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Flaxman - Past Imperfect, Future Unknown - JCRT 4.2
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Pragmatically speaking, then, we know that there has been, over the last fifteen to twenty years, a strong interest in something called literary theory and that, in the United States, this interest has at times coincided with the importation and reception of foreign, mostly but not always continental, influences. We also know that this wave of interest now seems to be receding as some satiation or disappointment sets in after the initial enthusiasm. Such an ebb and flow is natural enough, but it remains interesting, in this case, because it makes the depth of the resistance to theory so manifest.

—Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory*.¹

Twilight of the (Theoretical) Idols

Whatever we think about theory, and today we are often encouraged to think the worst, perhaps we can all agree that its recourse has become a matter of profound tact. The “resistance to theory” that Paul de Man underscored in the mid-1980s has evolved over the last twenty years into something closer to disapproval, dismissal, and occasionally outright derision. The result is that one must ultimately understand the discretionary limits of theory as much as theory itself. In the most obvious sense, we might say that the *savoir-faire* of theory has degenerated into a game of proper names, for if the emergence of theory coalesced around the writings and teachings of distinct figures, the diplomacy of theory has come to lie in the capacity to grasp the right names to drop and the right times to do so. The proper name is now inextricable from the larger sense of its propriety. All things being equal, we know that Roland Barthes remains an ever-graceful option, Michel Foucault an acceptable turn, Jean-François Lyotard a more delicate case, Jacques Lacan a prospective breach of etiquette, and de Man himself a point of almost certain instigation.

3. Of course, as the derision of de Man’s makes all too clear, the reasons motivating any such reaction may well extend beyond the strict limits of a given theorist’s writings, but the fact that the name game, or theoretical tact in general, is always already overdetermined by ostensibly “extra-theoretical” concerns only stresses our present state of affairs. What separates us irreconcilably, I would say, from the so-called “strong period in literary theory” is precisely an inability to consider theory *in itself*, that is, apart from the history of condemnation and ill-will that has come to condition its discourse. Attempts to evoke theory in the “old style” are liable to induce consternation, as Jean-Michel Rabat’ notes in his recent book, *The Future of Theory*. Speaking of our new academic millennium, Rabat’ explains that theory “is not Beautiful any more, but, if not downright ugly yet, a little embarrassing, like a distant cousin full of outdated dreams of grandeur, silly daydreams more adapted to those far away countries in which one finds students’ dorms displaying posters of Mao, Marilyn, or Che Guevara.”² Like those icons, one confesses a fondness for the poster-children of theory at the risk of appearing woefully earnest or pathetically naive, for the new politics of theory insists that we should have “gotten over” or “gotten past” such juvenile interests by now or, at the very least, that we should have intuited the dilemmas that make theory so problematic today. We might

¹Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 5.

²Jean-Michel Rabat’, *The Future of Theory* (London: Blackwell, 2002), p. 4.

even say that the revolutionary or fashionable enthusiasm induced by theory appears so silly by virtue of its persistence, which flies in the face of a general belief that theory is pass', out of touch with current scholarship and, ultimately, the world.

4. One may already have detected here the drift (*d'rive*) of a much older and more practiced mode of dismissal, for the current slams against theory, however novel in their cynicism, still trade upon the longstanding belief that the discourse of theory is disengaged from the material world. Since de Man's "Resistance to Theory" appeared, for instance, this sentiment has taken the form of the familiar refrain to return to history or to make theory itself "newly" historical. While this has surely happened, critics continue to regard theory as an abstraction, a mind-game that has little or nothing to do with the real world. The animus inspired by theory is, if not transformed, ostensibly explained by its own essential failure to attend to what is truly important "out there." One of the current generation's premier theoreticians, Judith Butler, has gone so far as to wonder aloud whether this attitude might not demand a terminological change. "If the political task is to show that theory is never merely *theoria*, in the sense of disengaged contemplation, and to insist that it is fully political (*phronesis* or even *praxis*), then why not simply call this operation *politics*, or some necessary permutation of it?"³ As Rabat' cunningly responds in *The Future of Theory*, "*theoria* has never been 'disengaged contemplation,' and that even when theory was depicted at its most ludicrously abstract and oblivious of material contingencies through the famous anecdote of Thales who fell down a well because he was gazing at the stars, one cannot forget that Thales was not only a philosopher and observer of the heavens' but also a statesman with political ambitions."⁴
5. Like Rabat', we might regard the attempt to re-package theory under a new name as, at best, ironically and symptomatically aloof and, at worst, downright silly. Is it possible to consider this cloaking operation without recalling Prince's various attempts to assume a different moniker, even non-linguistic symbol? Whether we call it theory or "the politics formerly known as theory," the fact remains that theory by any other name would smell just as rotten to some, and perhaps this is the point we really need to consider. Rather than re-organize the rhetoric of theory to assuage its potential resentment, we need to inquire into that resentment itself. What is it about theory that has provoked such hostility? Could we even begin to understand theory, apart from a collection of definitive texts, as a larger epistemic occasion from which resistance and even resentment are historically inextricable? And if we were to produce such a history, what would it look like and how would it grasp the integral ("structural") relation between theory as a mode of discourse and the reception of theory within the institution of the American university? In several interesting ways the constituents of this project have been suggested by Rabat's own whimsical and wonderfully accessible book, which we might take, in this discussion, as a point of departure for an even broader and more concerted effort to understand the remarkably powerful resources and the regrettably overreaching reflexes of theory.

Remembrance of Theory Past: The French Invasion

5. If the future of theory is concealed in its past, then perhaps the past, or at least the reception of what is called theory in the United States, must be understood in light of the institutional

³Quoted in *The Future of Theory*, p. 2. Also see *The Critical Tradition*, ed. David H. Richter (Boston and New York: Bedford and St. Martin's Press, 1998), p. 1515.

⁴Rabat', p. 2.

instability that characterized the 1960s and 1970s. A “disciplinary crisis was rampant in the humanities,” writes Rabat’ of this period, and at the heart of this crisis lay a collective uncertainty about some of our most fundamental assumptions’ assumptions about what a text is and what distinguishes it as such from other cultural production, assumptions about the relevance of art and its relationship to ideology, assumptions about the nature of language and the function of criticism.⁵ The successful outgrowth of theory in American was largely indebted, then, to the timeliness of its germination, for the crisis of faith in the traditional methods and discourses of the humanities dovetailed with the introduction of new methods and discourses that we have come to associate with structuralism and poststructuralism. In a sense, the event of theory required the convergence of the American disciplinary crisis with a predominantly French interdisciplinary mode of analysis that had been gestating for several decades and that would fully emerge as a broad-based analysis of the structures of knowledge and a critique of its predominant institutions.

6. In *The Future of Theory*, Rabat’ rehearses several theoretical genealogies, but pride of place must be granted the legacy of French Hegelianism, without which theory as we know it would be impossible to imagine. The famous lectures of Alexandre Koj’ve on *The Phenomenology of Spirit* and the subsequent teachings of Jean Hyppolite on the subject drew together a remarkably wide range of intellectuals. In this history of consensus as well as dissent, Hegel could be understood as a “strange attractor” for two or even three generations of thinkers ranging from Lacan, Bataille, Blanchot, Levinas, and Sartre, to Althusser, Derrida, Deleuze, and Foucault. As a result, the embryonic discourse of theory emerged from various disciplines’ “philosophy, sciences like linguistics and psychology, and literature (often with the help of the fine arts)” and immediately began to communicate across those disciplines, responding to the questions of one with the lessons of another.⁶ If the 1966 conference at Johns Hopkins on the “The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man” is regarded as the landmark or most literal moment for the “arrival” of theory (in the same sense, say, that the Beatles’ arrival the year before marked the “foreign invasion” of rock and roll), this is because, by drawing together the likes Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, Paul de Man, Lucien Goldmann, Jean-Pierre Vernant, Tzvetan Todorov, and Roland Barthes, it introduced theory as an essentially interdisciplinary and perhaps even unifying endeavor at a moment that seemed, from the perspective of individual disciplines, radically fragmented. Indeed, the organizers of the symposium openly “sought to identify certain basic problems and concerns common to every field of study.”⁷
7. The avatars of the structuralist solution to the crisis of the humanities, which included the Baltimore conference and a contemporaneous issue of *Yale French Studies* on “Structuralism,” outlined the constituents of a discourse that promised, to the glee of some and the regret of others, a broad-based critique of knowledge. In effect, we might say that the advent of theory appealed to those whose disciplines seemed stagnant or methodologically stale, to those who felt constrained by a scholarly tradition, and while this process was interdisciplinary, its ineffably linguistic mode or, as it is sometimes called, its “linguistic turn” invariably made its most profound and most bitter inroads in literature departments. The linguistic penchant of both structuralism and poststructuralism took literature as its *locus classicus*, as the privileged space of all language. Without literature, the argument went, theory would be

⁵Rabat’, p. 7.

⁶Rabat’, p. 17.

⁷Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato eds., *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1972), p. xvi.

merely philosophy or what is broadly understood as science (*Wissenschaft*), for the linguistic and rhetorical practices of literature bring about the investigation into language itself. As de Man wrote, "Literary theory can be said to come into being when the approach to literary texts is no longer based on non-linguistic, that is to say historical and aesthetic, considerations or, to put it somewhat less crudely, when the object of discussion is no longer the meaning or the value but the modalities of production and of the reception of meaning and of value prior to their establishment the implication being that this establishment is problematic enough to require an autonomous discipline of critical investigation to consider its possibility and its status."⁸

8. As de Man rightly suggests, then, theory coincided with, and thereby catalyzed, an already extant dissatisfaction with literary studies, but as such this intervention must be distinguished from the larger history of upheavals in American literary studies. The history of literary study in the United States can be understood, from its initial separation from the German philological tradition, by a struggle to define its purposes and methods, such that the very "tradition" of academic literary studies was characterized by the attempt to solidify tradition itself. Prior to the advent of theory, for instance, departments had been wrangling for decades over the commitment to "scholarship," which was primarily historical, and alternately to "criticism," which was primarily textual. By the 1960s the New Criticism seemed to have consolidated its position, but this is precisely when it "suddenly came under attack for political complicity or irrelevance."⁹ After all, the New Criticism had evolved, as Gerald Graff notes, into a kind of "protection racket" according to which interpretation became "an industry in which the routines of production obscured the humanistic ends production presumably served."¹⁰ In other words, what this racket came to protect was the methodology of interpretation itself, which was quickly materialized in sacrosanct or protected readings of certain texts. In turn, those same texts were effectively protected, both authorized in the sense of the organicity to which New Criticism aspired and authorized in the sense of a growing canon of texts that were educed to be worthwhile and worthy of criticism.¹¹
9. Admittedly, this brief history of theory threatens to render it just another in a long series of successive challenges to the literary status quo, such that the history of theory would merely amount to a history of, say, English or French departments, when in fact a great deal more

⁸de Man, p. 7. If the conditions for literary theory, as de Man describes them, have not substantially changed as I believe a case could be made for this then why do we live in the wake of theory? Surely part of the answer lies in the degree to which the procedures of this theory, as a mode of reading, were internalized, systematized, and reproduced: in short, in the degree to which literary theory became cliché. As de Man's alter-ego in America, Jacques Derrida, recently admitted, deconstruction ultimately amounted, in the hands of its American practitioners, to "organized bodies of rules, of procedures and techniques, in a word, *methods*, know-how applicable in a current fashion. One could even formulate or formalize (and I applied myself in this way at first) a certain consistency in these laws which made possible reading processes at once critical and critical of the ideal of critique, processes of close reading, which could reassure those who in or outside the wake of new criticism or some other formalism felt it necessary to legitimate this ethics of close reading or internal reading. And among these examples of these procedural or formalizing formulae that I had proposed there was the reversal of hierarchy. After having reversed a binary opposition, whatever it may be 'speech/writing, man/woman, spirit/matter, signifier/signified, signified/signifier, master/slave and so on' and having liberated the subjugated and submissive term, one then proceeded to the generalization of this latter in new traits, producing a different concept, for example another concept of writing such as trace, *différance*, *gramme*, text, and so on" (as quoted in *The Future of Theory*, p. 98).

⁹Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 240.

¹⁰*Professing Literature*, p. 228.

¹¹For a more developed history of literary criticism in the American university, see Vincent B. Leitch's *American Literary Criticism from the 30s to the 80s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

is arguably at stake in this reception. While the interrogation of the criticism “racket” had begun in earnest prior to the advent of theory, we distinguish theory, apart from other literary discourses, by virtue of that fact that its particular discourse took shape around the critique of tradition and of the institutions that condition and produce such knowledge. The structural development of theoretical discourse is impossible to extract from its historical development, since theory was not simply introduced into the American institution but emerged from, or rather *as*, a mode of querying the status quo. What separated theory from mere literary criticism is that the former’s interrogative impulse, which began with respect to the latter, eventually evolved into a critique (or, more precisely, into numerous modes of critique) that went beyond the pale of literature, deploying the tools of linguistic analysis to delve into a variety of cultural, socio-economic, and political institutions.

The Position and Disposition of Theory

10. In this context, perhaps we can begin to pose the historical emergence of theory in terms of the development of a certain kind of discourse, the deployment of which, although consolidated around various epistemic and textual tactics, entailed its own specific structure in relation to the institution of knowledge. As Rabat’ explains, “Using different means than demonstrations, fundraising, or lobbying, means that remain closer to the status of a text, Theory functions as a witness in an ongoing trial, and its necessity arises from the moment one realizes that there is precisely such a trial, be it in the field of the humanities or of justice, politics, bioethics, the environment, and so on. Facing these issues, Theory is supposed to ask difficult, foundation questions that all somehow entail revisionary readings of culture and its foundations texts.”¹² In other words, theory operates in two modes: first, as a witnessing, which should not be confused with the distantiated act of observation or the moral act of judgment; second, as a mode of inquiry, which should not be confused with the indifferent act of assessment or presumptive act of interrogation.
11. As Rabat’ argues, theory should never be embarrassed by the fact that it does not have the answers to these questions, since its ethics lie in the assumption of the position of watching and questioning without waiting in secret with a cache of predetermined ideals that would replace our culture with another already preconceived culture. Rather, theory developed as a discourse that compels culture to account for ‘to disclose’ itself, and in this respect *The Future of Theory* has provided, among others, one remarkably interesting thesis that we might take the opportunity to elaborate here. Insofar as theory remains undefined or vague while also seeking to question culture, even culture in the vast geo-political scope, Rabat’ argues that this is because theory is tantamount to a “process of hystericization.”¹³ What does this mean? Hysteria, Rabat’ recalls, has always proven historically inaccessible to “medical knowledge as a positive disease with clear symptoms and a detailed nosography,” and we might simply recall here that the initial diagnosis of the disease conceived it as an insufficient irrigation that caused the uterus to migrate. (As Plato explained, “The womb is an animal which longs to bring forth children. When it remains barren for too long after puberty, it is distressed and sorely disturbed, and straying about in the body and cutting off the passages of the breath, it impedes respiration and provokes in the sufferer the most acute anguish and all manner of diseases besides.”¹⁴) In other words, the tradition of analyzing hysteria, which reaches from

¹²Rabat’, p. 8-9.

¹³Rabat’, p. 9.

¹⁴Plato, *Timaeus*, part III, 91 c.

the Greeks to present day psychiatry, always remarks the attempt of various institutions of knowledge to determine its essence, whereas the essence of hysteria qua theory could be more accurately said to consist of a form of bearing witness to and questioning knowledge itself.

12. The enigma of hysteria compels knowledge itself to speak, to account for itself, and surely this was Freud's profound and vertiginous experience of the hysteric. Having undertaken the treatment of hysteria first with Breuer and then Charcot, Freud began in his private practice to contrive a new mode of encountering hysteria—a mode whose failure may allow us to grasp the correlative nature of theory. As Freud tells us in his *Fragment of a Case of Hysteria*, "since the date of the *Studies [in Hysteria]* psycho-analytic technique has been completely revolutionized. At that time the work of analysis started out from the symptoms, and aimed at clearing them up one after the other. Since then I have abandoned that technique, because I found it totally inadequate for dealing with the finer structure of a neurosis. I now let the patient himself choose the subject of the day's work, starting out from whatever surface his unconscious happens to be presenting to his notice at the moment."¹⁵ In other words, if hysteria is literally marked by the production of symptoms, Freud came to gradually understand that these symptoms were the traces of an experience—something seen, heard, remembered, or imagined, but an experience nonetheless—that had been displaced onto the body, where it insisted as a kind of *memento*. Often, a more recent memory sent the hysteric reeling back into childhood, when he or she had experienced a trauma, at first seemingly actual and then usually fantasmatic, but always (from the perspective of the symptomatology) ineluctably *real*. Whence the vast techniques of the unconscious, including the interpretations of dreams, that Freud had developed in order to recall the trauma and alleviate its symptomatic formations on the body.
13. The problem, as Freud came to learn in *Fragment of a Case of Hysteria*, was that the "passivity" he often assumed to lie at the basis of hysteria was capable of a subtle and even devious transformation whereby the analyst himself was liable to become the subject of interrogation. In the case of Dora upon which the *Fragment* was based, Freud seemed to have precisely misunderstood his own role in the analysis: not only had he become implicated in Dora's own psychic life but she began to unconsciously seduce him away from a properly analytic ignorance into the position of knowing and even pronouncement. At one point during her short treatment, Freud admits that "Dora only wanted to play 'secret' with me, and to hint that she was on the point of allowing her secret to be torn from her by the doctor;" the failure to realize the game—the counter-transference—in which he was caught would ultimately lead to the failure of the analysis itself.¹⁶ To lift a phrase from Jacques Lacan, Freud had assumed the role of the "manager of souls," had assumed a position of knowledge and mastery with respect to hysteria, and Dora had pounced upon that assumption.¹⁷
14. What does it mean, then, to speak of the "hystericization of theory"? In his "return to Freud," Lacan sought to articulate the nature of hysteria as a disposition with respect to the mastery of knowledge: in essence, the hysteric bears witness to the failure of symbolization with respect to his or her traumatic reality, but at the same time this failure of the signifier triggers the hysteric's own particular relationship to desire, namely, as a desire to know. "The structure of a neurosis is essentially a question," writes Lacan, and in order to understand theory itself

¹⁵Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, Volume VII, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1999), p. 12.

¹⁶Freud, 78.

¹⁷Jacques Lacan, "The Freudian Thing" in *'crits*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1977), p. 116.

as a “process of hystericization,” we might follow the analyst’s mission to express hysteria, beyond either its symptomatic presentation or its aetiological elaboration, as a modality of discourse that always questions the institutionalization of knowledge.

Propadeutic to Any Theory: The Four Discourses

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15. In *L'envers de la psychoanalyse*, his seminar of 1969-1970, Lacan formally shifted the study of hysteria from its psychological and symptomatic foundations, which lay at the basis of Freud's work, to an analysis of hysteria that effectively transformed the "science of the particular" into an abstract discourse. More specifically, Lacan situated hysteria as one of the four discourses (the other three being the discourses of the master, of the university, and of the analyst) on which "every determination of the subject depends."¹⁸
16. Of course, this sounds like any number of aphorisms about the irrevocable effects of language, but what is interesting here with respect to our investigation of theory is that Lacan develops "the practice of language" in the scope of larger social phenomena that organize the subject. One could go so far as to say that the four discourses reflect four distinct modes of social life, namely, educating (the university), governing (the master), protesting (the hysteric), and revolutionizing (the analyst) but this recognition ought to provoke our confusion: why isn't theory included within the discourse of the university and why should it be included within that of hysteria?¹⁹ As we can see, the discourse of theory qua the hysteric is diametrically opposed to the discourse of the university, which is to say that its terms have been moved two positions from that of the university (the discourses themselves, which are composed of the same four terms, are individuated according to the placement of the terms in the grid we are about to describe; in other words, Lacan constructs the discourses by placing the same series of four terms in different positions, such that the clockwise movement of the terms by one position forms each discourse). This relationship will ultimately allow us to understand not

¹⁸Jacques Lacan, *Seminar XVII: L'envers de la psychanalyse* (Paris: Seuil, 1991), p. 178.

¹⁹For an explanation of these functions, see Mark Bracher, "On the Psychological and Social Functions of Language: Lacan's Four Discourses" in *Lacanian Theory of Discourse: Subject, Structure, and Society*, ed. Mark Bracher, Marshall W. Alcorn, Jr., Ronald Corthell, and Françoise Massardie-Kenney (New York: NYU Press, 1994), p. 107 ff.

only the structure of theory but also its concomitant resentment, but for the moment we must begin by taking the long view of Lacan's four discourses.

17. Far from conceiving the valences of "successful" communication, Lacan's discourses are effectively conditioned by the recognition of the failure of language, that is, the failure of the signifier to "hit its mark." We speak endlessly because we cannot communicate what lies beyond the horizons of consciousness, because we cannot entirely evoke what is symbolically inaccessible/real. Discourse might thus be defined, in analytic terms, as "a necessary structure of something that largely exceeds always more or less casual speech," and yet to look at Lacan's four discourses/or, at least, at the four basic positions that ground the different discourses/we might be initially tempted to think that Lacan's is a basic linguistic model of sender and receiver.²⁰ Consider the first positions of the schema:
18. The agent expresses itself to the other, with the expectation that this expression will be understood and will bring about the desired effect. Thus, we can add another position to the discursive coordinates we are in the process of elaborating, for the "message" to the other is sent with the expectation that something will happen, that the demand will be fulfilled.
19. Hence, the address to the other has provoked a product, but we might note that the (dis)placement of the product below the level of communication already signals the distinction between a manifest and a latent level. Indeed, Lacan will eventually grant this lower level a kind of subterranean or hidden status, but this gesture/the derailment of the analytic conceptualization of discourse from consciousness or (what is the same thing) from our conscious sense of the functioning of communication/only genuinely emerges with the introduction of the fourth and final term:
20. In a sense, "truth" is the most unprecedented and unexpected position in the discursive constellation: where, after all, did truth come from and how can we square its appearance with the other positions? The answer/as the double slash already implies/does not lie in a strict causal relation to the product. Rather, as Paul Verhaeghe explains in a Lacanian turn of the screw that re-inscribes a wholly new sense of causality:

It is only the fourth position that introduces the psychoanalytic point of view. In fact, it is not the fourth, but the very first position, namely the position of *truth*. Indeed,

Freud demonstrated that, while man is speaking he is driven by a truth, even if it remains unknown to himself. It is this position of truth which functions as the motor and as the starting-point of each discourse.²¹

21. The Freudian aphorism that Verhaeghe recalls to describe this absent motivation, "the ego is not master of its own house," is perhaps better and more suggestively rendered by Freud's remarkable line: "*Wo Es war, soll Ich werden*." We are tempted to translate this phrase as "Where the id was, there the ego shall be," but Lacan argues that this misses the sense of Freud's insight, which does not include definite articles or definitive ready-made categories ("*Das Ich und das Es*") but, rather, concerns the distinction between the subject of the unconscious and the series of "alienating identifications" that compose the ego. Emphasizing the signifying

²⁰ *L'envers de la psychanalyse*, 11.

²¹ Paul Verhaeghe, *Does the Woman Exist: From Freud's Hysteric to Lacan's Feminine*, trans. Marc du Ry (New York: Other Press, 1999), p. 101.

coordinates that estrange the subject from the unconscious truth that speaks through us ("*a parle*"), Lacan translates the phrase as follows: "There where it was, it is my duty that I should come into being."²² As this phrase suggests, the model of sender and receiver is utterly short-circuited, and so we might retroactively consider the relationship between these positions, which reveal to us unsuspected nuances.

22. We have already noted the double slash that separates product and truth, but in fact this is one of two disjunctions that mark the relationship between the left and right side of the diagram or, more materially, between the speaking subject and the other.
23. At the top level, the relation of impossibility can be easily grasped if we recall that the agent, who is spoken rather than speaking, must now be understood as an imaginary effect of discourse rather than as its originator and authority. In other words, the subject is inhabited and incarnated around a truth which is impossible to transmit to another. In turn, the product of the other cannot possibly respond to the desire of the agent because the product has virtually nothing whatsoever to do with the agent's desire (if anything, it will remark the desire of the other). Hence, this product's response is *mutatis mutandi* utterly impotent with respect to the truth of the agent; the absence of the arrow refers the non-correlation between product and truth that marks any of the four discourses

The Discourse of Hysteria and the Hystercization of Theory

24. At this juncture, we might wonder: what does this have to do with theory? Having sketched the positions that determine the psychoanalytic model of discourse, we are now in a position to answer this question by posing the specific discourse of hysteria as the structural analogue of theory. In other words, theory is hystericized to the degree that it expresses the desire of hysteria, and it remains for us to grasp the specificity of this desire.
25. Hysterical discourse, as we have already seen, is created according to the placement of four discrete symbols in the discursive grid we have heretofore described, and our discussion to this point has already adumbrated a logical sense of the terminology.²³ Hence, let us simply begin by briefly defining these four symbols, beginning with the subject, which Lacan writes as $\$$. In other words, the subject is nothing else but this split subject, the subject split by language, whose speech always literally describes the absence at its heart, which provides our second term, *le petit objet a*. This "little a" consists in the rem(a)inder of primary narcissism that eludes the determination of speech, thereby rendering language incomplete but also catalyzing the subject's desire to say or have it all. Notably, the impossibility of this linguistic relation is encapsulated by Lacan's famous definition of the signifier as "that which represents the subject for another signifier," and this provides the final terms in our series. In essence, Lacan's definition entails that even the most basic linguistic model depends upon the existence of at least of two signifiers. The first signifier, S1, the so-called master signifier, refers to a fundamental attempt to cover up the lack that constitutes the subject: in other words, the

²²Lacan, "The Freudian Thing," p. 128-129.

²³Not that it is critical that we do not confuse these terms, which can rotate around the diagram, with the positions themselves, which remain fixed on the diagram. This temptation is particularly strong in the case of the subject, who would seem to automatically assume the place of agent when, in fact, the subject can be the agent (as in the discourse of hysteria) just as much as it can be the other (as in the discourse of the analyst), the product (as in the discourse of the university), or the truth (as in the discourse of the master).

insinuation of the master signifier always corresponds to the attempt of the subject to respond to its own absence of being. The second signifier, S2, refers to all other signifiers, which in turn take their cue from this master signifier, forming a network of signifiers or chain that constitutes knowledge.

26. In the context of the hysteric's schema, the placement of these terms in the discursive grid already begins to reveal the profoundly theoretical nature of the hysteric's discourse. Why? In the first place, the discourse places the subject (\$) in the position of agent who addresses the master (S1). In other words, hysteria fundamentally consists in a demand made of the master, and we see this most clearly at the outset of any analysis: the analysand comes to the analyst not only to seek answers but because he or she believes the analyst possesses those answers. The analyst, as Lacan says, exerts an initial appeal as "*le sujet supposé 'savoir'*" ("the subject supposed to know"), but unlike the situation of analysis, in which the subject is induced to make his or her desire a desire for unconscious knowledge, the discourse of the hysteric is addressed to the master.²⁴ The hysteric is motivated to address the master about the truth that speaks through or in the hysteric but which cannot be symbolized, and this is what we meant when we said that the hysteric's discourse is always phrased as a question. According to Lacan, behind all the questions, there lies one basic question: *che vuoi?* In other words: what am I, why do you say I am what I am?
27. The epistemic shift we associate with theory is just as much induced by the most fundamental of all theoretical tendencies, namely, the demand of all institutional forms of authority to explain: *why?* Why are things as you say they are?²⁵ If theory is akin to hysterical discourse, then this is, first and foremost, because the latter denotes the position of protest with respect to the discourse of the master, which assumes or embodies knowledge, or with respect to the discourse of the university, which Lacan considers a regression of mastery into the anonymity of institutional knowledge.²⁶ Both the discourse of the master and of the university ultimately rely upon justifications ("because" or "nature") that the discourse of hysteria relishes in exposing as empty. In fact, the dissatisfaction of the master's answer is actually constitutive of hysterical desire: or as Lacan famously said, "the desire of the hysteric is to have an

²⁴This is why Lacan suggests that psychoanalysis undertakes the "structural introduction, by artificial conditions, of the discourse of hysteria." Indeed, if psychoanalysis induces the "hystericization of discourse," as Lacan argues, then we might regard hysteria and its particular rhetoric of the unconscious as the primary ("universal") means of describing the subject of psychoanalysis. See *L'envers de la psychanalyse*, p. 35-36.

²⁵Jacques Lacan, *Seminar III: The Psychoses* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1993), p. 175. We must note here, however, that what mobilizes this form of hysterical questioning always refers to the enigma of sexuality, and this may explain why hysteria remains the privileged and accursed space of femininity (despite, as any analyst will attest, the existence of male hysterics). For instance, in the case of Freud's patient Dora, the subject of *Fragment of a Case of Hysteria*, this question of "why?" belies her entire analysis, and Freud himself tracks it down in the girl's illicit experiences with two women, her governess and her father's mistress, Frau K. In each case, Dora seems to silently beg of them: what does it mean to be a woman? Or, as Lacan explains in returning to this case history: "As is true for all women, and for reasons that are at the very basis of the most elementary forms of social exchange (the very reasons that Dora gives as the ground for her revolt), the problem of her condition is fundamentally that of accepting herself as an object of desire for the man, and this is for Dora the mystery motivating her idolatry of Frau K." See Jacques Lacan, "Intervention on Transference" in *In Dora's Case: Freud's Hysteria's Feminism*, ed. Charles Berheimer and Claire Kahane (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), p.99. Of course, Freud's account of Dora's hysteria bears witness to the analyst's utter failure to understand that, behind Dora's multiplying identifications, was precisely a desire for Frau K. rather than a for her father and his various substitutes. Whence the girl's dismissive attitude toward doctors, including Freud himself: she had "grown accustomed to laugh at the efforts of doctors" because their knowledge could not account for the mystery of sexuality she desired, because her questions made fools of the arbiters and priests of knowledge. Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, p. 22.

²⁶See Jacques Lacan, "Radiophonie," *Scilicet*, 1970, nr. 2/3, p. 88.

unsatisfied desire." There is no conscious "answer" to the hysteric's question except to reveal the enfeeblement of knowledge and explanation itself, and yet this failure is itself a kind of crowning moment for the *savoir* of the unconscious. "The hysterical subject prompts the other to know. What she desires is knowledge as a means of *jouissance*. This is structurally impossible, and it transforms her from an instigator of knowledge to source of failure, thereby demonstrating fundamental lack."²⁷ We clearly see this in Lacan's schema of the hysteric, where the address to the master (S1) induces a product, knowledge (S2), which is not only unrelated to the initial address but, even more problematic, which by definition cannot include the object-cause of desire that catalyzed the initial address. While the top half of the hysterical discourse establishes an impossibility between the subject's address and the master's answer that could at least be understood according to Blanchot's paradoxical "*rapport sans rapport*," the lower half of the discursive constellation affirms the absolute impotence of the product, of the master's knowledge, to respond to the hysteric's desire.

28. At this point, we might step back in order to grasp more clearly the stakes of theory in this discussion of hysteria, for if we take hysterical discourse to articulate the position of theory, we must also now come to terms with the dilemmas that characterize both hysteria and theory. Inasmuch as hysteria qua theory stands as the discourse of the question or, rather, of a questioning that always undermines institutional or official knowledge, must also recognize that *this same discourse is conditioned by a belief that an answer does exist*. In this light, Lacan's discussion of hysteric and master should be understood as the refashioning of Hegel's Master-Slave dialectic, in which this pair was posed as the embodiment of a "battle for recognition" that lay at the threshold of self-consciousness. As such, Lacan's discourse concerns the unconscious component of this battle, thereby revealing that while the slave-hysteric does induce the downfall of the master, the former's desire always threatens to re-install that function of the "one supposed to know." The toppling of a master discourse only succeeds for the hysteric in issuing forth a call for a new master, and in *L'envers de la psychoanalyse* Lacan underscores this point in one of his most famous, politically intriguing, and ultimately ironic moments. Needless to say, the subject of the seminar—the four discourses and, especially, the question of the hysteric—was intended to coincide with and to confront the student uprisings that had reached a fever pitch the previous year: 1968. In this context, not only did Lacan assign the discourse of the hysteric to the function of the protest, but he went so far as to tell the protesters: "*Ce ' quoi vous aspirez comme r'volutionnaires, c'est ' un ma'tre. Vous l'aurez.*" In other words, "as revolutionaries you are looking for a master—and you will find one."²⁸
29. By way of conclusion, then, we might suggest that theory was hystericized to the degree that not only did it address knowledge and demand that it speak its truth, but also to the degree that it desired, in turn, a coherent and masterful truth. Or as Robert Scholes once explained, "Structuralism, I am suggesting, is a response to the need' for a 'coherent system' that would unite the modern sciences and make the world habitable for man again. This is a religious need, of course."²⁹ Even as theory engaged in the critique of tradition, it was always already asserting itself as a new tradition with new masters, among which must be considered Lacan himself. It should hardly surprise us, then, that we are now engaged in playing the game of proper names, for these names still retain the taint of mastery and of concomitant resentment with which they arose to prominence in the 1970s and 1980s. Indeed, the resentment directed

²⁷Verhaeghe, p. 111.

²⁸*L'envers de la psychanalyse*, p. 239.

²⁹Robert Scholes, *Structuralism in Literature: An Introduction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), p. 2.

toward theory, while many things, must be understood above all other things as a reflection of the hypocrisy of theory itself. In the future, if it is to have a future, theory will have to find the means of critique of mastery and the institutionalization of knowledge that does not, ultimately, result in desiring and invoking new masters.

Notes

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