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Author(s): Jean-Michel Rabaté, Gregg Lambert

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Rabaté & Lambert - Conversation on The Future of Theory - JCRT 4.2

Conversation on *The Future of Theory**

Jean-Michel Rabaté
University of Pennsylvania
Gregg Lambert
Syracuse University

This public conversation was recorded at an event held at The Slought Gallery, Philadelphia, November 1st 2002, as part of a series called "Conversations in Theory," organized by Aaron Levy, curator. (Approximately 80 mins. in length.) A streaming audio archive of this event is available_: **Real Media Stream Windows Media Stream** [Media Support]

3. **Lambert:** To begin with I want to recall a line from *Difference and Repetition*, which forecasts a style of philosophy for the future, regarding what Deleuze describes as "a bearded Mona Lisa and a clean shaven Marx." This line returned to me, Jean-Michel, as I read your account in *The Future of Theory*, particularly regarding your description of what you call "an hysterical Hegel." Now, I always thought Marx was the hysterical one in relationship with Hegel, but here you seem to be saying something different. In the book there is a very dominant thesis that that Theory constantly risks becoming a little bit hysterical, or that its discourse itself is, in some way, hystericizing. Can you talk a bit about your use of the term "hysterical" with regard to the discourse of theory?
4. **Rabaté:** I love your question, Gregg. Yes. Let's begin with this image of the bearded Mona Lisa and the clean-shaven Marx. Having just read Williams's biography of Karl Marx—a really wonderful book—I learned that the last photograph of Marx was taken in 1882, while he was in Algiers. Of course, that period, for me, was interesting—Joyce had just been born—and this last photograph shows a bearded Marx, but since he was under the sun of Algeria, had later decided to shave his beard and get a very short haircut, although he was never photographed clean-shaved. This is the last Marx I would like to keep in mind—an unimaginably clean-shaven Marx, balding like Lenin! We have already seen the somewhat comic portrait of Freud shaven, which is as unorthodox as the beardless Marx. And here, of course, Deleuze sends us to the bearded Mona Lisa transformed by Duchamp. If Duchamp, the exemplary artist-philosopher-theoretician of art, could paint Mona Lisa with a mustache and a beard and a goatee, which he signed L. H. O. O. Q. ("*elle a chaud au cul*"—there is no need to translate it), it was so he could later on reprint the Mona Lisa without a beard, a reproduction of the usual Mona Lisa entitled: "Mona Lisa, Shaved." For me, this could allegorize what Theory does to canonical texts: first, it adds to the portraits of their authors a waggish beard or a funky mustache, then it lets them come out, as it were, "clean and shaven." As I suggested in the book—there will always be a "future of Theory" since "tomorrow you will get a free shave"!
5. I think that all of this has to do with the latent hysteria contained in Theory. The central question of hysteria in Lacan's account is ultimately something like: "Am I a man or a woman?" Here is one of the questions that Theory should start asking of us. Not just because I'm

interested in gender theory, but because one can take Judith Butler, who is emblematic of a certain discourse of gender theory when it tries to go elsewhere, although not necessarily further. When Judith Butler continues writing Theory while denouncing Theory, or pretending that she is beyond Theory then I see her doing Theory, but “shaved.” In other words, to use a musical image, we seem to be always between *Le Nozze de Figaro* and the reprise of the *Figaro* theme (“*Se vuol ballare...*”), which is curiously heard at the end of *Don Giovanni*. My idea of the hysterization that Theory engenders takes its cue in Lacan. My starting point is Lacanian, although *The Future of Theory* is not a Lacanian book, strictly speaking. I have been interested in the theory of the “Four discourses” in Lacan, and I was trying to see why Theory, as it has been famously or infamously displayed, or produced, had to face the discourse of the university while, at the same time, never quite being reducible to the discourse of the university.

6. Since I have started shaving in front of you, I can confess more. Most of this book—it may not be obvious—is autobiographical. When I came to Penn in ninety-two, the first local star who was mentioned to me was Camille Paglia. I never heard of the name but she was the most famous anti-theoretician living in the US at that time. One day, an acquaintance suggested that I should invite her to my seminar because she had “kicked Derrida in the ass!” My response was: “Oh really? That might be interesting.” Then I heard Camille Paglia talk a few times and loved the way she kept contradicting herself without any qualms—indeed, it was an hysterical reaction to Theory’s hystericizing discourse. She was the living proof that that Theory could antagonize or hystericize, thus produce effects that, for better or worse, are similar to those of classical hysteria. This led me back to the discourse of the Surrealists who, in 1928, published a praise of hysteria. My gesture in the opening pages of the book was simply to take passages from this manifesto for hysteria written by Breton and his friends, and whenever the word “hysteria” was used, I replaced it with the word “theory.” And it works!
7. **Lambert:** I think I remember Paglia, at that time, published an article where she recommended that we [Americans] have a second Boston Tea Party and throw all the French back into sea.
8. **Rabaté:** Yes, so this confirms the autobiographical element here. I like this idea of “importation,” a lot has been written about the French as these “interlopers,” like the Greeks were for the Romans. This is what Camille Paglia says, basically. These sophists were invited to American universities because they make more money in the states, but they pervert everything, and they now need to be sanitized and thrown back.
9. **Lambert:** Well, even Derrida had made fun of this desire. I remember a lecture given at Cornell (later published as “The University in the Eyes of its Pupils”) where Derrida constantly referred to himself as a “*professor au large*,” which also means as you know, “from the high seas,” that is, somebody who’s just landed. So, in a sense, he constantly talked about his position in the United States as being equivalent to someone who has just come off the boat, so to speak.
10. **Rabaté:** Right, this is indeed what I mean. Before I came to this country, I had worked with Derrida as a student at the *L’Ecole Normale Supérieure*, and it was interesting to compare how in France—maybe this has changed a little now—he was not really a star, even though he was rumored to be very big in America, like you might say, “big in Japan.” When we heard this, our response was “Oh really, is he?” And then we might have a coffee or a drink with him, and he’d say, “Oh, these Americans, they exhaust me!” That was the myth: to be a good theoretician, one had to make it big in America.

11. **Lambert:** On the subject of imports, the figure of Barthes has always struck me as extremely important, and you devote a whole section to his influence, I think, in order to demonstrate a more subtle genealogy of his work than is often registered in the United States around the distinction between structuralism and post-structuralism. For example, Barthes' earlier work did not find an audience that was exclusively located in universities, and despite the difficulty of the essay "Myth Today" in *Mythologies*, I am often amazed by the staying power of this programmatic little book, which is still taught in secondary schools today, and may even offer-if revised for a more contemporary social and ideological context-an alternative model for the analysis of popular culture than the British version of Cultural Studies. Finally, there is something about the variation of Barthes' project, which cannot be reduced to any simplistic program, which seems to illustrate your understanding of "theory as literature," the title of the last chapter of *The Future of Theory*.
12. **Rabaté:** Yes, I agree that I owe a lot to Barthes, although my love for Barthes derives from after having come to the U.S. When still in France, I had written on *Camera Lucida* in a number of discussions of the image, but it was the anti-semiotic and phenomenological "later Barthes" I was interested in, while I would never open again these old volumes associated with Structuralism and *Tel Quel*. I remember telling French students that *S/Z* was beautiful, but also totally messy and unusable. It was only after I had started teaching "Theory" in the U.S. that I discovered how important, even necessary, the whole of Barthes' oeuvre was. As you say, his first essays pave the way to a more subtle approach to cultural studies and also to social semiotics. More than that, it is the very sweep and reach of Barthes' claims, the multiple ambitions of a polymorphous intelligence able to work and play everywhere—which did not preclude a series of embarrassing recantations – that provided a model of what Theory should do: be dynamic, launch processes without worrying where they will end, and never be afraid of internal dissensions and contradictions
13. **Lambert:** In the introduction to your book, you give a note, or "caution" as it may be, concerning what you describe as a burgeoning new "consensus," which refers, maybe, to a second stage of this hysterization of Theory we just spoke of. There is, if I could quote you, "a spreading reluctance to 'do' or 'let do' Theory in the university." As I was reading this, I was thinking of the various disparate signs of this new consensus, the most evident of which (for me) has been the gradual acceptance of a certain kind of historical narrative of Theory itself, in which Theory is capitalized, as sort of "High Theory" (like in "High Modernism," or "High Baroque"), and has been supplanted—for reasons of history, agenda, politics, constituency—by a kind of acephalic or de-capitalized number of theoretical modes of inquiry (under the heading of "theories of" ... gender, sexuality, identity, race, etc.). I have witnessed two aspects of this myth as it began to become institutionalized at the level of departments and disciplines (especially, more recently, through the influence professional organizations like the MLA). The first was an explicit charge of "elitism" against the dominant historical modes of theory, mostly European in origin, such as deconstruction, psychoanalysis, and new historicism. (Although, I have to say, in the case of new historicism, I remember a line from one of Stephen Greenblatt's essays, I believe, about coming back from Thailand in first class and reflecting on post-colonial topics over the jingling of ice in his scotch glass—and I could see why this might spark some charges of elitism). The second can be described as an "anti-systematic" impulse, which again, could be understood to actually refer to a certain style of Hegelianism that is now being reacted against. How do you understand these traits "elitism" and "system-building" to have become attached to the representation of Theory in the United States?

14. **Rabaté:** This is an important question, and this charge is based on a misconception of Theory. Personally, I do not think that Theory is elitist, per se, but rather that it poses the question of knowledge as well as a certain relationship to knowledge. One of the reasons why Theory seemed elitist when it emerged in the seventies in the United States was that, suddenly, it opened a new library. That is, suddenly, literary scholars were more or less forced'willy-nilly, quickly—to read through the works of Levinas, Heidegger, Bataille, Habermas, and other European philosophers. That was part of the seduction, but it was also what somehow precipitated its downfall, as this has been the rallying point for new critical schools in the university. Besides, what looked "elitist" by comparison to "politics," as we said in the nineties, seems mostly an American problem. It doesn't exist in France, for the simple reason that they don't do "Theory" as we do it here. Of course, many of the thinkers we mentioned have been in contact with French writers, but not "Theory" as such. The name is always used as an Americanism, and Theory is not taught in French universities. You can be a philosopher, you can be a sociologist, or a literary researcher who has philosophical leanings, but it's only now that a certain number of terms have been imported back in France. In Europe, it would be different, of course, but in France particularly, Theory is just "literary theory," not the American meaning in which you have philosophy, ethics, psychoanalysis and other such discourses included under the name.
15. This is why I quoted Judith Butler in the introduction of the book. I was surprised to see how adamant she has been in saying "No, no. I'm not doing Theory. I'm doing activism. I'm doing politics. Theory is dead." Well, for me, this is a semantic problem. What she does is indeed Theory, since her grounding is clearly in Hegel, in psychoanalytic discourse, gender discourse, Foucault and similar thinkers. I wondered why she would deny what she had been doing for some time. How can she not really be following Camille Paglia (who can be dismissed rather quickly), but employing the same gesture simply say: "No, Theory is behind me. This is past. This was ten years ago, or a leftover from the sixties and seventies, and now in the nineties we have to be "political"?"
16. True, we are essentially still talking about elite institutions somehow, whether they are called Stanford or Penn, and about the problems associated with tenure and promotion in elite institutions. In this sense, I can accept that Theory has partly an elitist character, but this remains purely sociological. In fact, I don't think that Theory is particularly opaque. It does require that you be conversant with a number of difficult texts, although reading Plato or Kierkegaard is not much more difficult than, say, reading Chaucer, Hopkins, Joyce or Shakespeare. Fundamentally, Theory opens to another dimension of the library. It opens also to another dimension in your own discourse, and this is where things get complicated. This is not my complete definition of Theory, but it's one aspect of Theory: you are supposed to account for what you do when, for example, you are reading or attempting to be concrete. This is what I often ask of my undergrads: I ask them to choose freely any topic they want, provided they can account for the reasons that made them decide to treat this topic. It looks simple enough, but in fact it's not so easy to justify the choice of discussing a poster or a film. It is not easy if you want this choice to be relevant and to keep a connection with why you are a student, or why you want to do this and not something else, and so on. There is an added level of discursive responsibility brought in by Theory.
17. **Lambert:** Current "anti-theoretical" positions have charged Theory with "missing the real," and are implicitly described in your argument as stemming from hystericizing discourse. In the case of the substitution of the term "politics" for "theory," as in the example of Butler

who you cite, there is an implicit assertion that Theory becomes more concrete, or is suddenly restored to the real (which, interestingly enough, is given the status of “a missing object”), only when Theory takes on an overtly political subject of agency. In response, you write, “The post-Romantic yearning of an unattainable mother construed as more real or more alive has never sounded so true as when dealing with the subject of Theory.” Overall, many of the arguments, as well as a certain amount of irony that is detectable in your account of the historical modes of the debates around Theory, seem to be predicated on this thesis that the status of Theory concerns a “missing” relation to truth. It seems that almost all positions against Theory today are those in which truth is said to be either missing or elided in the kind of knowledge that Theory produces; hence the charges of its being a-historical, apolitical, partial (or Eurocentric) so that some aspect of the subject’s own agency is necessary in order to re-establish access to this register of truth. Can you comment on this?

18. **Rabaté:** Yes, this point is very important, if not crucial, and it is this idea that Camille Paglia and others conveyed in the early nineties. Indeed, the very connotations of the word “Theory” seem to lead you astray; that is to say, if you’re in Theory, then you’re in the realm of ideas and you’re not dealing with the real world. Consequently, a shift has been observed in literary theory from deconstruction, post-structuralism and psychoanalytic theories to neo-Marxism and new historicism, a shift that claimed it heralded a “return to History.” The main implication was that Theory had always been essentially ahistorical. What interests me here is that the same has been said about high Modernism. Suddenly Modernism was perceived as both elitist and a-historical. Authors like Eliot and Pound were quoted as confirming the elitism and a-historicism of the “movement.” At the same time, people were embarrassed because of Eliot’s right-wing ideas, of Pound’s neo-Fascism. Even if their choices do not help, they tend to suggest that they were closer to history than one would imagine! The political discourse associated with P.C. ism was both rejecting their politics and blaming these political choices on a fundamental absence from history. I literally shocked many people when I said that I had worked on Pound precisely because he was a Fascist—that this was an excellent opportunity to study and perhaps undo or deconstruct certain aspects of fascism.
19. What struck me when I came to University of Pennsylvania in ninety-two was the inflation of the term “the politics of...” At that time, all the students I had were working on “the politics of” this or “the politics of” that. I first thought, “Wow, they’re really political here!” I should’ve realized that the phrase was more or less empty. I even engaged in a sort of in-joke about this in the book, when I make fun of people who have “politics of” in their title. Of course, as I had just recently published a book entitled *James Joyce and the Politics of Egoism*, I was making fun of myself as well. However, this inflation of the “politics of,” as in the politics of language, the politics of sexuality, and so on, was often blamed on the French. I would often hear, “But you taught us that everything is political; therefore, now everything has to be politicized.” This also led to the idea—which is very Romantic in a way—that the *real* Real is just there, a little further... As one of my French students once said, “I renounce, I cannot write a PhD, life is too short.” This may be true—it will be, in the long run—but if you are a student engaged in some kind of writing and reading process, one can show to you that there is a specific “Real” to be dealt with in writing as well. At least I was successful in demonstrating this to him and having him finish a thesis!
20. The belief in a “reality” leads, nevertheless, to different versions of what determines reality. When I was a student in 1968, “reality” was *nobler*. Many of my friends believed this and acted upon it when they stopped being students and started to work in factories. Some of

them would go to demonstrations and that was it. At least what mattered was that you knew what the real was. However, even if you drop your studies and become a construction worker, you need a theory or at least an account of why you are doing that. Supposing you join a Renault plant with the idea of transforming your factory and co-workers into a revolutionary unit—can you do it? What degree of delusion and false consciousness must you try to avoid?

21. **Lambert:** This reminds me of an anecdote in one of the Seminars where Lacan talks, in a very funny passage, about working in Sardinia in summer as a fisherman. It is the little story of petit Jean, who says, “Do you see that tin can floating out there on the waves?” Lacan says “Yes, I think so,” and petit Jean says, “Well, it doesn’t see you.”
22. **Rabaté:** Exactly! I have returned to this anecdote for a piece to be published in the *Cambridge Companion to Lacan*. I remember how in 1969 Lacan quoted himself and modified the punch-line of the same anecdote by simply replacing the sardine can with Freud. He added that when he was writing, even if he knew that Freud was not actually looking at him, he could feel the presence of his insistent gaze! This and other factors may explain why, in the early seventies in France, those who tried very hard to be political and had joined leftist groups ended up on Lacanian couches. Lacan was perhaps the only person who had a comprehensive and powerful enough discourse that seemed to speak to the subversive intent of the students and, at the same time, who situated himself elsewhere. This might force us to examine more systematically the function of the Master who is always implied in the discourse of hysteria. At that time, however, another model was provided by Foucault, who was rather anti-Marxist and not very Freudian, and who actually taught people a lot about real politics, for example, when he worked with prisons and prisoner’s rights. Foucault once said that he found it was curious that we saw philosophers like Camus and Sartre, who elaborated a generous discourse about ethics, politics, commitment, engagement, while they happened to have done the least during the war; whereas there were also intellectuals like Jean Cavailles and Marc Bloch who ended up in active Resistance groups and paid the price with their lives. Both were executed during the war. Cavailles had invented his set theory and new logico-mathematical objects, and Bloch was a renowned specialist of the Middle Ages; neither really tried to connect their field of expertise with an ethical or political discourse but they enacted their ethical beliefs directly.
23. **Lambert:** Because this is partly scripted, we’re following the script, but at the same time, this is also supposedly organic, and our conversation has been developing in a way that I thought it would, that is, more and more of our discussion of Theory has been framed by psychoanalytic discourse, particularly that of Lacan, on whom you are an expert. I believe that psychoanalysis in particular may have something important to tell us about this specific problem we have been discussing concerning the subject of Theory in the university. In particular I’m thinking about the status of the university in the famous four discourses that you alluded to earlier, and how that’s related to the discourse of hysteria—since I’m guessing that your reading of the four discourses is behind the description of Theory as hysterical and hystericizing. I wonder if you could clarify this for the benefit of our audience.
24. **Rabaté:** This is a difficult moment in Lacan’s seminar, but he distinguishes four discourses, one being the discourse of the master, the other the discourse of the academic (*universitaire*), the discourse of the analyst, where he tries to situate himself, and the discourse of hysteria. “Hysteria” is taken in a very broad sense. My main impetus in writing this book was to assert that “Theory comes from, or is like, hysteria.” There were immediately people who responded:

“Oh, but you are then against Theory!” And I would reply: “On the contrary, I am all for Theory.” Inevitably, someone would cry: “Oh, how can you see Theory as positive and call it ...”

25. **Lambert:** . . . call it *petite hysteria*.
26. **Rabaté:** Right! But even the grand hysteria of someone like Camille Paglia can be interesting in her own manner. What Lacan is saying is that hysteria—its strange structure—is never satisfied with a neat answer, always asks for more in the name of a certain notion of truth. Therefore, some kind of knowledge is produced. You can only be a good scientist or intellectual when you question absolutely everything, you want to go back to elementals and redefine the terms, not accepting any pat answer you are given. For instance if today, we talk about building Europe, a new Europe, how can one account critically for all the good intentions that are deployed and also situate them as an alternative to the American model? Is the notion of “late capitalism” or “post-modern capitalism” that Jameson and others used really useful? Yes and no. What current political system could fall outside the scope of such a term? These are just examples of how a theoretical hystericization might function. Lacan tried to negotiate this in a productive way with a sort of later Freudo-Marxism. The crucial innovation is that he introduces an element which is rarely produced in Marxist discourse—the dimension of enjoyment, of *jouissance*, something that is, I think, fundamental to any discussion of politics today. And in this sense, I think someone like Žižek has managed to make sense of all these strands of critique coming from Lacan and the Neo-Marxists. Deleuze is another, with his critique of ego-capitalism from the point of view of schizophrenia, which is another interesting way of thinking about these issues.
27. **Lambert:** I think that I recall a wonderful moment from Lacan’s Seminar on Ethics, which he describes the character of the intellectual in a manner that, I think, has a particular pertinence for today. He was speaking around the fifties, I believe; certainly it comes from the period of the creation of atomic energy and the atomic bomb as, perhaps, the central problem of *jouissance*. I believe he phrased this problem in terms of whether we would cross this threshold of *jouissance*, that is, whether we would rather extinguish the world than let the other ideological side get a chance to enjoy it. It is this context that he made a very canny—as he usually does in a moment of a joke—comment on the structure of the political which that I think still holds very true today. He said that, typically, the conservative intellectual, as an individual, could be characterized as what he called a “knave.” (At that moment he uses the English notion of knavery, the knave from, in fact, Shakespeare.) But he said that, as a group, conservative intellectuals are in fact a bunch of fools. I think that if you can see this with Bush today, and it’s almost a demonstration of this thesis that when you get a bunch of conservatives together, they’ll begin acting foolish. Whereas, you know, that behind every one of them in the group there’s a real knave at work—and I’m thinking here of Cheney, probably. But Lacan also said that the problem with the left, and with a certain orthodoxy that is common in the discourse of the left, is that, individually, the leftist critic is often a fool, whereas a group of leftists are often a bunch of knaves. And so, in a certain way—and I’m speaking about this in relationship to all you’ve been talking about—I find that there is a tendency to suspend a certain register of the truth for a political good, as if the presence of an overtly ideological decision is what guarantees, or in fact validates, the effect of truth at the moment when one lies.
28. **Rabaté:** Precisely. And I think this is just as true today as it was then. This is where the academy, as a group of knaves perhaps, is right to refuse to be too foolish. But it looks as if

there was a choice; in fact, you are either a knave or a fool in refusing the discourse associated with Theory, or a particularly bad version of postmodern theory in which there is no truth. If everything is constructed, then, everything is easily deconstructed too easily. This is where a reductive version of Derrida's transforming "there's no 'outside the text'" into: "everything is a mere text" 'played into the most fundamental and reactionary values of American life. If all that is being said about social discourse is that it is fundamentally constructed, meanings all these are just lies, why not just be ourselves, with all the old individualism coming back and nature as a sort of source and mother. One slips back into a reactionary ideology (Rorty). If this is what American "Theory" inevitably begets, I agree that it's good to refuse it. However, this can only be stated after a series of total distortions. Derrida would immensely complicate such simplistic assertions. This is why I am still close to Derrida, even though I am a little baffled by the theological turn his thinking has taken recently. Although it is true that in an American context, it is necessary to go back to issues like "God" and the "name of God".

29. **Lambert:** I remember even in the seventies and the eighties, during the period when reader response criticism was coming in, and I think there was a real American sense of the politicization of theory that was in reader-response criticism, for example. But there was a real reaction at the same time, because people began complaining, "Well, what do critics have left to do if we do nothing but act like ethnographers and record the readings that students make of every text?" There was the danger of no transformative relation, or the evacuation of the critical position of knowledge and authority in that moment. In response to the entry of deconstructive criticism, there was also real terror in the idea that there is no truth. I think that both fears were characteristic of the early reception of theoretical discourse, which prompted a misrepresentation that was hysterical. And yet, the positions that followed from this reactionary period took this misreading as a true representation of Theory. What was worse, however, in my view, was that others simply took the first misreading literally; therefore, if there is no truth, and if everything is constructed, then it is all just "strategy"
30. **Rabaté:** Yes, the same symptom appeared when it looked as if the main enemy was Plato or Platonism. This was something that struck me as being misguided when I came here to teach. Someone would say, "We do not want to read Plato," and then add: "We are against idealism" or "Derrida teaches that presence is bad." My response was always an "Oh, really?" by which I tried to establish as much distance as presence! Happily, at that time, in a number of discussions with Anglo-American students, Derrida insisted that presence is not bad as such and that it is even the best one can have. Even if we can question the "metaphysics of presence" denounced by Heidegger, it does not follow that we have to demonize presence. Deleuze could be blamed for an early knee-jerk anti-Platonism that would assert: "Platonism is idealism; we are materialists; materialism is good, idealism is bad." Why not, after all? The real problem begins when this is understood to mean: "Let's get out of Platonism as quickly as we can!"
31. On the other hand, following Lacan, I see Socrates as the figure of the first hysteric in philosophy. In the Socratic method, if you play the role of Socrates, you have to play the role of the hysteric. "Why do you say that? Do you think that really? What do you mean when you use that word?" This is connected with the psychoanalytic method; in a hypothetical situation you cannot tell people— "Well, you believe, that individualism is "good" 'as good as altruism, say—and that idealism is "bad", but you know, you're wrong." From a psychoanalytic perspective, it is important to understand that people can know, but that they don't want to know because there is too much enjoyment in their misinterpretations and misconstructions.

32. **Lambert:** I'm going to shift the questions now to another tense and talk a little bit about the past. My genealogy begins much later than yours, from the beginning of the eighties and from another coast—as you say, from elsewhere. I studied at Berkley with the likes of Jean-Luc Nancy, Lacoue-Labarthe, and Avital Ronell. I remember quite clearly from this period the dominance of what could be called the first wave of DeMan's students, Ronell among them, who could be said to have established the tone of a distinctly American brand of deconstruction. I look back on this period with a mixture of regret, disdain, and admiration for all the political intrigues, the back-stabbings, and the phantom assassinations. It was like watching a Chinese opera! Perhaps we need—we Americans, that is—someone like Elizabeth Roudinesco to sort out this important historical period for us. In fact, I sometimes think it's the closest we've ever come as a culture to imitating Parisian social life.
33. What I regret, however, was the sort of somewhat paranoid atmosphere and the heavy-handedness of the guerilla-like tactics that were employed by some of this group to establish the place of Theory in departments and in professional organizations in the 1980's. In my view, part of backlash that has occurred around the continued place of Theory was conditioned by the air of intimidation that was employed against members of the academy, and you can still see this today when people react with a sense of insecurity in response to someone who does Theory. Perhaps this is part of the implicit charge of elitism, which is that, early on, many people used theoretical discourse as a weapon, as a kind of bludgeon, as if to say, "You're not smart enough to talk to me," or something like that. Although this period does not play an important role in your book, I wonder if you could relate some of your own experience and perspective of the early to the mid-late eighties.
34. **Rabaté:** Right. That's a very important question because I think any school tends to create mannerisms by which you identify with or against. I don't know whether you read this really good and funny book called Wittgenstein's Poker which describes Cambridge in the 1930's when all these British scholars had started imitating Wittgenstein's habit of meditating, keeping silent and then suddenly having an illumination manifested by hitting his forehead with a loud, "*Ach, Ja!*"
35. **Lambert:** Yes, I know of a contemporary analytic philosopher who was born in the states, but after he went to Australia started speaking with a heavy British accent.
36. **Rabaté:** Likewise, I remember a time when, if you were a French communist, your grammar would deteriorate because Marchais, the Communist Party leader, would put on a proletarian mask and systematically use wrong subjunctives, bad grammar and so on. Everyone who wished to be thought of as an orthodox Fellow traveler would speak suddenly this terrible French. On their side, the Lacanians had devised a complex Mallarmean syntax and even used a few of their own phrases in imitation of the Master (they would never say "I am alluding to x," they'd say "*je pointe*" at something.) Indeed, any group will tend to create these signs; and flaunting one's familiarity with Hegel, Nietzsche or Heidegger, this parading of Germanic erudition was the dominant mode by which de Man and his followers asserted their authority.
37. **Lambert:** Well, I am fond of the following anecdote, because it describes a DeManian sort of encounter. I was phoned one morning by a graduate student, and during the conversation he asked me what I was doing. And I said, "Well I just spent the morning reading Henry James' 'Figure in the Carpet' and I'm writing on it right now." I usually work pretty quickly. And so, the response from my inquisitor was, "Oh Really? And to think that it took me two years to read that text." So there was this pregnant moment, and this was typical of the DeManians, it

would take years and years for them to finish anything, because the notion of reading was, of course, over-determined in a sense that no one could actually really read something in the morning, and I was a fool for thinking I was really *reading*.

38. **Rabaté:** Since you talk about de Man, a lot of what has to do with the hysterization of Theory has rebounded in the endless trial of de Man, a complex issue no doubt, perhaps too complex to go into right now. I'd say simply that I'm not a "DeManian" (it sounds like a bad disease). I like de Man's work in some respects, but in too many of his essays I find at some point a more or less deliberate obfuscation. At any rate, it's not because one has been a Nazi sympathizer as a young man that one's writings should suddenly stop being readable. I have the same attitude facing Heidegger, Celine, and Pound. When I learned that de Man had been an extreme right journalist as a very young man, he became more not less interesting. And the American rejection that followed adulation was emblematic of the mistake I was denouncing earlier a propos of Butler. It is similar to the case of Céline, who is obviously one of the greatest French novelists of the last century. True, he turned into a Nazi sympathizer, and even worse, a rabid anti-Semite. But this is a symptom that we should try to understand. Since so much in the twentieth century had to do with fascism, let's address that squarely.
39. **Lambert:** Part of this earlier tradition that we're tracing historically was the rise of a very experimental kind of theory, and I'm thinking of books like Avital Ronell's *Telephone Book*. It suppose it emerged partly in response to Derrida's *Glas* and the period of *Tel Quel*, which was the dominant influence in Paris a decade earlier. But the period I am speaking of was at the height of the Reagan Era, and it's a very odd and kind of interesting truism to say that a more conservative political environment produces a more hysterical leftist environment, in the sense. One of the things that I was part of in the early eighties was a group called "Radio Free Theory," and this was in Berkeley, where we actually put on a radio show together that starred several people like Ronell and others who have gone on to make a name for themselves, or to disappear. But we created a radio program that had things like a "schizophrenic weather report" and a radio version of Freud's "The Rat Man." It actually aired on the PBS radio station. But it seemed like anything was possible in this environment, and the more radical and experimental that we became, the more possible it seemed, although I also think that we went way over the line of good taste in the process. But I wonder if you think about that and the period that followed, precisely around the emergence of the revelation of the wartime writings of de Man, that there was a closing down of some of the more surrealist and experimental forms of theoretical work in the United States?
40. **Rabaté:** Of course, you could say that Lacan himself, with his very bizarre syntax, was one of the first to perform Theory. It's a good suggestion for us: let's immediately start these Rat Man's talks ... But, indeed, the moment of experimentation seems to have passed. And my reaction here is to take precisely a historical perspective and go back to major texts like Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* or texts by Kierkegaard'this is a literature of theory, writing, experimentation, creatively blurring genres and boundaries. Most of the systematic rewrites of Theory of the eighties seem secondary to these. Take Derrida's *Glas*, for instance. I am surprised when I see people are baffled by it and speak of its radically innovative form. Next to *Finnegans Wake*, it seems rather tame in comparison. The avant-garde gestures toward subversion presupposes that by subverting language you can also subvert politics and culture as well. We have gone wary of these assimilations, back to a more conservative attitude.
41. Interestingly, the experimental moment was avoided by de Man. But it is precisely when the

de Manian discourse was getting predictable or stereotyped, that Derrida and other American deconstructionists like Ronell started playing with fonts, types and settings, radically opening the page to new assemblages. For me, of course, Theory is not opposed to poetry, and a lot of LANGUAGE poetry comes close to what I call Theory. I heard the same story from many poet friends in France; they would go all the way to California and chat with Californian “witnesses.” All they wanted to do was hear anecdotes about Ginsberg or Kerouac, whereas these American writers only wanted to chat about the latest books by Derrida or Deleuze. Then, indeed, there was a time when one American avant-garde was fascinated by Theory, just when most poets in France had had too much theory and were getting back to more direct experimentation.

42. **Lambert:** Well, this has been good. I’m going to now ask one final question, which is basically to rephrase or to repeat to you, in a very Lacanian gesture, the title of your book as a question. So what is the future of Theory? You have already spoken about this in terms of the possibility of an avant-garde, about the varied forms of experimentation that question the level at which we read the text, and that has to continue in some way, but what is the future of such practices?
43. **Rabaté:** Well, you know the prophecy of Rabelais who has a character announce: “Tomorrow, the blind will not see and the deaf will not hear.” Perhaps this is the “future of theory” as well: a neat tautology whose function is to keep alive the pleasantly soothing illusion that there is a future. Nevertheless, I do believe that theory will re-emerge as more visible simply because it is needed. One needs to update our “discourses on method,” one needs to keep a discursive take on concepts if one wishes to know what one does as an artist, as a scholar, or as a writer. There is nothing new to this, as this is what Socrates had already been urging fellow Athenians to do. Thus, it’s always good to look back in time and see parallels with, say, the age of Apuleius and the age of Dante, the age of Bruno and the age of the Schlegels. Because of the politicization of academic struggles and the recent “Theory Wars,” one forgets that there has been a longer history of Theory. One of these days, I will teach a class on Theory using only non-canonical books. No Derrida, no Lacan, no de Man, no Butler, no Bhabha. Just Protagoras, Democritus, Rabelais, Balzac, Bruno, Vico, Coleridge, Carlyle, Borges and a few others. If it is feasible, this should trigger an awareness that there is yet a much more complex history of Theory to be written. It might lose its capital “T” in the process, but that for now would be a worthwhile future project. But, in the end I would say that Theory is for today, is now, and that may be my final answer.

Notes

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Jean-Michel Rabaté is currently Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Pennsylvania. He has published around 15 books on Beckett, Bernhard, Pound, Joyce, psychoanalysis and literary theory. Recent books include *Jacques Lacan* (Palgrave, 2001) plus a collection of essays, *Lacan in America* (Other Press, 2000). He has just published *James Joyce and the Politics of Egoism* (Cambridge University Press, 2001) and *The Future of Theory* (Blackwell, 2002). Forthcoming is the *Cambridge Guide to Jacques Lacan* (Cambridge University Press, 2002). He is on the curatorial board of Slought Networks.

Gregg Lambert, Professor of English & Textual Studies, Syracuse University, has written and published on the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze, contemporary literary theory, aesthetics, and the fate of the Humanities' disciplines in the contemporary university. Publications include *The Non-Philosophy of Gilles Deleuze* (Continuum, 2002) and *Report to the Academy* (Critical Studies in the Humanities, Davies 2001). Forthcoming in 2003 from Continuum is *The Return of the Baroque: Art, History, and Theory in the Modern Age*.

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