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**WHITHER THEORY?  
OÙ VA LA THÉORIE ?**



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## **The Theory Effect, or Hysteria Revisited**

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This piece of work grows out of a contribution made in 2002 to a seminar at the University of Paris 8 at Saint Denis<sup>1</sup>. My aim then was to investigate the resistances Lacan has encountered – and continues to encounter – within the North American psychoanalytic community, and I used the clash of theoretical cultures observed in that context as a way into the more general question of what Paul de Man has called, with deceptive transparency, “the resistance to theory”<sup>2</sup>. In the purest Freudian tradition, my own contribution was a displaced and, even at the time, belated gesture of resistance, a response to the institutional act which, in no small measure, was to precipitate the “Whither Theory?” conference<sup>3</sup>; the recent referral of candidates whose applications for professorship were turned down largely on account of the explicit nature of the theoretical/ philosophical agenda informing

<sup>1</sup> The paper was entitled: “Lacan in the US : the First Wave, the New Lacanians”, and given at the seminar hosted by the CRLC (presided by Noëlle Batt), at the Université Paris 8, 15 June 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory*. 1986. 2<sup>nd</sup> printing. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.

<sup>3</sup> “Où va la théorie?/ Whither Theory?” International Conference, Paris X-Nanterre, 19-21 June 2003.

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their work<sup>4</sup>. The seminar at Paris 8 was hosted by the Centre of Research into Literature and Cognition (CRLC), a group favouring an interdisciplinary approach and not noted for its theoretical timidity. As on the previous occasion, I'm struck by the irony of raising the question of resistance to theory in a forum broadly sympathetic or at least not indifferent, and certainly not impermeable to theory's pertinence and claim. If the present context of debate offers the opportunity to refine an argument, it also brings home a further irony, implicit in the delay that dogs public appeal to the institution. The breach between a desire for redress and its occasion compels the speaker to forego the instant gratification of "talking back"<sup>5</sup> to a flesh-and-blood interlocutor and settle for less tangible pleasures: in this case, faith in the afterlife of the letter and its unforeseeable trajectory.

I propose, in what follows, to investigate the theory effect, pausing briefly to point out that I use 'theory' here in the sense it has come to acquire in Anglo-American cultural criticism over the past twenty years or so. As this sense is complex and elusive, it may be judicious to review recent attempts at definition before attempting to gauge theory's effects. In his recent *Theory Matters*<sup>6</sup>, Vincent Leitch makes a broad and useful distinction between theory as body of texts – a heterogeneous body, continually augmented – and theory as a mode of enquiry, described as "logical, skeptical and judgmental", driven by a hermeneutics of suspicion, singularly attuned to "ineradicable distortions and contradictions" and fostering a climate of "distrust in common sense, social institutions and hidden agendas"<sup>7</sup>. Cultural studies, the dominant critical paradigm in 90s Britain and the US, has both absorbed and politicized this mode of enquiry, accounting for the current widespread impulse to relate "local phenomena to globalizing

<sup>4</sup> I refer here to a judgment issued by the CNU (Conseil National des Universités) in 2002. The CNU is a two-tier inter-university panel invested with powers of decision regarding matters of promotion within the discipline. The judgment was reversed in 2003.

<sup>5</sup> Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: a Politics of the Performative*, New York and London: Routledge, 1997, p. 15.

<sup>6</sup> Vincent B. Leitch, *Theory Matters*, New York and London: Routledge, 2003.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

forces”<sup>8</sup>. Absorption of (and in) theory is a measure of cultural studies’ thirst for critical tools and methodologies as well as its politically-edged commitment to conceptual innovation; an avidity well served by theory’s disseminatory energy, its seemingly effortless self-propagation throughout the burgeoning, open-ended field of the (inter)disciplines<sup>9</sup>. Concepts such as the rhizome, panoptical vision, the trace, the gaze, the Real (to take some obvious examples) possess a heuristic potential that overrides disciplinary boundaries, a proven and productive citationality that has yielded insight and furthered debate in areas such as trauma studies, film theory and gender studies. The critical concept and what was once a subordinating field of application (literature, fine art) are presently bound together in a chiasmic rapport of “inter-implication”<sup>10</sup>; the received polarity of the aesthetic and the evaluative/interpretative categories, the modernist postulate of the artwork’s autonomy with respect to critical languages are giving way before a discourse that stages a flamboyant dynamic of reciprocal seduction<sup>11</sup>, where reference to the literary may serve as a pretext for deepening a theoretical insight or explicating a psychoanalytical concept. Such developments have challenged the orthodoxy of a hermeneutic practice assuming the primacy of the literary or iconic signifier; today, theory no longer respectfully illuminates the text but rather provokes the literary and tangles with it in a dialectic of mutual illumination<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>9</sup> A term coined by Leitch in response to the recent recasting of traditional disciplinary boundaries. See Leitch, p. 169

<sup>10</sup> The concept is Shoshana Felman’s: see Shoshana Felman, “To Open the Question”, *Yale French Studies*, n° 55/56, 1977, pp. 4-10.

<sup>11</sup> Here I look forward to the Surrealist definition of hysteria translated by Jean-Michel Rabaté and quoted later in the present article.

<sup>12</sup> Exemplary readings in this respect might include Lacan’s reading of Sophocles’ *Antigone* in *L’Ethique de la psychanalyse*, 1959-60, Paris: Seuil, 1986; Slavoj Žižek’s reading of Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) in *The Fragile Absolute*, London and New York: Verso, 2000, pp. 152-156; Judith Butler’s return to Sophocles’ *Antigone* in her *Antigone’s Claim: Kinship between Life and Death*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2000.

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Jonathan Culler covers much the same ground as Leitch in his attempt to formulate a working definition of the term 'theory'. He refers to it as:

*[...] the nickname for an unbounded corpus of works 'that succeed in challenging and reorienting thinking in domains other than those to which they ostensibly belong because their analyses of language, mind, history or culture offer novel and persuasive accounts of signification, make strange the familiar and perhaps persuade readers to conceive of their own thinking and the institutions to which it relates in new ways.'* <http://servedby.advertising.com/click/site=0000077952/mnum=0000143653><sup>13</sup>

Culler's remarks are unexceptionable but his terminology invites comment. To speak of theory as a 'nickname' draws attention to the provisionality of the term, which functions, in effect, as a convenient, consensual shorthand for a 'curiously hybrid and unstable mix'<sup>14</sup> of discourses, ranging from philosophy to psychoanalysis and linguistics, while also drawing on anthropology, intellectual history and 'hard' science. The theory currently informing literary and cultural studies is at the furthest possible remove from the foundational, self-consistent, synchronically assured "organon of methods" called for by Austin Warren and René Wellek in their *Theory of Literature*<sup>15</sup>. Today's 'theory' is, as Culler puts it, unbounded: the bounds exceeded are disciplinary (theory's provenance is diverse and its explanatory ambition not confined to the literary, itself a concept in flux) and temporal (the rapid succession of paradigms since the 1960s, their revisions and updates, the epistemological discontinuities noted in reappraisals of Marx, Freud and Lacan reveal the core of theory as inescapably diachronic,

<sup>13</sup> See Jonathan Culler, "Introduction" in Mieke Bal and Inge E. Boer, eds. *The Point of Theory: Practices of Cultural Analysis*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1994, p. 13.

<sup>14</sup> See Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh's "General Introduction" in Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh, eds., *Modern Literary Theory* (1989), 4<sup>th</sup> ed., London: Arnold, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature*, New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1949.

'unboundedly' futural in its anticipation of a (self)-critique retroactively checking hubristic tendencies to totalization). The widely influential philosophical working-through of Freud's notion of *Nachträglichkeit*, central to the problematics of *différance*, could be read, in one sense, as an allegory of theory's encounter with this futurity<sup>16</sup>. Such a reading would imply that the debate has taken a reflexive turn, a view corroborated elsewhere in metatheoretical speculations on resistance (and self-resistance) as touchstones of theoretical enquiry<sup>17</sup>. Self-interrogation is no doubt to be expected at a time when the theoretical picture is increasingly characterized by "disorganization", albeit positively defined by Leitch as "expansion through combination and proliferation"<sup>18</sup>. Disorganization, for Leitch, signifies transdisciplinary 'contagion' by a single strong theory (as in the eclectic use of Foucault, a crossover theoretician cited by sociologists, literary critics, feminists, queer theorists and philosophers), or the weaving together of disparate theoretical strands into a single voice – Gayatri Spivak's idiosyncratic blend of deconstruction, postcolonial critique, Marxism and (Third World) feminism is cited as an example. If, as Leitch suggests, theory is currently "all over the place"<sup>19</sup>, it seems fairly evident that its unruly pervasiveness ("voraciousness" and "imperialism" according to its detractors<sup>20</sup>) should inspire extremes of affect – euphoria, panic, abhorrence – reactions one might accurately diagnose, with Jean-Michel Rabaté, as hysterical or, at the very least, hystericized<sup>21</sup>. This hystericization is directly perceptible in the enunciative modality of critical discourse, its increasing adoption of the 'personal' tone –

<sup>16</sup> Key texts in this connection are Derrida's "Freud et la scène de l'écriture" in Jacques Derrida, *L'Écriture et la différence*, (1967), Paris: Seuil, coll. "Points-essais", 1994, pp. 293-340; and Lyotard's "Emma" in Jean-François Lyotard, *Misère de la philosophie*, Paris: Galilée, 2000, pp. 57-95.

<sup>17</sup> Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory*, *op. cit.* Jacques Derrida, *Résistances: de la psychanalyse*, Paris: Galilée, 1996.

<sup>18</sup> Leitch, *Theory Matters*, *op. cit.*, p. ix.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. ix.

<sup>20</sup> See Brian McHale, "Whatever Happened to Descriptive Poetics?" in *The Point of Theory*, *op. cit.*, pp. 64-65.

<sup>21</sup> Jean-Michel Rabaté, *The Future of Theory*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2002.

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“[s]aying “I” and drawing on one’s personal experience”, as André Kaenel rightly points out<sup>22</sup> is more than an intellectual fashion, rather an indication that the era of critical self-effacement before consensual ‘descriptive’ models is drawing to a close. The disorganization of the theoretical scene forces critics into the open, prompting them to declare allegiances and show their hand. Rabaté’s openly personal selection of current projects, agendas and rising stars in the conclusion to his book is, by his own admission, a hystericized response<sup>23</sup>; as is Leitch’s when he names his “theory favourites”: a “quirky, personal mix” of texts representing his take on the “postmodern professional unconscious”<sup>24</sup>.

Hystericization brings us back to the theory effect from a suggestive angle that invites consideration of theory’s entanglement in questions of body and affect. My approach will take its cue from this insight, concentrating first of all on the varieties of anxiety theory provokes, which range in intensity from outright condemnation to a qualified commitment to theory’s aims and methods.

At one extreme, then, the theory-phobics: a wholesale rejection of theory as so much jargon intended to terrify the uninitiated or infiltrate and disable a national *psyche* – as in Camille Paglia’s furious trashing of ‘French theory’<sup>25</sup> – represents an enduring strand of opinion within and without university circles and might be accounted for by the following :

- i. The eternal return of a conservative, common-sense backlash in the face of a proliferative, “disorganized” discourse which shows no signs of flagging (Culler’s already unbounded corpus is growing at exponential rates), disenchantment with the theory wars of the past three decades and the attendant desire

<sup>22</sup> See André Kaenel, “Moby’s Dick and Ahab’s Wife”, in *Etudes Culturelles. Cultural Studies*, ouvrage dirigé par André Kaenel, Catherine Lejeune, Marie-Jeanne Rossignol, Presses Universitaires de Nancy, 2003, p. 151.

<sup>23</sup> J.-M. Rabaté, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

<sup>24</sup> Leitch, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

<sup>25</sup> Camille Paglia, “Junk Bonds and Corporate Raiders: Academe in the Hour of the Wolf.” In *Sex, Art and American Culture*. New York: Random House, 1992.

“to get back to the text [...] back to personal experience and attention to the phenomena of everyday life”<sup>26</sup>

- ii. At a national level – and here I invoke, briefly (bowing to prevailing trends in critical practice...) my immediate context, that of the French university – the shunning of theory can be read as a territorial call-to-arms in defence of a value-laden (but largely undiscussed) conception of literature, under threat, in departments of English and American studies in France, from the pressing demand for a marketable linguistic competence, a working knowledge not so much of “la langue de Shakespeare” as of “Wall Street English”<sup>27</sup>. At this juncture France is experiencing a singularly intense moment in that perennial “crisis” endemic to the teaching of the humanities<sup>28</sup>. Recent government proposals for the overhaul of the university system echo the spirit of policies that have transformed higher education in Britain over the past twenty years; at such moments there is an institutional temptation to line up and shoot a number of culprits, and to this end theory can be made to fit the bill as efficiently as Claude Allègre<sup>29</sup>. It must be remembered that theory, despite its dominantly French complexion, has been and still is widely considered a foreign import of dubious worth in departments of English and American studies in France. In a recent article Sylvère Lotringer reminds us that ‘French theory’ is in fact an American invention<sup>30</sup> and in the current political climate this can scarcely count as a point in its favour. This intractable

<sup>26</sup> Hayden White, *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect*, Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999, p. viii.

<sup>27</sup> This is an allusion to the long-running advertisement campaign on behalf of the Wall Street Institute School of English, specializing in courses for the adult business and management community.

<sup>28</sup> Terry Eagleton gives a witty account of this state of perpetual crisis in *The Significance of Theory*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1990, pp. 28-30.

<sup>29</sup> France’s Minister of Education, Research and Technology from June 1997 to March 2000.

<sup>30</sup> Sylvère Lotringer, “La Théorie, mode d’emploi”, *TLE*, n° 20, 2002, p.68.

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“foreignness” of theory need not, of course, be a narrow function of geographical and linguistic borders; it is a common metaphor for an “otherness” intrinsic to theoretical discourse and points to a source of theory-phobia less dependent on immediate political conjuncture or state-of-the-discipline – and here I come to the third and final trigger for what one might call (with one’s tongue in one’s cheek) a *negative theoretical reaction*.

- iii. Theory is known to inspire a kind of gut dismissal reminiscent of the disgust evoked by Kristeva when she describes contact with the abject<sup>31</sup>. Here we might speak of the systemic expulsion of theory as a “bad object” – I refer to that visceral intolerance or allergy to an idiom on the grounds of surface complexity (Lacan’s *Ecrits*, the later Heidegger, the early writings of Deleuze and Guattari, the Derrida of *Glas* have been known to inspire outrage followed by condemnation). Theory makes its appeal to a heterogeneous instance: the theory ‘processor’ is as much drive as she is reason. The unspoken but, it would seem, widely-accredited notion that theory assembles and communicates itself in some de-libidinized, noumenal realm of pure thought might explain the common tendency to dissociate tenor and vehicle (the idea and its verbal, material support) and the consequent neglect of theory as style or rhythm, produced by and addressed to an *embodied* mind (where this adjective is given the semantic resonance it has acquired in cognitive science). The writing and reception of theory is a process from which the body is easily subtracted: yet even if we are prepared to grant that the changes wrought by theory are incorporeal in nature, we cannot deny that it is vectored by the concept, which, according to Deleuze and Guattari, “...s’incarne ou s’effectue *dans les corps*”<sup>32</sup> – theory is, in other words, an event in which the body is centrally implicated. In a similar vein, the theoretical word does not

<sup>31</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l’horreur* (1980), Paris: Seuil, 1983, p. 10.

<sup>32</sup> Gilles Deleuze et Félix Guattari, *Qu’est que la philosophie?*, Paris: Minuit, 1991, p. 26. Emphasis mine.

travel down channels of enlightened *disinterest* but carries the emotional freight of an entire history of prior exchange, so that the stance or positioning of the sender/ receiver may prove critical in determining the fortunes of the message. In another, but not altogether alien register, Althusser in his late writings postulates a homology of thought, word and gesture in respect of the ineluctable materiality of the trace they leave behind<sup>33</sup>. It is a fact that theory's style, its idiosyncratic prosody, its materiality, frequently prove an initial and definitive stumbling block, demanding as they do a protracted labour of reading, an organic and imaginative *immersion*. To analyse this form of labour it might be helpful to conceptualize the reader as a composite agency, responding to the theoretical word on a number of levels not admitting of easy synthesis – building on work by Michel Picard<sup>34</sup>, Vincent Jouve detects no less than three instances involved in the process of reading: the 'lectant' who maintains an evaluative, critical distance with regard to the text, the 'lisant' who suspends disbelief (and judgement) in the charmed wake of the signifier; and finally the 'lu' or passive pole, the locus of fantasmatic investment, whose desire in reading tends, narcissistically, toward the satisfaction of unconscious drives<sup>35</sup>. I would suggest that all three are solicited and mobilised by narrative, theoretical or fictional, to the extent that such distinctions still hold<sup>36</sup>. Once a given idiom is rejected on grounds of insurmountable otherness it can be casually dismissed as jargon – and from there it is a short step to the equation of part and whole (the familiar synecdoche that makes Lacan/ Derrida/ Deleuze synonymous

<sup>33</sup> Louis Althusser, *De la philosophie*, Paris: Gallimard, 1994, p. 43.

<sup>34</sup> Michel Picard, *La Lecture comme jeu*, Paris: Minuit, 1986.

<sup>35</sup> Vincent Jouve, *L'Effet-personnage dans le roman*, Paris: PUF, 1992, p. 82.

<sup>36</sup> The distinction has come under scrutiny in the work of Octave Mannoni (*Fictions freudiennes*, Paris: Seuil, 1978), Maud Mannoni, (*La Théorie comme fiction: Freud, Groddeck, Winnicott, Lacan*, Paris: Seuil 1979) and Malcolm Bowie (*Freud, Proust and Lacan: Theory as Fiction*, Cambridge University Press, 1987)

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with theory in general). Before we can say *deterritorialization* Culler's "unbounded corpus" has been denounced as charlatanism and shot down in flames.

So – I'm grateful to J.-M. Rabaté for bringing the body back into theory in his recent book, by way of an argument that the theory effect (or should that be *affect*) is primarily one of *hystericization*. I'd like to comment on the thesis advanced in Rabaté's introduction, as it resonates with ideas introduced earlier and has led me to refine my own understanding of theory's effects. Rabaté introduces three connected but semantically divergent notions – *hystericization* (as process and effect proper to theory), *hysteria* (as, alternately, a model for theoretical discourse or pathology/ pathological reaction), and finally *Hysteric* (with a capital H), a reference to Lacan's theory of the four discourses, advanced in *L'Envers de la psychanalyse*, the 1969-70 seminar. A brief reminder that the four discourses are respectively those of the University, the Master, the Analyst and the Hysteric<sup>37</sup>. Rabaté states his thesis succinctly: "What I see, however, as Theory's main effect in the production of knowledge and the dissemination of discourses can be described as a process of hystericization."<sup>38</sup> More on this process later as my immediate concern is to follow Rabaté's reasoning as it weaves between its chosen terms of reference. After a brief evocation of Charcot, Freud and the Salpêtrière, Rabaté moves on to develop a parallel between Theory and hysteria, finding support for this analogy not, as one might expect, through appeal to "the fascinating but labyrinthine volumes of Charcot, Janet, Freud and

<sup>37</sup> Lacan introduces and develops the notion of the four discourses in *Séminaire XVII, L'Envers de la psychanalyse*, Paris: Seuil, 1991, pp. 9-163; in his *Séminaire XX, Encore* (1975), Paris: Seuil, coll. "Points-essais", 2002, pp. 23-35. Useful commentaries include Bruce Fink's in *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (1995), 3<sup>rd</sup> printing, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997, pp. 129-137, and Mark Bracher's, "On the Psychological and Social Functions of Language: Lacan's Theory of the Four Discourses" in Mark Bracher (ed.), *Lacanian Theory of Discourse: Subject, Structure and Society*, New York: New York University Press, 1994, pp 107-128.

<sup>38</sup> Rabaté, *op. cit.* p. 9. Rabaté distinguishes 'Theory' (in general or *per se*) from 'theory', understood as a theory pertaining to a specific field of knowledge.

Breuer<sup>39</sup>, but by fast-forwarding to the Surrealist manifesto in praise of hysteria jointly authored by André Breton and Louis Aragon in 1928. This is a hysteria which is notoriously de-pathologised, its energies redirected and harnessed for purposes of social revolt, and exalted – in the words of the manifesto – as “a supreme vehicle of expression”. It may be useful to quote the manifesto conclusion in full, as it is crucial to Rabaté’s argument (the square brackets are his):

Hysteria [Theory] is a more or less irreducible mental state characterized by a subversion of the relations between the subject and the ethical universe by which the subject feels determined in practice, outside any systematic delirium. This mental state is based on the need for a reciprocal seduction, which explains the hastily accepted miracles of medical suggestion (or counter-suggestion). Hysteria [Theory] is not a pathological phenomenon and can in every respect be considered a supreme vehicle of expression<sup>40</sup>.

Hysteria, then, recast as a revolt against the ethical dictates of the symbolic order, a state both eroticized and eroticizing, its excesses not so much disturbing nor alienating but positively inflected as “supremely expressive”. Aligning Theory with this provocative Surrealist version of hysteria, Rabaté goes on to argue that those who sense its seductive force and resist it on these grounds are liable to fall into hysterical denial in the form of “ranting denunciations”<sup>41</sup> – here we return, clearly, to hysteria as pathology, as patent and disgraceful loss of self-control. We are then given an illustrious (female) example of a ranting denunciator – Camille Paglia, whose stand against French theory and unreconstructed approach to sex and gender are well-documented as they sent shock waves throughout the American academy in the early 90s. After quoting Paglia’s (hysterical) injunction: “Lacan is a tyrant who must be driven from our shores”<sup>42</sup>, Rabaté switches to Lacan’s (post-surrealist) elaboration of the discourse of the

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11, author’s translation.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

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(upper-case) Hysteric. This avatar of the Hysteric is, once again, a de-pathologised instance, or rather one whose pathology is rescripted as a form of heroic dissent. The Hysteric is represented as enjoying privileged if not unmediated access to the discursive sphere of knowledge/ science: in *Television*<sup>43</sup>, Lacan closely identifies the discourse of knowledge and that of the Hysteric insofar as both evince structural self-contradiction, incompleteness and uncertainty. Rabaté repeatedly underscores the fact that the discourse of the Hysteric does not imply a clinical category and should not be taken to illuminate an individual's psychology: thus while their discourse earns them the title of Hysterics, neither Heisenberg nor Hegel are to be considered as "closet [lower-case!] hysteric[s]"<sup>44</sup>.

Thus severely (but I hope not abusively) abridged, Rabaté's argument throws up a number of questions: how does the inherited concept of hysteria we are working with here condition the hystericization postulate? What if anything is being silenced and what retained when hysteria emerges as a poeticized instrument of revolution, when its discourse is equated with that of knowledge, when it is aligned, finally, with theory/ Theory? What fluctuation in the *episteme* enables hysteria to pose as theory's *alter ego*? Whence this elective affinity with the highest reaches of mental endeavour? It was not always so. By way of response to these questions, a brief return to Freud and classic psychoanalytic definition, and here I turn to Laplanche and Pontalis in their *Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse*<sup>45</sup>: hysteria in its primary psychoanalytic sense designates a form of psychical conflict of diverse origin giving rise to bodily symptoms susceptible to alleviation through the talking cure. Although increasingly recognized in the most recent psychoanalytical literature (both Anglo-Saxon and French) as a universal condition, hysteria has

<sup>43</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Television* (1974), trans. Denis Hollier, Rosalind Krauss, Annette Michelson. New York and London: Norton, 1990, p. 19.

<sup>44</sup> Rabaté, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

<sup>45</sup> Jean Laplanche et J. B. Pontalis, *Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse* (1967), Paris: PUF, 1990, pp. 177-183.

traditionally been gendered, more precisely *feminized*<sup>46</sup>. In fact its persistent feminization is, I think unarguably, its salient feature. The abundant literature devoted to the female hysteric, the case histories, diagnoses, aetiologies have meant that femininity and pathology have been, if not conflated, then at least thought together in psychoanalytic theory and practice from its inception, and their interdependence has congealed into a modern myth with the dissemination of psychoanalytic ideas to an ever-wider public in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. To be recuperated as an instrument of revolt, glamorized for its erotic potential, cast as a paradigm of knowledge, selected as the privileged vehicle of self-identification (Lacan describes himself, famously, as ‘the perfect hysteric’), hysteria has had to undergo what I am tempted to call, after Nietzsche, a *transvaluation*: it has had to be partially severed from its disabling connection with the feminine and its overt link to a pathological condition that is neither sublime nor subversive, but, first and foremost, *pathological*. Or rather if these connections survive, as survive they must for the term cannot be reinvented, they serve only to denote that species of negative theoretical reaction alluded to above (theory-phobia as a classic case of anxiety hysteria: the case of Camille Paglia). How does this transvaluation come about? *When* can hysteria be re-written as an emancipatory discourse which “maintains a quest for truth”?<sup>47</sup> Only – crucially – once it has crossed the gender divide to establish itself as a malady common to the sexes. Elaine Showalter, a foremost historian of hysteria, has identified the First World War as a key moment in the emergence of male hysteria (otherwise referred to as ‘shellshock’ and ‘war hysteria’). She argues forcefully that it was medical recognition of this disease (not the hysterical behaviour of the suffragettes) which, in England at least, paved the way to modern

<sup>46</sup> While Lacan acknowledges that hysteria cannot be restricted to a particular sex, his work contains statements, like the following, that leave one pensive: “... (et l’hystérique mâle ? on n’en trouve pas un qui ne soit une femelle).” Jacques Lacan, *Propos sur l’hystérie*, talk given in Brussels in 1977, published in *Quarto*, n° 2, 1981. Accessed 20 May 2004 <<http://www.ecole-lacanienne.net/documents/1977-02-26.doc>>

<sup>47</sup> Rabaté, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

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psychiatry and increasingly humane methods of treatment<sup>48</sup>. What happens when an ideology that feminizes hysteria is forced to accommodate the *male* hysteric? Juliet Mitchell, author of a recent book on hysteria, has this to say: “[O]ver and over again, a universal potential condition has been assigned to the feminine: equally, it has disappeared as a condition after the irrefutable observation that men appeared to display its characteristics.”<sup>49</sup> With the advent of the shellshocked soldier, the scene is set for a gradual fading of hysteria as dysfunction and its rising from the ashes as potential discourse of knowledge; masculinized, or rather de-feminized and therefore, to an appreciable extent, de-pathologized, its energies are no longer self-destructive nor debilitating but subversive, its epistemological insecurities paradigmatic of the restless, conflictual advance of science/knowledge/ theory. It is, then, no accident that Rabaté by-passes Freud and calls on the Surrealist manifesto of 1928 to buttress his *rapprochement* of theory and hysteria. The heady effects of hystericization as described by Rabaté – its erotic push-and-pull, its transmission of a questioning spirit, its inducement of constructive perplexity, hinge on a concept of hysteria whose dimension of neurotic and unglamorous protest against patriarchal constraint – its tie with the feminine – is effectively bracketed. *Hysteria’s changing valency as a*

<sup>48</sup> Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980* (1985), London: Virago, 1996, pp. 145-194.

<sup>49</sup> Juliet Mitchell, *Mad Men and Medusas: Reclaiming Hysteria and the Effects of Sibling Rivalry on the Human Condition*, Penguin, 2000, p. 7. Showalter makes a similar point in her recent book on current cultural manifestations of hysteria: “We know that Freud treated many male hysterics, but they have not been turned into mythic figures like Dora. In England, the handful of essays on hysterical boys and men that appeared in medical journals in the 1880s and 1890s have never been collected or reprinted. In the United States, one must turn to unpublished archives to find reports on hysterical men in civilian life. The cultural denial of male hysteria is no accident: it’s the result of avoidance, suppression and disguise. Although male hysteria has been clinically identified at least since the seventeenth century, physicians have hidden it under such euphemistic diagnoses as neurasthenia, hypochondria, phthiatism, neurospasia, eleorexia, koutorexie, Briquet’s syndrome, shell-shock, or post-traumatic stress disorder.” Elaine Showalter, *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Culture* (1997), London: Picador, 1998, p. 64.

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*result of historical processes of gendering*: an inherited blindness to this process proves vital to Rabaté's insight, it is as it were "the organizer of the space of the vision contained in [his] text"<sup>50</sup>; in other words, it is precisely what gives his thesis – *theory hystericizes* – its suggestiveness and reach. Intriguingly, taken as a whole, Rabaté's text appears to enact that partial distancing or severing from the feminine which informs its founding hypothesis: from *hystericization* Rabaté moves – firmly – on to *historicization* and indeed much of the book is concerned with (patrilineal) genealogies of theory. Could this turn to the arborescent have anything to do with the rhizomatic threat of hysteria, whose anarchic potential must be subdued by Method? Somewhat eclipsed by the agonistics of influence and counter-influence, and a chapter on theory, science and technology, hysteria returns, ghost-like, to frame the argument: Rabaté ends on the reciprocal hystericization of theory and literature and, as mentioned earlier, an openly hystericized, personal exposition of current theoretical debates and trends.

The obverse of my resistance to Rabaté's insight is, predictably, my surrender to its force of seduction. I'm particularly struck by one aspect of the theory/ hysteria analogy : the way in which theory's current ubiquity echoes the pervasiveness of hysteria, both never so present as when they are said to have had their day. Juliet Mitchell observes that hysteria has disappeared from the literature (Anglo-American writings on psychoanalysis) only to reappear, everywhere, under a different name: borderline states, multiple personality disorders, anorexia and bulimia, depression. "Hysteria", claims Mitchell, "is as broad and expansive as human culture. (...) [A]s a response to certain aspects of what it means to be human, [it] is everywhere."<sup>51</sup> This resonates suggestively with current rumours that theory is yesterday's fad when a casual glance suffices to confirm its penetration, not just of academic discourse but of contemporary

<sup>50</sup> See Wlad Godzich's introduction to Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1983), 4<sup>th</sup> printing. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986, p. xxix.

<sup>51</sup> Juliet Mitchell, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

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fiction<sup>52</sup> and, via the instant global rush of information, the media and popular culture (the Derrida fan club, movie and T-shirt phenomenon). Mitchell observes that, in our time, men and women in the First World have come closer together in social, political and economic terms than ever before. Consequently “both genders can be hysterical in ways that are more immediately similar”<sup>53</sup>. Does this suggest that we are all hysterics now? And, by implication, all potential theorists? Is this the nature of the reciprocal contamination/ seduction we witness when university professors start producing “œuvres” as well as major theoretical statements rather than traditional (‘secondary source’) literary criticism?<sup>54</sup> Which are we witness to, today: hysterics theorizing, or theory hystericizing? Is the prevalence of theory in humanities departments a refraction of the generalised hysteria which, according to Mitchell and Showalter, currently permeates society? If nothing else, these questions suggest that Rabaté’s theory of the theory-effect is bang on target.

I propose at present to pursue the hystericization effect and the resistances it begets, questions best thought together. The near-pathological, anxiety-hysteria type reactions (or resistances) to theory have been dealt with earlier: these comprised the “ranting denunciations” to which we would have to add, at the other end of the scale, the borderline-psychotic, imitative discourses that copy what has been internalized as a master-signifier (hysteria’s well-documented mimetic impulse).

But the hystericization effect that is most common by far can, I think, be best described as a function of theory’s specific mode of interpellation, which posits a split, fragmented or even pulverised subject – or to be more precise, a subject *as* split, fragmented, pulverised. Here it might be helpful to take up Rabaté’s basic

<sup>52</sup> Linda Hutcheon lists several “...postmodern artists who double as theorists: Eco, Lodge, Bradbury, Barth, Rosler, Burgin.” She adds the *nouveaux romanciers* and the surfictionists to the growing list of those who theorize their art – and, we might add, fictionalize their theory.

<sup>53</sup> Juliet Mitchell, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

<sup>54</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *L’Université sans condition*, Paris: Galilée, 2001, p. 47.

distinction between theory as genre (Rabaté's 'Theory', Culler's 'unbounded corpus') and theory as 'theory-of', a set of hypotheses tied in to a specific discipline.

- a. Theory as genre hystericizes since it incites to a mastery which it renders impossible (it is both unbounded and exponentially augmented). It makes totalizing claims while raising incompleteness to a structural principle. Those who look to the sprawling body of Theory to think *for* them, or, less hysterically, to help translate a given theoretical language, such as that of Derrida, Lyotard or Lacan are drawn into further spirals of hystericization when they discover that, for instance, Christopher Norris's Derrida is irreconcilable with Žižek's (the ongoing debate as to whether deconstruction is a politically responsible praxis or a freewheeling scepticism, one that seems set to run and run though Derrida himself has long since moved on); or when they discover that the divisions in what is monolithically labelled 'postmodern theory' go, as they say, all the way down - on the one hand, Lyotard, micro-narratives, politics as language games, a radicalized Kantian sublime that precludes synthesis in "driving a wedge" (as Christopher Norris puts it<sup>55</sup>) between speculative and cognitive judgements; on the other, via a return to Marx, the call for a new macro-narrative, the adherence to a *telos* of political emancipation, though within a distinctively postmodern structure of feeling which we might characterize, in the wake of Žižek, as an *ethos* of reliance without trust<sup>56</sup>. Allowing for disparities of critical language and perspective, David Harvey, Slavoj Žižek, Terry Eagleton and Christopher Norris might fairly be considered as representing the latter tendency<sup>57</sup>.

<sup>55</sup> Christopher Norris, *What's Wrong With Postmodernism: Critical Theory and the Ends of Philosophy*, Herts.: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990, p. 27.

<sup>56</sup> Edmond Wright, "Introduction: Faith and the Real." *Paragraph* 24.2 (2001) (issue devoted to Slavoj Žižek), pp. 18-19.

<sup>57</sup> In their influential *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations* (Macmillan, 1991), Steven Best and Douglas Kellner come out strongly in favour of this

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- b. Theories-of: individual theories (psychoanalytical, Marxist, feminist, queer...) also hystericize, addressing themselves to an instance which must accommodate the gaps and aporias generated by theory's failure to cohere into a unified plot. Theory's asystematicity, its internal resistance to a totalizing fluency, its openness to correction by the Real are inherent to its typically jagged development: hence two Lacans, two Freuds, Marx before and after the 'epistemological break', the doctrinal incompatibilities which mean there are not one but *several* Barthes and Benjamins<sup>58</sup>. The resistance to theory is primarily a *self-resistance*, as pointed out by Paul de Man and, more recently, by Derrida in his *Résistances: de la psychanalyse*. This self-resistance is manifest in theory's uneven advance and equally apparent in the blind spots theory generates at its very heart, the hieroglyphs, or, in i ekian terms, 'bones in the throat' thwarting its cognitive and explanatory ambition (Derrida identifies three such areas in Freudian theory: the dream umbilical, the repetition compulsion, the death drive). These are rocks on which the hermeneutic impulse founders, and it is to this *restanalyse* that Derrida devotes the bulk of his essay. Self-resistances of such magnitude might well provoke that disqualification or indeed "ranting denunciation" which speaks of a desire – a "narrative" desire<sup>59</sup> – repeatedly frustrated.

We return, finally, to the issue of hystericization induced by written style; this time what I have in mind is not the reflex expulsion alluded to earlier, but a less extreme (and more prevalent) form of hystericization, which Jane Gallop outlines with precision in her *Reading Lacan*<sup>60</sup>:

position – see their conclusion, pp. 256-304. It is also advocated by Vincent Leitch in *Theory Matters, op. cit.*, pp. 26-27.

<sup>58</sup> Rabaté, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

<sup>59</sup> I refer of course to Peter Brooks' seminal *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*, New York: Vintage, 1984.

<sup>60</sup> Jane Gallop, *Reading Lacan* (1985), 2<sup>nd</sup> printing, New York: Cornell University Press, 1986.

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... perhaps the great difficulty in reading Lacan, the great malaise produced by his style, resides in the discrepancy the reader feels between her-self [sic] and the text's interlocutor, whose place she occupies but does not fill. The violence of Lacan's style is its capacity to make the reader feel nonidentical with herself as reader, or [...] to make the reader feel inadequate to her role as "the man to whom Lacan addresses himself," that is, inadequate to Lacan's style<sup>61</sup>.

In this account, Lacan's (female) reader is the evanescent support of contradictory interpellations, hystericized as to gender (Lacan grammaticalizes his future reader as masculine), flickering in the space she occupies (as flesh-and-blood reader) but never fills (the instance postulated by and internal to the text, Umberto Eco's 'ideal' (male) reader). Her position is a hystericized one of fake mastery, which a de-psychologized account would call "imposture", a position explored by Jean-Jacques Lecercle in his *Interpretation as Pragmatics*<sup>62</sup>. Now if imposture is the position more or less gracefully assumed (in both senses of the word) by a number of professors and colleagues within the institution, it is unlikely to appeal to that restrained body of decision-makers and evaluators who legislate at any one time on matters of promotion within the discipline. As a social mechanism generating norms, rules, standards and inevitably inclined to conservatism, the institution (whether psychoanalytic or literary) will make its own a discourse at the furthest extreme from the hysteric's (upper or lower case) or the impostor's. We will be dealing here with what Lacan qualifies as the 'discourse of the university' whose agent is emphatically not the divided, hystericized 'subject supposed to know' but in effect her obverse – the knowing subject whose discourse is underwritten by a master-signifier. In its hystericizing effects, the discourse of theory unsettles positions of mastery and subordination and undermines the notion of an authoritative signifier or set of signifiers. This is untenable to a university discourse in which "[p]hilosophy [...] has always served the master, has always placed itself in the service of rationalizing and

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117. Emphasis mine.

<sup>62</sup> Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *Interpretation as Pragmatics*, London: Macmillan, New York: St Martin's Press, 1999.

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propping up the master's discourse...'63. Žižek has recently spoken of the will to power straining beneath the ostensibly neutral, constative modality of the university discourse which masks the nature of its performative reach and intent by the very skill of its performance: that of giving an unbiased account of things "as they are"64.

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The accusation of an "excess of theory" levelled at the work of candidates aspiring to professorship says much about the conviction held by prominent agents of the university discourse regarding theory's ancillary role, a position Eagleton repudiates but summarizes neatly as: "...theory is all right as long as it can directly illuminate texts"65 This conviction is passed off as anchored in a consensual conception of the literary which becomes especially difficult to credit – or defend – when its consequences translate into flagrant instances of professional exclusion. In a wider sense, the assignation of terms (literature/ theory) to fixed places in an immutable order effectively means that neither may emerge as a site of contest, leaving us with an uncomfortable paradox on which to conclude: the university discourse as practiced by inter-university decision-making bodies can foreclose precisely that type of enquiry vital in a climate where literature's future – and that of the university – increasingly hang in the balance.

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63 Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, *op. cit.*, p. 132. Emphasis original.

64 Slavoj Žižek, "Homo Sacer as the Object of the Discourse of the University", article posted 25/09/03, accessed 19 May 2004 <<http://www.lacan.com/hsacer.htm>>

65 Terry Eagleton, *The Significance of Theory*, *op. cit.* p. 77.

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