

# ✚ TEN LESSONS IN THEORY: AN INTRODUCTION TO THEORETICAL WRITING

*By Calvin Thomas. New York: Bloomsbury, 2013. 240 pp.*

REVIEWED BY KENT L. BRINTNALL

In the opening pages of *Ten Lessons in Theory*, Calvin Thomas explains that his wide-ranging, incisive and sometimes polemical tour through contemporary literary theory “stakes itself upon three major premises” (xi). First, he contends that an adequate understanding of theory “depends upon a much more sustained encounter with the foundational writings of Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud than any reader is likely to get from the standardised introductions to theory currently available” (xii). Second, among theoretical writers, contributions by Jacques Lacan are the “richest,” most generative, and most important (xii). Finally, “‘literary theory’ isn’t simply highfalutin speculation ‘about’ literature, but. . . theory fundamentally *is* literature. . . . ‘The writing called theoretical’ is nothing if not a specific type of ‘creative writing’” (xii).

Thomas develops his first premise by devoting an entire Lesson to the work of Hegel—providing both a quick overview and a detailed exposition of the master-slave dialectic. He frequently returns to the ideas and contributions of Nietzsche, although a reader unfamiliar with Nietzsche’s work would need a fuller introduction than the one provided here to understand Nietzsche’s importance for contemporary critical theory. While Thomas’s over-arching approach to the nature, work, and contribution of theory purportedly depends on Marxist concepts, the book as a whole shows little sympathy for Marxist analysis and spends virtually no time examining capitalist exploitation.

But Thomas’s prose comes alive when he engages the work of Freud and Lacan. The first five lessons are grounded in psychoanalysis and its relationship to structuralist theories of language. Any student or teacher of theory who has trouble giving a sympathetic audience to psychoanalytic

concepts and approaches would benefit from the first half of Thomas's book. Thomas has a gift for not only making Lacanian psychoanalysis clear, but also for making these concepts seem virtually self-evident. Thomas focuses on how the subject comes into being in the midst of a social environment and as the product of a social process. Because Lacanian psychoanalysis reveals the relationship between the subject and language, it is *necessarily* also a theory of literature; concurrently, any approach to literature must *necessarily* grapple with Lacanian psychoanalysis. In the second half of the book, when Thomas turns to Lacan's treatment of the phallus and sexuation, one wishes he had explained, described and, most importantly, translated Lacan's ideas with the same level of care. Unfortunately, Thomas's discussion of the phallus and sexuation in the second half of the book lacks his earlier clarity. In this latter encounter, when presenting Lacanian ideas that are much less straightforward, Thomas merely restates Lacan's conclusions, rather than doing the careful work of explication that he performs in the first half.

Thomas's commitment to Lacan makes sense given the broader thrust of his text. As he clarifies in the introduction, he is "concerned less with *what theory is* and more with *what theory does*" (4). According to Thomas, theory is, fundamentally, an activity—an operation against nature (xiii). Theory is a practice of interrogating, examining and questioning that which seems most real and commonsensical. With this definition, it makes perfect sense that Thomas places Marx and Lacan next to each other (31). Marx pulls back the curtain on operations of labour; Lacan pulls back the curtain on operations of language. There is a shared concern, according to Thomas, in thinking about how what is named as reality occludes the real, and it is the work of theory to identify this occlusion and its consequences.

This conception of theory not only helps Thomas determine who and what count as theory—Lacan, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Althusser, Foucault, Derrida, and certain feminist, queer, and postcolonial theorists—but also who does not: formalists, religious adherents, and all those who think that reality is somehow directly accessible to our senses and our understanding. This conception of theory also helps Thomas explain why theory is necessarily difficult. Insofar as theoretical writing has as its purpose the unsettling of our commonsense assumptions about what is most self-evident, it must rattle every common point of reference. For theory to do what

it seeks to do, it cannot *not* be challenging. Just as theory seeks to do work on the world, we must do work to grapple with theory.

Once again, Thomas comes up short in terms of his third premise: theory as a practice of writing. One of the great virtues of Thomas's *Ten Lessons* is their clarity and lucidity. Thomas digests so many different notions that *Lessons* hides the complexity of his primary texts. This is especially true of Thomas's treatment of Lacan. It is Lacan's writing style that makes his ideas so daunting, and so one could master Thomas's *Lessons* but still be at sea when turning to Lacan's seminars. Thomas has an impressive grasp on the thinkers he presents and engages (especially those with whom he agrees). Through the clarity of his exposition, however, Thomas subverts his own ends. If, as he states in his concluding chapter, theory has a restlessness that negates and undoes all positive claims (271–74), it is unclear how *Ten Lessons* itself becomes restless. Lacan may unsettle us, but nothing in Thomas's text unsettles Lacan.

In fact, Thomas rarely grapples with the tensions that exist between the figures he presents. For example, on a number of occasions he notes the “universal” and “transhistorical” assertions of Lacan and Freud, without noting that Marx and Foucault are very concerned with historical variability and particularity. How one thinks Marx with Freud, or Foucault with Lacan, are live scholarly questions, but a reader of Thomas's lessons would not know that. Similarly, in his otherwise masterful presentation of the relationship between Lacanian psychoanalysis and structural linguistics, Thomas never pauses to think about what the introduction of Charles Peirce does to his analysis. While Saussure insisted that the relation between signifier and signified was arbitrary, and while Lacan followed him, Peircian semiology suggests that there are a range of signs where this relationship is *not* arbitrary. And there are at least some readings of Kristevan semiology that would suggest something similar, insofar as some signs have connections to bodily processes. While it may be the case that no important Lacanian concept is altered by acknowledging that some signs are not arbitrary (if, in fact, that is something we should acknowledge), Thomas's failure to grapple with the ways in which certain orthodoxies and pronouncements may need to be qualified or complicated makes his book, overall, come across as more dogmatic than it could. Given Thomas's obvious passion for certain theoretical modes of inquiry, and given how clearly and painstakingly he makes

his case, this patina of dogmatism is significant because it will likely alienate readers already hostile to the theoretical project for which Thomas is making a case.

(This does raise a much more general question about the ultimate audience for Thomas's book. Is he giving readers already committed to these modes of thought talking points for understanding and defending them? Is he trying to present a coherent account of a wide range of theoretical ideas, concepts and approaches? Or, is he trying to show readers who have no facility or sympathy for these approaches why they matter? My sense is that Thomas is more invested in the former projects than the latter. Insofar as his book reads in this way, then it is vulnerable to the attacks of theory that contend it is insular and exclusive.)

Thomas's dogmatism becomes most problematic when he lands on terrain where he seems to feel most comfortable and conversant—feminist theory. In “Lesson Ten” the tone of the writing changes dramatically. In fact, Thomas calls this chapter a “credo” and organizes it in terms of propositions and pronouncements. This characterization and presentation is unique to the book. More than almost any other Lesson, Thomas allows himself to engage in a sustained critique of theoretical ideas. Thomas produces a pointed, extended critique of an example of third world feminism (259–64), rejecting utterly its interrogation of Euro-American feminist accounts of agency and liberation. Here, quite contrary to Thomas's conception of theory, he is quite ready to assert that he *knows*—that *everyone* knows—what freedom and agency really are, and that Third World feminists simply refuse to recognize it. Most troubling is that in his excoriation, Thomas refers to himself as a “conspicuously pale male feminist theorist” (260). With this flippant parenthetical, Thomas dismisses an appeal to particularity, context, history and cultural difference, which reveals a failure to grapple with the nature of the challenge he rejects virtually out of hand. It is unclear how this “credo” fits with the “restlessness” Thomas champions elsewhere in the book.

And Thomas's treatment of religion—which becomes more present and more insistently vociferous as the book progresses—is typified by a similar dogmatism. Thomas speaks confidently about all world religions, their origin, and their purpose, and cannot imagine any way that anyone could engage in religious meaning-making (255–56). Thomas treats Hegel's

religious belief as an embarrassment, as something not to be taken seriously (138). Although he adores Lacan, he never acknowledges Lacan's fascination with mystical writings and religious practices. While Thomas's prior writings rely heavily on the work of Georges Bataille, the thinker merits only a passing mention here (and no listing in the index). Is it because Bataille takes religion and the sacred seriously in his own restless approach to theoretical engagement? Is he too difficult to fit into the anti-religious characterization of theory that Thomas articulates? Thomas can only think religion as a commitment to presence, to reality, which shows the narrowness of Thomas's conception of religious texts and approaches. Mysticism, apophaticism, and negative theology do not show up as religion/religious for Thomas. I point out this particular dogmatism not to make any particular claim for religion, but only to note that the worries about language, about meaning-making, about unknowability, and about restlessness have been apparent to religious thinkers for centuries. Like many committed theorists, Thomas characterizes religion and theology as enemies, whereas they may often be generative compatriots.

*Ten Lessons in Theory* should be read widely. Thomas makes a passionate, compelling case for the work of theory, for the political purchase of a certain way of thinking and writing theoretically. He also does an exceptional job of making surprising connections across theoretical approaches and ideas. For the student who does not understand why virtually impenetrable texts are being assigned with such frequency, or why they are considered a necessary part of one's education, Thomas's book will not only help clear the conceptual ground, but will also give the student some sense of why grappling with complexity and density is worthwhile in the first place. For the teacher who does not understand why certain students are drawn to abstruse texts, why they so readily incorporate them into their writing and conversation, Thomas's book will provide a glimpse into why such encounters can be a fount of inspiration and excitement.

What all of us can learn from Thomas's text, however, is the lesson of restlessness, the capacity to be fully open to having our most fundamental commitments and certainties, our most precious dogmatisms, buffeted by the waves of the unfamiliar and the unwelcome. Positively and negatively, explicitly and implicitly, then, Calvin Thomas's *Ten Lessons in Theory* performs the promise and peril of doing the work of theory.