

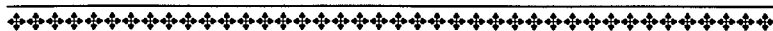
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The possibility of literary theory has repeatedly been put at risk by the apparently simple question “What sort of object is a literary text?” The question of the mode of being of the literary work has provoked some of the most intense critical inquiry of recent times. In the work of Heidegger, Adorno, and Derrida, the epistemological status of literature, the problem of language’s claim to true representation, challenges our received notions of ontology and, ultimately, being itself. Thus the question “What is literature?” frequently sponsors highly philosophical interrogations of our inherited ways of comprehending the external world.

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*Literature, Culture, Theory* 22



## **Singularities**

Extremes of theory in the twentieth century

*Literature, Culture, Theory 22*



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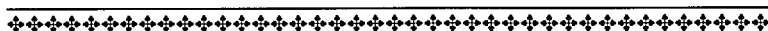
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# Singularities

Extremes of theory in the  
twentieth century



THOMAS ADAM PEPPER

*University of Aarhus*



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*placed in the hands of Thomas Winkler*

*ouro de mina  
coração  
desejo e sina  
tudo mais  
pura rotina  
Jazz  
tocarei seu nome  
pra' poder  
falar de amor*

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## Preface. Truth or method



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This book is not written to help anybody. It has never been my aim, during the course of writing the essays collected here, to provide anyone – least of all myself – with a set of mini-manuals useful for the study of the authors whose works are discussed. Nor have I seen it as my task to provide a statement of a unifying theme, a red thread that might run through all of these essays and lead the one who might follow it to an overwhelming intention. Not a single one of these exercises was ever conceived of as a conspactive statement about a writer's work – least of all my own.

The form of much of what is sold in the current eutrophic-entropic bloom of the critical supermarket is, for the most part, based on a main title – which encapsulates, more or less wittily, the thematic concern of the book – followed by a colon, which indicates to the cursor of the potential scanning mechanism that the words that follow are names or subjects to be cataloged for access in storage-and-retrieval systems. It used to be that classification systems were constructed in order to classify books; now books are written, subjects – in all senses – are produced, in order to conform to the standards of those systems.

This time of so-called postmodernity, in which genres are supposed to be mixed, reveals its truly corporate intention in the way it classifies books, in a way analogous to that in which the university system which produces those who write them insists that would-be apprentices specialize themselves into the most standardized fields so that they will be capable of being recognized by the System. This hysteron proteron of the book-production system and the cynicism and hypocrisy of the academic-unit



## Preface

production system together demonstrate the decadence and profound lack of imagination of this time. This leveling of everything into information is the technological correlate of a nihilistic aestheticism, in which everything is interesting and can be scanned by the eye without any potential scotomization or damage. The damage is already done.

Is it so surprising, then, that we find ourselves in the cliché of the Middle Ages? It is wars, plagues, chaos, and identity politics at every level. But the new medievalism has a very contemporary aspect, too: the intellectual garage sale. Not only in the matter of what passes for intellectual life, particularly in the United States, this is not a good time.

It is a time of massive cynicism and universal lying, in which all qualities have been devalued, or rather suspended, in a wave of reactive consumer populism that seems both inescapable and never-ending. It is a time to burrow in and to write for the future, because there are no readers, and perhaps there never will be again. This is a hard burden for any book – let alone my first book, my little Isaac – to bear.

I cannot help feeling somehow preempted, cheated. It is not only that now we are postlapsarian and post-Pascalian: even the idea of the shock experience, as a characterization of what we are going through, seems remarkably quaint as a kind of description of the modernity to which, so it is claimed, we no longer belong. This is an age in which one must be classifiable, so that everything one says can be dismissed as mere point of view.

How many *voices* are there? Very few. But if one wants to have one's own, it is necessary to have apprenticed oneself to the ones there are. And so it is necessary to have chosen them with the greatest care; to have been their student; to have listened to them; to have faced them; to have measured oneself with and against only the strongest and the most productive – but never to have been locked into the boredom and ultimate self-disappointment of discipleship. To have dallied with it – yes, inevitably; to have seen the depression – yes; to have endured the confrontation – and survived.

But survival is a lonely issue. One is one's only witness. And how can I present an account of my singular experiences? Somebody has to write and somebody has to tell the truth.

Under the pretense of objectivity, a vulgar theoretism has taken

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over, a theoretism that is blind to its history. Even though I am more or less conventionally captioned as a theorist, a literary theorist, whatever – I think of those T-shirts that say “model/waiter/whatever” – I cannot make any pretense to some kind of lie of objective interest in the objects I have chosen here. I prefer to state my nonobjectivity and my partiality here at the outset. If I am going anywhere, I am moving towards the space where I can show that it is obsessions, which are always those of a subject or of subjects, that show something of the true, not the universal lie of interests. Interests are interesting at one moment, no longer interesting the next. Obsessions last. Interest is the defensive screen of obsession.

Explaining how something so apparently subjective as an obsession can and does have a relation to the true, and that this might be of more than passing interest to the reader–scanner, is very difficult indeed. The first step is to say that I do not think that obsessions are simply personal or simply subjective. I live in the world just as everybody else does, and therefore I cannot – falsely – pretend to say that anything I have to say is so radical, revolutionary, and original that it has no relation to the Out There where I too am. To do so would be to price myself out of the market.

If I were to say something so silly, how could anybody possibly have access to what I do say (supposing they cared to try, which is not a given)? As long as one writes about words signed with other people’s names – as long as one writes – one is in a public space along with everybody else. So it is not a matter of subjective impressions.

When Freud self-consciously began the century with the attempt to try to situate his own dreams within the realm of science, he began down this road upon which I find myself. In any case, I find this road to be the only logically possible hope – not only for the reasons stated above, but also because it is a questioning, critical road, one upon which I find myself thinking about how stories, particulars, texts, bear some relation to the truth, also about how something that must be called knowledge of this truth is produced, even if it is not itself capable of being reproduced.

This road allows me to ask my questions starting out from the language in which the sediments of the production of such truth are to be found. There isn’t anything else, really, to go on. Long ago, I left behind any impulse to state the truth in some perspicuously

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stable and universal form. In the realm of reading and writing, which is where I am, such attempts – attempts toward a theory of this or that – always fail to satisfy. They renounce being able to account for what is to be found in the reading of any given or chosen particular, and thus they renounce their claim to bring a set of phenomena under the control of a concept or of a set of concepts. Such theories – of something called narrative, for example, a word I have never understood, even if I use it sometimes – are today’s version of the vulgarity of a theory of truth by correspondence.

Since the phenomena do not correspond to the theory in any compelling way, they reveal only the theory’s own desire for control, and ultimately, its despair over its lack of control. One can either dispense with the theory (unless it is a statement – not a theory – about the limitations of theory) or with the phenomena (Hegel: “so much worse for the facts”). And *a fortiori* for all the -isms that have fallen out of what is now called High Theory – tinged as this expression is with a nostalgia for a time when people were smarter, if more naïve. The -isms, those *misérables* of the academy, are all more vulgar and more cynical and more opportunistic than Theory ever was – even if the existence of Theory itself is only a phobic, defensive aftereffect, the reaction–formation mirage of the institutional marketplace. It is unfortunate that those concerned, the practitioners of this magical art, rushed to this word and took it upon themselves as a name.

When I started putting these things together I felt like the old, tired J. F. Sebastian in Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner*, who takes a cyborg named Pris, whose brain he has designed, into his apartment, itself crammed with the more mechanical toys he has invented to keep him company among the ruins. He introduces her to them and says: “These are my friends, I make them – I *make* them.”

Happily I could never say the same. Now I remember the story of one of the world’s more famous and enduring rock stars. Once asked why he didn’t visit his children, he responded, “Because I don’t know who they are.”

There are so many names hidden in this book. I prefer not to make any more unfair use of them by chanting them again at the moments where they themselves cry out. Their own music appears in the proper places, along with strains of Shostakovich’s Preludes and Fugues and the ballads of Caetano Veloso. I do not

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wish to make anyone suffer the indictment of more crass repetition. Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Ortwin de Graef, Werner Hamacher, Geoffrey Hartman, Jan Mieszkowski, Mary Quaintance, Gene Ray, Jan Rosiek, and Andrzej Warminski have my deep thanks for doing what they could for parts of the manuscript; Richard Macksey, Ray Ryan, Michael Sprinker, and Hilary Hammond for their work on and faith in the project. Thoughts, friendship, and wild patience from Andrew Ash, Howard Bloch, Jack Cameron, Jacques Derrida, Susan Edmunds, David Ellison, John Guillory, Ralph Heyndels, Denis Hollier, George Kateb, Debra Keates, Jan Keppler, Jean-Pol Madou, Janet Malcolm, Louis Marin, Claire Nouvet, Hans-Detlef Otto, Ernst Prelinger, Avital Ronell, Michael Shae, James Swenson, Greta West, and Deborah White were the condition of possibility of my own impatience. Special thanks are due to my colleagues at the Søren Kierkegaard Research Centre at the University of Copenhagen, and in particular to Stacey Ake, Vivian Bentsen, Henrik Blicher, Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, Joakim Garff, Dorothea Glöckner, Darío González, Johnny Kondrup, Karsten Kynde, and Kim Ravn, all of whom kept me alive through the final editing. Much of this book was written with the generous support of the Mellon Foundation, the Mrs. Giles Whiting Foundation, the Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung, the James L. Knight Foundation, and Danmarks Grundforskningsfond.

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## Abbreviations

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- AI* Paul de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology*, edited and with an introduction by Andrzej Warminski (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996)
- AR* Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979)
- BI* Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight*, second edition, revised (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983)
- C* Maurice Blanchot, *Celui qui ne m'accompagnait pas* (Paris: Gallimard, 1953)
- CTP* Edgar Allan Poe, *Complete Tales and Poems* (New York: Vintage, 1975)
- CW* Paul de Man, *Critical Writings 1953–1978* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989)
- DE* Emmanuel Levinas, *En Découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger* (Paris: Vrin, 1982)
- E* Jacques Lacan, *Écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 1966)
- FR* Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and Repetition*, translation by H. Hong and E. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983)
- GO* Maurice Blanchot, *The Gaze of Orpheus* (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1981)
- GW* Paul Celan, *Gesammelte Werke* I–V (Frankfurt-on-Main: Suhrkamp, 1983)
- MM* Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia* (Frankfurt-on-Main: Suhrkamp, 1951), translation by E. F. N. Jephcott, *Minima Moralia* (London: New Left Books, 1974)
- MP* Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: University

*Abbreviations*

- of Chicago Press, 1982)
- OS Jacques Derrida, *De L'esprit* (Paris: Galilée, 1987), translation by G. Bennington and R. Bowlby, *Of Spirit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989)
- P Jacques Derrida, *Parages* (Paris: Galilée, 1986)
- RC Paul de Man, *Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993)
- RMR Lindsay Waters and Wlad Godzich, eds., *Reading de Man Reading* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989)
- RR Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984)
- RT Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986)
- SP Jacques Derrida, *Signéponge/Signsponge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984)
- WH Martin Heidegger, *Was heißt Denken?* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1984)