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



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“I’m a Total Solipsist – What About You?”

(The Metaethical Effect of Jokes, Theories and Other Articulations)

1. There is only one thing worse than doing theory, and that is not doing theory

As the current director of an impoverished local research group in my impoverished local university, I recently received about eight cartons of remaindered books – volumes that the group has published during its twenty-five years or so of existence. I received the cartons because there is no storage space left for these forgotten volumes, and I was told to give or throw them away. I offer this anecdote as an introduction, because it seems to me that, before we can go on to discuss the future of theory, it might be wise to examine some aspects of its past, notably what effect it has had on the French universities. For as I picked up the dusty volumes, I was surprised to note that, back in the late Seventies, all of my colleagues were *littéraires*; all of them were publishing on Dickens or Hardy or Alexander Pope. I was surprised by this because many of them finished up their careers teaching what the French call “Civilisation” – a discipline which isn’t exactly Cultural Studies and isn’t exactly Political Science, Sociology, or History either. It is easy to understand why certain colleagues rushed

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into this breach opened up in the realm of traditional English Studies. There came a time when one couldn't go on writing about Dickens or Hardy or Alexander Pope without situating them in an ever increasing theoretical framework, a burden that pushed these colleagues towards the refuge of fact.

As for the future of theory, I would like to begin by giving you a vivid but indirect picture of what this future might possibly be. Judging from the content of the following document, you will probably jump to the conclusion that I hold this future to be terribly bleak. I will try to show, however, that, at another level, this exchange could give us a "road map" (if I may borrow this term from its inauspicious authors) with a somewhat brighter idea of where theory may go to avoid withering away:

SUPERIMPOSED CAPTION: 'LONDON 1895'
SUPERIMPOSED CAPTION: 'THE RESIDENCE
OF MR OSCAR WILDE'

Suitably classy music starts. Mix through to Wilde's drawing room. A crowd of suitably dressed folk are engaged in typically brilliant conversation, laughing affectedly and drinking champagne.

Prince of Wales (TERRY J) My congratulations, Wilde. Your latest play is a great success. The whole of London's talking about you.

Oscar (GRAHAM) There is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about.

There follows fifteen seconds of restrained and sycophantic laughter.

Prince Very very witty ... very *very* witty.

Whistler (JOHN) There is only one thing in the world worse than being witty, and that is not being witty.

Fifteen more seconds of the same.

Oscar I wish I had said that.

Whistler You will, Oscar, you will. *(more laughter)*

Oscar Your Majesty, have you met James McNeill Whistler?

Prince Yes, we've played squash together.

Oscar There is only one thing worse than playing squash together, and that is playing it by yourself. *(silence)* I wish I hadn't said that.

Whistler You did, Oscar, you did. *(a little laughter)*

Prince I've got to get back up the Palace.

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Oscar Your Majesty is like a big jam doughnut with cream on the top.
Prince I beg your pardon?
Oscar Um ... It was one of Whistler's.
Whistler I never said that.
Oscar You did, James, you did.
The Prince of Wales stares expectantly at Whistler.
Whistler ... Well, Your Highness, what I meant was that, like a doughnut, um, your arrival gives us pleasure and your departure only makes us hungry for more. *(laughter)* Your Highness, you are also like a stream of bat's piss.
Prince What?
Whistler It was one of Wilde's. One of Wilde's.
Oscar It sodding was not! It was Shaw!
Shaw (MICHAEL) I ... I merely meant, Your Majesty, that you shine out like a shaft of gold when all around is dark.
Prince *(accepting the compliment)* Oh.
Oscar *(to Whistler)* Right. *(to Prince)* Your Majesty is like a dose of clap.
Whistler Before you arrive - before you arrive is pleasure, and after is a pain in the dong.
Prince *What?*
Oscar and Whistler One of Shaw's, one of Shaw's.
Shaw You bastards. Um ... what I meant, Your Majesty, what I meant ...
Oscar We've got him, Jim.
Whistler Come on, Shaw-y.
Oscar Come on, Shaw-y.
Shaw I merely meant ...
Oscar Come on, Shaw-y.
Whistler Let's have a bit of wit, then, man.
Oscar Come on, Shaw-y.
Shaw *(blows a raspberry)*
The Prince shakes Shaw's hand. Laughter all round. (1990, 230-31)

In a delightful study on the nature of jokes, the American philosopher Ted Cohen has observed, "Only a fool, or one of those who believe in 'theories,' would presume to say, in general, what the purpose of joking is" (9). Insofar as we are all here to presume to say what the purpose of theory is, perhaps Cohen would presume that we are all fools. Yet his critique stems not from a rejection of Theory but from an endorsement of pluralism that is not unlike some passages from Alain Badiou that I will be quoting later on. For Cohen announces clearly (10) that he is

going to offer no comprehensive theory of joking because, in his opinion, there can be no such theory. His goal will be to describe the purpose of *some* jokes on *some* occasions; his main concern will be to link these practices and occasions to what he is going to call *intimacy* (28). Now you will have noticed in my title that I am going to conflate a number of apparently disparate things, such as jokes and theories and works of art. So the question I will be asking will be something along the lines of, *Does theory itself create its own intimacy?* Or perhaps a better way of putting it might be, *How should theory be pursued in order for this intimacy to be achieved?* In raising these questions, I will not be defining theory or restricting theory to a particular essence so much as invoking general guidelines – what we might call a meta-theory – for how the different various theoretical practices can be carried out.

I should also make it clear that there are a number of fundamental questions which I will not be tackling in this paper. There has been and will continue to be an active debate as to the effect of theory on students and teachers of literature. Does it really make them better readers? Does it make them better people? I will answer these questions only indirectly, since I will be situating my comments about jokes, theories, and works of art in the realm of the metaethical, rather than the ethical. This is not to say that these things have no effect in the ethical and political arenas themselves; it is only to limit my more theoretical analysis of theories and jokes to questions of the *experience* and the *process* of judgment, rather than the *content* and direct socio-political efficacy of these *forms of life*. But before I go on to explain what I mean by the metaethical effect of theories, jokes and works of art, we might do best to start with some kind of definition of what theory is.

2. Beyond the Raspberry Principle

One recent volume that attempts to define theory and sketch its future is Jean-Michel Rabaté's *The Future of Theory* (2002), a "manifesto" designed to counter some other recent volumes – one thinks automatically of Valentine Cunningham's *Reading after Theory* (2001) published in the same series of "Blackwell Manifestos." Rabaté

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takes great pains to separate what he calls Theory from other intellectual disciplines:

Theory is not just philosophy and it should not stray too far from the humanities, by which I mean it has to keep a bond, however flexible and dialectical it may be, with literature. Or Theory is literature, if you want, but literature raised to the power of speculation. (8)

There is, perhaps, already a subtle putdown in the words “not just philosophy” – but the point seems to be that Theory (with the capital *T* that Rabaté insists upon) has a link to the arts that philosophy does not. Rabaté also emphasises what he calls the “hystericization” (9) of theory – the idea that Theory is “hysterical” in the Lacanian sense of being that discourse which constantly subverts, questions and asks for proof. I personally prefer a more Deleuzian vocabulary based on the notion of the “problem” or on the idea of events which make language “stutter.” These points will be developed later on. But first I want to argue that Rabaté’s strategy in his definition of “Theory” is perhaps unnecessarily narrow. He starts out by positing a general phenomena called “Theory” – distinguishing it from theory (without the capital) as a term which applies to individual schools and practices (3). But then he goes on to identify this capitalized “Theory” with French and Continental thought and with its influence on American academia. For example, he implies that the “point of departure” of Theory can be taken to be the publication of *Writing Degree Zero* by Barthes in 1953. What were Richards and Empson writing back in the Twenties and Thirties, if not literary theory? Rabaté underlines “the almost ineluctable Hegelian inflection given to any discourse that presents itself as ‘literary Theory’”(39). I find no Hegelian inflections in the works of Richards or Empson, nor in the works of Genette, Todorov, Eco, Jean-Marie Schaeffer or Christopher Norris, but it seems to me that all of these people have been involved, at times, in something that I need to call *literary theory*. I wonder if Rabaté is not setting up a tautology where Theory simply *is* anything of vaguely Hegelian descent, and where everything else just doesn’t count. But if these other thinkers are also elaborating theories as to the nature and operation of our activities

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with respect to language, experience and works of art, then I see no need to draw up water-tight divisions.

There are, however, a number of factors which encourage the erection of insurmountable barriers, the most obvious of which is the almost inevitable *agôn* that has characterised theory over the past few decades. One encounters all too often remarks such as the following, taken from a review in the rather conservative journal *Philosophy and Literature*:

I can imagine a day when scholars will shake their heads in amazement that the mental exhaust emitted by a few primarily Gallic savants engulfed and stupefied a whole generation of academics in its hypnotic miasma. (DISSANAYAKE, 238)

This barely disguised raspberry is no less pointless than the sour grapes of wrath one can find in the mouths of certain poststructuralists denouncing their “enemies” or ostracising a speaker because he happens to quote Habermas. I think, by the way, that it is high time for some of our eminent colleagues to stop pretending that they are the rebels they indeed used to be, to stop pretending that they are repressed by the Establishment, crushed by the prevailing Doxa, excluded from the corridors of power. This conference, with its 60 participants from some of Europe’s most prestigious universities is ample proof that we are the Establishment, or at least part of it, and that the Doxa we must fight against is sometimes our own. When I begin reading articles in the *Financial Times* about “PoMo architecture” in its relation to the “Zeitgeist,”¹ I feel that some of our silver-haired and Mao-suited mentors should give up playing the role of the marginalized revolutionary.

Still, it is true that there is a lot of hostility on both – or I should say *all* – sides. The very anger and excess of my quote from *Philosophy and Literature* is itself a sign that many non-Poststructuralist theorists feel themselves to be on the losing side. So perhaps Jean-Michel Rabaté is right to disdain the “ranting denunciations” of “most critics of

¹ See Edwin Heathcote, “Kingdom of the Naff,” *Financial Times*, March 1/March 2, 2003, VI.

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Theory” (11) – it isn’t easy to start a constructive conversation with someone who claims that all you have to offer is “hypnotic miasma.” It isn’t easy, but it may be possible, and we should at least try. Engaging in theory shouldn’t mean only talking to yourself and your allies. Even if people such as Valentine Cunningham or Raymond Tallis do seem to be “ranting,” true courage would involve trying to take them head on and not dismissing them without a demonstration. I can say this without hypocrisy since I myself got into trouble when, in a review a while back, I accused a conservative anthology of articles of not confronting the poststructuralist opponents they so blithely mocked. If you want to publish a volume entitled *Beyond Poststructuralism*,² and decide to give free rein to your contributors so that they can take potshots at people such as Catherine Belsey or Frederic Jameson, why not make the exercise even more titillating by giving Kate and Fred a chance to shoot back? Of course, the same might be said about the conference we are now attending (I don’t see Ray or Val waiting anywhere in the wings). It would be silly to deny that there are incredible antagonisms at the heart of Theory – though not all arguments “Against Theory” are tirades against Poststructuralist thought. After all, Knapp and Michaels’ essay³ back in 1982 had nothing to do with a desire to stop theoretical reflection on the nature of literature – they were aiming only at the elimination of a particular issue (the gap between meaning and intention). And the opponents they were arguing against were not “miasmatic Gallic savants” – E.D. Hirsch can hardly be seen as a disciple of Hegel or Lacan. But it is true that there is much violence in the language of theory, and I suppose that when the theoretical Shaw feels totally cornered by his theoretical adversaries Wilde and Whistler, there sometimes isn’t much more he can do than blow a raspberry and try to laugh. Yet the raspberry is a let down in a way, since up to that point we were enjoying the mental

² See Wendell Harris, ed., *Beyond Poststructuralism: The Speculations of Theory and the Experience of Reading*, University Park, Pa.: Penn State P, 1996. My review appeared in *Philosophy & Literature* 1997 21: 444-454. It was one of the last times I was asked to contribute to the journal.

³ See Steven Knapp & Walter Benn Michaels, “Against Theory,” *Critical Inquiry*, Summer, 1982.

gymnastics of the different contestants. Commenting on the videotape of Deleuze released after his death, Jean-Jacques Lecercle has seen in some passages the “revenge of the teacher after a lifetime of pedagogic responsibility, and subsequent frustration” – a responsibility that Deleuze could abandon since he was speaking from beyond the tomb. Lecercle illustrates this responsibility and frustration with the following example of typical university discourse: “‘Your objection is highly interesting, even crucial...’ which, as we know, means ‘You idiot, you haven’t understood a word I said!’ ” (63). I may be hopelessly naïve, but it seems to me that there are times when objections are indeed interesting or even crucial.

3. Jokes, Theories, Communities

The conjunction of jokes and theories that I am attempting in this paper is not itself just a joke – though it is perhaps the result of accident: I happened to be reading Rabaté at roughly the same time that I was working on Ted Cohen and a volume by Simon Critchley entitled *On Humour*. It seemed to me that what Rabaté had to say about Theory could apply to jokes, and what Critchley and Cohen had to say about humour helped characterise Theory. For example, Rabaté writes: “the function I ascribe to Theory” is “to startle an audience and make it demand new moral, political or intellectual justifications for what passes as a group’s collective values and cultural identity” (17). Critchley begins his essay with the following claim: “Jokes tear holes in our usual predictions about the empirical world” (1).⁴ We could just as well say “*Theories tear holes in our usual predictions about the empirical*

⁴ I could just as well have compared Jonathan Culler’s recent description of theory: “The main effect of theory is the disputing of ‘common sense’: common sense views about meaning, writing, literature, experience... Theory is often a pugnacious critique of common-sense notions, and further, an attempt to show that what we take for granted as ‘common sense’ is in fact a historical construction... theory involves a questioning of the most basic premises or assumptions of literary study...” (Culler, 4) to the following comments from Milan Kundera’s *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*: “Things deprived suddenly of their supposed meaning, of the place assigned to them in the so-called order of things... make us laugh.” (Kundera, 86).

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world.” Critchley goes on to argue that the “comic world is not simply... the inverted or upside-down world of philosophy, but rather the world with its causal chains broken, its social practices turned inside out, and common sense rationality left in tatters” (1) and he supports this by borrowing the following definition of the joke from Mary Douglas: “A joke is a play upon form that affords an opportunity for realising that an accepted pattern has no necessity” (10). This, too, sounds exactly like a description of Theory. For we don’t have “theories” about things we can easily take for granted. At the beginning of Joyce’s “The Sisters”, Old Cotter has his “own theory” (1) about the demise of Father Flynn – he has a “theory” about it because (as usual in Joyce) there is no certainty, no closure, that would make theory superfluous.

For Critchley, “humour reveals the depth of what we share” (18). Cohen begins by quoting Wittgenstein: “Don’t take it as a matter of course, but as a remarkable fact, that pictures and fictitious narratives give us pleasure, occupy our minds.”⁵ I suppose here, too, we can say the same thing about theories and jokes. For, with respect to any human activity, any “form of life”, there remains the ultimate question, Why bother? Biology can tell me why I have a liver; who exactly is going to tell me why we bother to have jokes and theories and works of art? Behind all this, there is what we could call an *anthropological* question, and if we see some convergences between these three forms of life – jokes, theories, and works of art – then perhaps they may be linked to a similar basic function.

For example, following Derrida, Rabaté argues that theory mustn’t be instrumentalised; it mustn’t be made into a method and mechanically repeated, it has to be new.⁶ But, of course, the same can be said of a joke or a work of art. The goal of a theory is like the goal of a joke; if I tell you a funny story I will want you to laugh; if I give you my definition of literature I hope you will agree. This, by the way, tends to show that the initial moment of literary theory is rather irenic; it is only when you don’t agree that the *agôn* starts. But even the philosopher of *agôn* begins by hoping that his readers will agree with

⁵ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* I, 524. See Cohen, 1.

⁶ See Rabaté, 99ff.

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him. Teaching or learning a theory, telling or hearing a joke is quite obviously a move in the construction of a community. Sometimes the community is rather small, such as the one capable of understanding the following joke which I can't help pilfering from Cohen (11). Here it is in its apparent simplicity:

According to Freud, what comes between fear and sex?
Fünf.

Sometimes the community can be larger – if it makes fewer demands on one's background knowledge. But in any case, if I ask you to learn a theory, appreciate a joke or a work of art, I am – quite obviously – trying to construct a common social reality – which was, of course, why Critchley argued that humour “reveals the depth of what we share” or want to share. And we might be led to postulate some sort of Davidsonian “Principle of Charity” with respect to humour as well: Humour (like rationality) is that on which we may ultimately agree, if we spend enough time talking to each other.

Cohen underlines the way a joke depends on common knowledge: “a deep satisfaction in successful joke transactions is the sense held mutually by teller and hearer that they are joined in feeling” (25). This is indeed why he introduces the concept of *intimacy* into his account of the operation of humour. He speaks of “the shared sense of those in a *community*” (28) and highlights the concrete consequences of sharing a joke: “That we do it *together* is the satisfaction of a deep human longing, the realization of a desperate hope. It is the hope that we are enough like one another to sense one another, to be able to live together” (29). This may seem to some a rather syrupy form of humanistic optimism; it is certainly a far cry from the Negativity of Being that dominates much current thought. But, to be fair, both Cohen and Critchley spend time explaining where jokes can go wrong, and how they can have harmful consequences as well.

I would like to argue, however, that even a bad joke is still a joke, just as a bad theory is still a theory and a bad work of art is nevertheless a work of art. More importantly, while it would be silly to argue that bad jokes, theories or works of art can never have negative

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effects, I do want to try to explain in what way the act of engaging with them can never be fully negative. This is where my distinction between the ethical and the metaethical comes in. The distinction is basically between a discipline (metaethics) that analyses the way our moral concepts work, and a practical human endeavour (ethics) that applies these concepts to particular human problems. More generally, my vision of the “metaethical effect” is of a sphere where the *form* or the *process* of judgment is taught, experienced or analysed, without implying any specific decisions as to the application of these forms to concrete praxis. My argument, very briefly, is that jokes, theories, and works of art all involve an activity – a form of life – that fosters this awareness of the nature of interpretation and choice. So in this sense, even engaging with a bad joke is a formative experience – a reminder of what interpretation and choice are, and how they work. Most fundamentally, it serves as a reminder that this is an *intersubjective* enterprise – that getting or not getting a joke, accepting or rejecting a theory, and so on, are essential elements in the way we forge a unity.

Still, why bother? What good does interpretation do us? To paraphrase Wittgenstein, if a lion could talk, not only would we not understand him, we also wouldn't laugh at his jokes. Humour depends on a framework, and we wouldn't understand the framework of the lion sufficiently to understand what he finds funny. This, of course, is no different from Thomas Nagel's claim that we can never really know what it is like to be a bat.⁷ Like jokes, theories articulate frameworks, and I suppose the answer to my anthropological question will have something to do with our *need* for these realms of articulation. Cohen points out that in jokes, as in art (and I would add in theory as well), success can never be guaranteed (30). My point would be that we *need* to have these realms where success cannot be guaranteed, in order to test feeling and communication; it is precisely this lack of guaranteed success that makes theory, jokes and works of art worth the effort. But this brings me to two notions I wish to borrow from Charles Taylor and Donald Davidson.

⁷ See Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 235^e and Thomas Nagel, “What is it like to be a bat?” in *Mortal Questions*, Cambridge, CUP, 1979.

4. Articulation and Triangulation

I have elsewhere sketched a picture of art as a realm of exchange, a “space of freedom” which combines both a kind of infinite liberty and certain accepted constraints.⁸ We might think of jokes and theories as also combining the same mixture of freedom and rules. All three activities involve what Charles Taylor calls articulation:

We find the sense of life through articulating it. And moderns have become acutely aware of how much sense being there for us depends on our own powers of expression. Discovering here depends on, is interwoven with, inventing. Finding a sense to life depends on framing meaningful expressions which are adequate. (18)

I think that this can tie in well with my metaethical approach – since we understand that whatever the actual content of the articulation, the very act of articulating involves increasing our powers of articulation and creating sense. Simply put, jokes, theories, and works of art refine and exercise this capacity.

Since the refinement of these powers involves invention, there is indeed ample space for the freedom which I have mentioned. But I wish to bring in Davidson to emphasise that element of constraint that tempers the infinite creativity. For discourses cannot take place in a vacuum – they depend on what Davidson calls triangulation:

...the objectivity which thought and language demand depends on the mutual and simultaneous responses of two or more creatures to common distal stimuli and to one another's responses. This three-way relation among two speakers and a common world I call 'triangulation'. (XV)

Theory, like all discourse, has to respect this three-way relationship; a theorist must not only react to the stimuli of his object of study but also to the conceptions of his interlocutors. Knowledge emerges holistically from the interplay of these three factors. Davidson adds:

⁸ See Ronald Shusterman, « Espace de liberté et sens du monde, » in Jean-Jacques Lecercle & Ronald Shusterman, *L'Emprise des signes*, Paris, Seuil, 2002. The volume is a debate between “RS” and “JJL”.

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Knowledge of another mind is possible, however, only if one has knowledge of the world, for the triangulation which is essential to thought requires that those in communication recognize that they occupy positions in a shared world. (212-13)

What I would like to argue, quite simply, is that jokes, theories, and works of art are activities designed specifically to foster triangulation and articulation – activities which help weave the social fabric.

It is not entirely facetiously that I offer the Oscar Wilde sketch as an example of articulation and triangulation. It is clear that each speaker in this verbal jousting match is dealing not only with his own intentions, but also “triangulating” these with external events and other minds. Moreover, the entire exchange, though obviously agonistic, remains an attempt to practice and refine articulation – the jousting is specifically directed towards testing feats of verbal skill. Indeed, the sketch is an exemplum of interpretive ingenuity; we are being shown strategies of intellectual dexterity and adaptation – the kind of thing theory is called on to do. Now it is true that all of this dexterity is being used by the characters for negative purposes. Yet the *agôn* is *in* the sketch – it is not in our *reception* of it. The raspberry may be an example of the “violence of language” *but it is not aimed at us*. And though it may be seen as a failure in the ingenuity of the character, it isn’t a failure in the ingenuity of the writers – for it is indeed a funny way to end the verbal duel.

Indeed, the more we look at the sketch, the more we can see how finely crafted it is – not only how articulate the speakers manage to be, overcoming incredible adversity in their interpretive tasks – but also how the text itself is structured to hold together and to operate on several layers. Notice how the sketch proceeds by linguistic themes and variations, with the vaguely epanaleptic *You will, Oscar, you will, You did, James, you did* (and so on) replying to the various *I wishes* that rhythm the text – not to mention the obvious permutations on the *There is only one thing* sequence. I take this movement of slight but constant permutation and adaptation – this common construction of a discourse evolving from a shared initial structure – to be emblematic of the workings of theory. Note by the way how well the sketch

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illustrates, with all the allusions to “What I meant”, the gap (or the possibility of a gap) between intention, language and meaning – the kind of thing philosophers and critics had been arguing about since at least the late 1940’s when Knapp and Michaels took them on in 1982. Yet I am not offering this sketch as an example of the inclusion of theory in humorous sketches (there are lots of better examples of that in the Python series) but as an example of adaptation and articulation themselves.

There is another level at which this sketch is encouraging the kind of “solidarity of texts”⁹ that I see as one of the elements of the metaethical dimension of fictional experience. The sketch operates best for those of us who know who Wilde was and have a moderate knowledge of some of his more famous or infamous quotations. And we also get more out of the sketch if we understand Shaw’s slightly marginalized position; that he should be chosen by the others as the victim does seem to fit in with our school-boy knowledge of literary history. And a Python fan would also recognise the fittingness of choosing Graham Chapman to play Wilde (Chapman’s homosexuality was never much of a secret). I have been emphasising what could be called the “intertextuality” of this sketch – but one could just as well consider it as a capacity for articulation and triangulation, a capacity for bringing together discourses and phenomena in order to achieve finer understanding and greater expression.

Of course, the Wilde sketch is closer to being a portrait of the critic (the interpreter) than the theorist. The three characters are *interpreting* texts rather than producing theories. Or we might say that the sketch is a portrait of creators, not simply because Wilde, Shaw, and Whistler were all artists in life, but because their one-liners are indeed works of creative imagination. But a theoretical element can be seen (to borrow the vocabulary of “cognitive linguistics”) in the basic activity of “mapping” that is involved. Here theory is re-description of phenomena in new and enlightening terms, an attempt to characterise and understand some element in a deeper way. The three wags are characterising the Prince via re-descriptions which must be interpreted

⁹ See “RS” in *L’Emprise des signes*, 221ff.

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so as to express some unformulated but essential truth, revealing not what it's like to be a bat but how the Prince is like a shaft of gold. Of course, in the fictional universe involved, the primary purpose of these de-territorialisations is not to tell us the truth about the Prince but to create trouble for the opponent. However, this action of re-describing can indeed give us an idea of the way each re-description is an *event*. But, of course, the sketch itself, like all jokes, like all works of art, is an event also – and it too “tears a hole in our predictions about the world” – as Critchley would say.

5. Systems and Singularities

Ultimately, what I am saying about jokes, theories and works of art might be connected to Wittgenstein's now familiar arguments about the impossibility of a private language. Davidson follows Wittgenstein in denying the possibility of such a language, since, for him, the very concept of language relies on this activity of triangulation. Without triangulation, there is only solipsism. Davidson writes: “The solipsist's world can be any size, which is to say, from the solipsist's point of view it has no size, it is not a world” (119). For there to be a world, there has to be someone to share it with me. And this brings me to the shallow joke that I've included in my title – “*I'm a total solipsist – what about you?*” Davidson would probably agree that the absurdity of this remark does not come only from the question; the very idea of *formulating* total solipsism in *language* is already a contradiction. But what I like about this joke is that the act of asking “what about you” is already an act of starting the dialogue which is the essence of theory. You can't start that dialogue and then pretend that there is no one who is listening (or worth listening to). The paradox is that theory, like a joke, like any discourse, *cannot* defend solipsism; it *has* to postulate and value exchange, since the very form of theory is to produce dialogue and articulation. Theory has to seek out the Other, which means trying to talk to the “ranting” opponents. Davidson and Taylor both believe that the self is inextricably defined by a “common public world” (Davidson, 52). I have borrowed from both to suggest that the articulation of the

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self provided by art, jokes and theories helps elaborate and improve this shared public world. The space of interpretation becomes thus a space for sharing thought and for shaping both the self and the community.

This articulation, however, should not be conceived of as a movement towards homogeneity. Mutual understanding does not preclude hybridity and pluralism. Writing about Chinese art, François Jullien has recently observed: « *le Sage est celui qui ne s'enlise dans aucune pensée et n'en exclut aucune pour se garder de la partialité et préserver ainsi sa disponibilité* » (16).

Theory must also maintain its availability and its openness to the plurality of styles. Underlining the importance of the notion of style for Deleuze, Lecerclé has described “a paradoxical system of singularities, the object of a science of the singular. Style for Deleuze is just that” (67). Perhaps the real question concerning theory is whether or not there can be a *theory* of the singular. Alain Badiou also seems to emphasize the singular in the following passage:

...c'est une propriété essentielle de l'étant en tant qu'étant qu'il ne puisse exister un tout des étants, dès lors qu'on les pense uniquement à partir de leur étantité. Une conséquence cruciale de cette propriété est que toute investigation ontologique est irrémédiablement locale. (1998, 190)

More recently he has stated: “*Nous affirmons qu'il n'y a, en art, que des œuvres*” (2002, 22). I take these statements as a claim that theory has to preserve this “local” aspect of its investigations; as a reminder that its definitions are always provisional and that there is no such thing as an essence of art.

Theory is an impossibility if by theory is meant a definitive and water-tight account of literature – a final definition. My own argument for a meta-definition of literature and art – which sees it as an event but which refuses to specify the exact nature of the event – seems closer to the pluralism we have been examining. Commenting on Deleuze's emphasis on the concept of the *problem*, Lecerclé notes that a problem “has one immediately striking characteristic: it is interesting, rather than true or false” (38). A problem is something which doesn't go away, something which isn't resolved by an exhaustive definition. Lecerclé notes how “the problem survives all attempts at a solution”

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and underlines “the proliferation of part theories... theories that never explicitly form a whole...” (40). One wonders, then, how Deleuzian it is to attempt to formulate a coherent and exhaustive theory of literature. Perhaps “RS” is the true Deleuzian, since he has repeatedly given only a meta-definition of art as that which has no essence, as that which remains a problem *and whose purpose is to remain a problem* – so that our talents of articulation may be eternally applied to it.

Perhaps I am misusing Badiou and Deleuze in my own agonistic way – turning their shafts of gold into unpalatable liquids. I am willing to be corrected, and to improvise a response. But that is exactly my point. We may all be blowing raspberries at each other, but even these raspberries create meaning. The future of theory will be found, I hope, not in *what* the Wilde sketch represents, but in *how* it represents – in how it engages the reader in a communal and intersubjective effort for understanding and comprehension despite the unavoidable disagreement inherent in all discourse. For there is indeed a problem with a strict Habermasian or Davidsonian confidence in reason and shared knowledge or values. The problem with the “principle of charity” is that the main body of shared beliefs which we all know to be true is never what we are interested in when belief is being discussed. Our conversations presuppose, perhaps, but don’t spend time elaborating on the fact, that $2+2 = 4$. Our actual exchanges are more usually about those grey areas where things are not so sure – otherwise why bother talking, one might say – and thus the main body of agreement is little to the point. But just because Theory has to be about what is beyond the main body of agreement does not mean that it is a sign of any great and unavoidable Negativity of Being or Need for Silence. There is only one thing worse than talking theoretical nonsense, and that is not talking at all.

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