

SINGULARITIES

EXTREMES OF

**THEORY IN THE
TWENTIETH CENTURY**

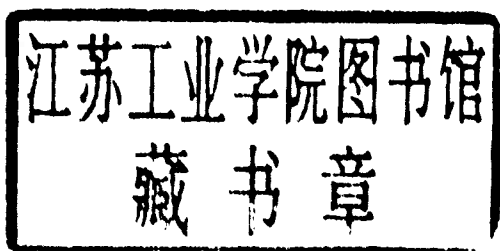
THOMAS PEPPER

Singularities

Extremes of theory in the
twentieth century

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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

Preface. Truth or method

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 conspective 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

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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

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

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

Preface

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

- 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, *Ecrits* (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)

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Introduction: Ode to X,¹ or, the essay as monstrosity

And for a long time I could see no other conclusion than this, that short of having sixteen pockets, each with its stone, I could never reach the goal I had set myself, short of an extraordinary hazard. And if at a pitch I could double the number of my pockets, were it only by dividing each pocket in two, with the help of a few safety-pins let us say, to quadruple them seemed to be more than I could manage. And I did not feel inclined to take all that trouble for a half-measure. For I was beginning to lose all sense of measure, after all this wrestling and wrangling, and to say, All or nothing. And if I was tempted for an instant to establish a more equitable proportion between my stones and my pockets, by reducing the former to the number of the latter, it was only for an instant. For it would have been an admission of defeat. And sitting on the shore, before the sea, the sixteen stones spread out before my eyes, I gazed at them in anger and perplexity . . . And while I gazed thus at my stones, revolving interminable martingales all equally defective, and crushing handfuls of sand, so that the sand ran through my fingers and fell back on the strand, yes, while thus I lulled my mind and part of my body, one day suddenly it dawned on the former, dimly, that I might perhaps achieve my purpose without increasing the number of my pockets, or reducing the number of my stones, but simply by sacrificing the principle of trim. The meaning of this illumination, which suddenly began to sing within me, like a verse of

¹ "[N]ot just in the vague or general manner in which any poem of address could be given this title . . ." After these words about the word "prosopopoeia" as a fitting title for a poem by Victor Hugo that in fact bears another name, Paul de Man appends the following note: "As they in fact often are, though preferably by the more euphonic and noble term 'ode' or 'Ode to X.'" The next note to his text reads: "Rather than being a heightened version of sense experience, the erotic is a figure that makes such experience possible. We do not see what we love but we love in the hope of confirming the illusion that we are indeed seeing anything at all" (RT, 48, 53).

Isaiah, or of Jeremiah, I did not penetrate at once, and notably the word trim, which I had never met with, in this sense, long remained obscure . . .²

I could begin at exactly the same place where I began to write the essays collected in this book – in a time that now belongs to the pastness of a past I hope never to remember – and say: I am fascinated by difficulty. This is what I have learned.

Let me try and state where I think I have come from. At the outset, I tried to formulate a set of observations concerning the relations between text and commentary in the authors whose works I was reading. I insist that the goal was, or should have been, to formulate – that is to say, to bring to utterance – and not to formalize. And thus I insist that among these texts there is no single relation but rather there obtains an open and mobile set of links, a set with no fixed boundaries of relations capable, at any moment, of being broken off and modified, but not exchanged.

For someone whose training began, by predilection, more or less, in the realm of so-called philosophical discourse, it was and still is all too easy to move along at the level of the concept. This is not what I hope to have done, although I have, no doubt, done some of it. But I admonish myself and my readers here, at the end and at the outset, against this. These admonitions toward the specific differences of each text, and against the banality of generalization, are themselves generalities, and fall into well-worn tracks.³ But now it is long after the end of a long apprenticeship, and I trust I will be forgiven for the attempt to restate, in my own terms, these problems that have come to the fore of the mind and as I see them.

Let's begin again.

In the course of a given rhetorical reading, there is a paradoxical relation between the reasons for the choice of a particular text or

² Samuel Beckett, *Molloy*, rpt. in *Three Novels by Samuel Beckett* (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 70–71.

³ The problem of enunciating this tendential attitude as a law, and thus falling into the trap that, like the principle of verifiability, it is not itself verifiable, is in fact the crux that generates so much of the power of Paul de Man's work. In the vocabulary of another tradition, we would have to call this kind of injunction toward the singularity of any text or reading a rule of *grammar*, in Wittgenstein's sense, that is to say, a rule of form. It is only, perhaps, in thinking about – and speaking about – the way in which the evidence of such a law's existence must be everywhere shown, but never said, that we will be able to speak of the recognition of event, act, or occurrence that will allow us to assert that we are no longer simply hyperformalists.

passage for reading and the micrological or histological reading that follows upon this initial choice. This initial decision (the rhetoric of intention is particularly dangerous here, as it is not certain that one ever *chooses* a text, purely and simply) may be an ideological matter (in the technical sense, a question about the *logos*, the meaning of a text); for example, in the case where it seems that a given passage is a crux and that a successful interpretation of this text depends upon its resolution. But what follows in the rhetorical analysis has more to do with lexical considerations: *how* is this text (dis)organized, and what does this (have to) do with or to the presupposition of meaning? My question is, then, how does the lexical reading relate to the original choice of reading material by means of logical (read thematic) considerations? What is the *thematic scar* left by the necessity of the initial choice upon the lexical reading that ensues therefrom; and how does this scar structurally limit the scope of the reading, or its extension (in the logical sense of entities covered by the predicate), what we might call the reading's power? I call the thematic scar the mark left by the initial choice of a text to be read on the rhetorical procedure that treats signifiers (and not concepts). How does this scar necessitate the proviso that comes with any reading, namely, that it is a reading of only *this* text, a particular reading, but one which also confers exemplarity upon the choices it makes and forecloses?

I write these words here, in the language of a critical mode now in desuetude, not out of a desire to remain in the past, but to assert that these projects, and my habitus, began under this sign. If I have moved on – who knows where, and who would be the judge? – I still wish to exercise my liturgical practices, not automatically, compulsively, or in the mode of sterile and unanimated repetition, but in order to try to move towards the future without any false sense of security or liberation that would come from ditching the past. Better to wake up every day and make ready for the journey to Mount Moriah than always to be trying to get back to Ithaca, or to New Haven. So it is not that I shall not have moved, but that I have tried, as hard as I could, to perform my exercises starting from this one place. Accidents always happen along the way. This is the correlate, or perhaps only the restatement, of what I have said already of my desire to temper my conceptual temperament, this tempering being the enunciation of the law I have tried – but no doubt failed – because of my very desire to state it – to internalize.

These tensions of the particular and the general, of the pressure of the move to the ontological and of the more pragmatic nominalism that says "I will have had to or have tried to begin *somewhere*," with *some* text, in some always singular, provisional situation, no matter how well prepared the ground may be – these tensions preoccupy this space even before it is opened outright, more purely and more simply. In this realm of contaminations there is not going to be anything more than the more or less purely and/or simply. They are well known, these tensions, but they can stand bearing out and restatement, in something like an apology for having decided to – that is to say, for having recognized that it is necessary to – leave the discourse of the universal behind and to move to something more like what used to be called – may its name forever and hauntingly be praised! – the essay.

Others have occupied these spaces differently, by working on the peculiarities of the relations between examples and what they can()not be read as exemplifying – for example – or by reading the relations between formalist discourses and the remains, what gets left out of the fields surveyed by these systems as the very conditions of possibility of enunciation of the formal laws themselves. (These gestures can, and can also not be read in the register of the proverbial return of the repressed; but the use of such a vocabulary must also be interrogated in respect of the temporal schemes it brings with it. In truth, it is not a bad choice of words at this moment; for, in foregrounding the temporal sequences imposed or implied, it shows that a purportedly more steady-state and neutral-formalist discourse – which itself can be expanded to include a meta-discourse on its own conditions of possibility and what they exclude – speaks this same language in respect of temporal pattern.)⁴

There is no simultaneity of our finite reasoning, and thus we could say there is always narrative, hence allegory – even if it is impossible, in the case of most narratives, to figure out what their law is or if they have one or to find a general law of narrative.⁵

⁴ See also de Man, "Sign and Symbol in Hegel's *Aesthetics*," in *AI*.

⁵ We could substitute the word "allegory" for the word "sophism" in the title of Lacan's "Le Temps logique et l'assertion de la certitude anticipée: un nouveau sophisme," given the definition of sophism therein. And we should also note that the title of the earliest typescript of de Man's essay now entitled "Allegory" (in *AR*), is "Narrative." *Allegory*, therefore, is the name we use for the *Narrative* that tells the story of the undoing of the concept (often by use of example) in a pseudo-temporal sequence that is, philosophically speaking, called *Sophism*.