, which until then provides an exhilarating discussion of how the idea of *techne* can widen the romantic base of neo-aestheticism). J. Hillis Miller and a few others tried to counter this tendency with a sense of the ethical that was both rhetorically aware and which contained an incipient political pluralism. The Soviet collapse and the delegitimizing of de Man in the wake of the wartime journalism scandal scuttled this antinomy. Now there is room for a theoretical politics that can come from within liberalism. Anderson brilliantly uses both the achievement and the failure of Trilling's attempt to square liberal politics with aesthetic complexity to show how texts can "exemplify the problem of exemplifying liberalism" in a spirit that, even if asymptotically manifested, can recognize in art *and* politics the claims of what Trilling famously called "the hum and buzz of implication." Liberalism can go beyond bourgeois rights, but art can also accommodate liberalism's greatest virtue, its willingness to accept the incomplete or unfulfilled while positing universal standards. Though Hardt and Negri receive a few mentions, the emphasis here is more on a radical, ramified liberalism, more subject to what Povinelli terms "immanent critique" (116) than to the "living communism" espoused, for example, by the young South African activist S'bu Zikode.

A liberal horizon enables the essays to operate in the space between Marxist and neoliberal dogma; it also enables them to anchor postmodern approaches. Cavarero's discussion of "natality" in Arendt shows how a rights-based individual can coexist with a maternal ethic of care, joined as they are by the cardinality of birth. For Cavarero, asserting maternal care in its bare manifestation can operate as a *sensus communis*, exposing those discourses that have historically sought to legitimate violence. This subtly feminist essay is accompanied by several pieces that extend postcolonial ideas. Povinelli explores the gap between those who can diagnose the instabilities inherent in late liberalism and those who are victims of these instabilities in her work with indigenous Australian people. Simon Gikandi refigures postcolonial theory to suggest that postcolonial fiction, especially when it involves the nation, can produce a "postcolonial mimesis" (276) that is able to fully take on board deconstructive theory. Eva Cherniavsky sensibly demands that criticism stop tacitly condescending to the subaltern while claiming to represent it and instead adopt a practice of "self-education" (160).

Other recent theoretical concerns, such as queer perspectives and the "religious turn," receive relatively short shrift here. What is refreshingly present, however, is an awareness of language as a problem, an awareness which discourses such as object-oriented ontology and Meillassoux's speculative realism have tried to play down. Martin Hägglund's essay, for instance, argues that "arche-materiality" rules out a pure virtuality, that a trace of precariousness in the affective nature of care makes it perishable and, therefore, verbal (275). By insisting that theory

cannot exist without language, Hägglund demonstrates, as does this brilliant collection as a whole, that the future of pure theory will abide in its continued ability to investigate its own language as well. **833**

**Note**

1. Louis Athusser, *The Future Lasts Forever*. (New York: New Press, 1995).