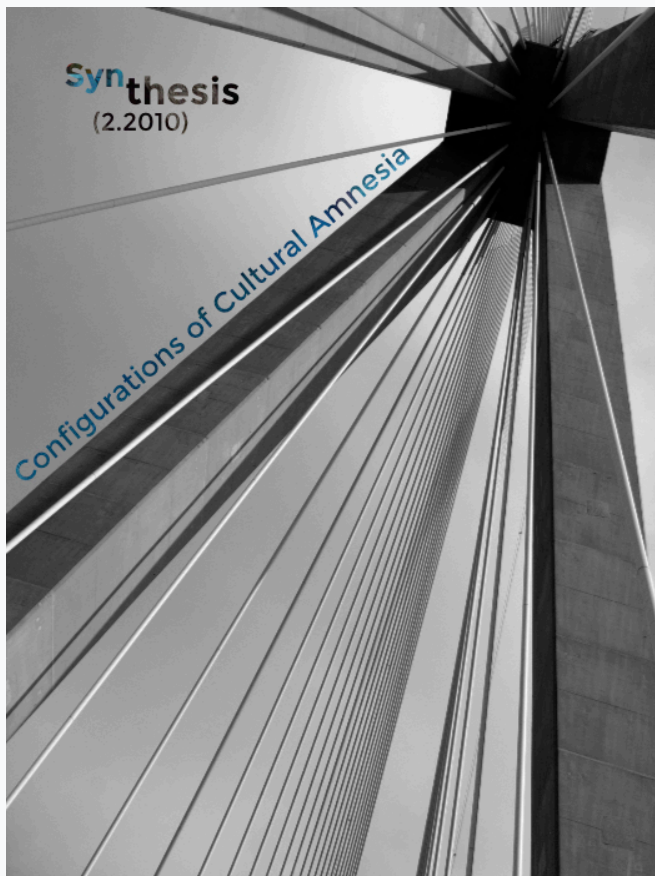


Synthesis: an Anglophone Journal of Comparative Literary Studies

No 2 (2010)

Configurations of Cultural Amnesia



Forgetting, Amnesia, Theory: An Interview with Jean-Michel Rabaté

Apostolos Lampropoulos, Jean-Michel Rabaté

doi: [10.12681/syn.16522](https://doi.org/10.12681/syn.16522)

Copyright © 2010, Apostolos Lampropoulos, Jean-Michel Rabaté



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

To cite this article:

Lampropoulos, A., & Rabaté, J.-M. (2010). Forgetting, Amnesia, Theory: An Interview with Jean-Michel Rabaté. *Synthesis: An Anglophone Journal of Comparative Literary Studies*, (2), 75–83. <https://doi.org/10.12681/syn.16522>

Forgetting, Amnesia, Theory: An Interview with Jean-Michel Rabaté

by
Apostolos Lampropoulos

Apostolos Lampropoulos: Let me begin with a point in *The Future of Theory* which I find particularly intriguing. You begin your introduction with a parallel between Theory and hysteria and at a certain point you remark that “like hysteria, Theory never stops coming back, at least under slightly different guises – which is confirmed by the huge number of anthologies, companions, guides, and new introductions. If Theory is reduced to the ghost of itself, then this is a very obtrusive ghost that keeps walking and shaking its chains in our old academic castles” (Rabaté 10). Your remark seems to concern most of the abundant end-of-Theory discourses and I am tempted to read this as an allusion, voluntary or not, to Jacques Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* and, more specifically, to two fundamental remarks. The first one has to do with the very characteristics of the ghost or specter: “A question of repetition: a specter is always a revenant. One cannot control its comings and goings because it begins by coming back” (11). The second one is based on the Shakespearean quote which itself keeps coming back in the Derridean text: “The time is out of joint: time is disarticulated, dislocated, dislodged, time is run down, on the run and run down, deranged, both out of order and mad. Time is off its hinges, time is of course, beside itself, disadjusted” (19). Let me also mention that for Derrida the ghost or specter maintains a problematic, or at least a double, relationship with temporality, because it “testifies to a living past or to a living future” (99), not to forget that it never dies. If this Derridean reading of your text is justified, seeing Theory as a ghost might lead to conceiving Theory as something which lacks a well defined moment of birth, is mostly defined by its regular or random reappearance, constantly escapes death, and can only establish its genealogy retrospectively. Would you recognize an effect of timelessness in the presence of Theory today? What kind of historicity would this leave for Theory? And how would this answer to the more or less permanent accusations against a presumably anti-historical or a-historical Theory?

Jean-Michel Rabaté: You were right to start with my whimsical equation between theory and hysteria, and perceive a link with the Derridean theme of the ghost; one of my books on theory in French was subtitled *Spectrographies de la modernité*, and it was published exactly in 1993, the year Derrida published *Specters of Marx*, that I hadn’t read then. I had always been intrigued, since I was an undergraduate, by Max Stirner’s treatment of Hegel in his *The Ego and its own*. No matter what his philosophical weaknesses are, Stirner manages to play the game of ‘hauntology’ on Hegel and his system very skilfully. I can also see how you were tempted to move from hysteria to what is, after all, and quite classically, one manifestation of hysteria, namely amnesia. Yes, this is not what I had in mind, and I wouldn’t wish to link too solidly this particular amnesia with anything like timelessness or with an a-historicity of theory. It seems to me, on the contrary, that ‘Theory’ has always played the game of ghosts, not by forgetting history, but precisely by reinvesting history with all the shades and specters that had been there at all time perhaps but need to be reawakened at some particular moments, because in fact they have been generated by what Derrida has called a hypermnesic machine. If we just begin at the beginning, say with *Of Grammatology*, we perceive early that writing is that which has to be forgotten so that writing may take place. Or more pointedly in “Plato’s pharmacy,” Derrida returns to Plato’s debasement of writing as a dangerous tool precisely because it triggers the loss of memory. Turning this loss of memory against him, Derrida demonstrates that writing is nevertheless necessary, indispensable even, for the constitution of any private or collective memory. In that sense, he is both Husserlian and Heideggerian at once. All this is well-known, and I don’t need to labour the point here. What counts for me therefore is less the timelessness that you mention than the danger of a system that literally cannot forget and will always point to resurgences of hidden and inaccessible traumatic memories. This entails the consideration of a certain historicity but it is a historicity that moves at the level of Heidegger’s meditation on the forgetting of Being—and we might as well replace Being with letters or *techne* in the deconstructive framework. The need to forget in order to think would describe a new task—otherwise Theory becomes like Funes the memorious in Borges’s famous tale: it cannot forget, hence cannot think.

A.L.: In an interview with Gregg Lambert, you promise to teach a class on Theory using only non-canonical texts, many of which (such as Rabelais, Balzac, Coleridge, or Borges) are traditionally

classified as literary and this will hopefully “trigger an awareness that there is yet a much more complex history of Theory to be written” (Rabaté-Lambert 2003, par. 41). In *Does Literature Think?*, Stathis Gourgouris also undertakes the project of reading literature as theory and points out that this must involve “the double work of both speculative invention of categories of understanding (much as philosophy or science does, but not in the terms of philosophy or science), as well as empirical excavation of literary textures” (19). Your project anticipates a new sophisticated history of Theory which remains to be written, mainly because the kind of Theory it will narrate also remains to be done or at least spelled out. Gourgouris’ project, on the other hand, is based on “literature’s scientia [which] is ‘disciplined’ in literary terms” (19). Both in your intention to trigger a new awareness about what Theory can be and in Gourgouris’ use of scare quotes when it comes to the discipline of literature’s scientia, I am inclined to see at least two things: first, a will to move on to a version of Theory now officially based not only on philosophical or critical texts, but also on literary writings that would not serve so much as object of a hermeneutics but as topoi of theoretical thought; and second, the consciousness that opening up to the idea of literature as Theory would inevitably question the literary and the Theoretical canon. Even if in a more implicit way reading literature as Theory has been on the agenda of the humanities for some time now, does this move presuppose some kind of *lethe* (i.e. a remembering to forget what literature and Theory are supposed to be doing) or a more radical amnesia (i.e. an attempt to read literature as Theory as if the previous modes of reading had never existed)? To ask my question more directly, could one even think about such a shift in our Theoretical habits without an amnesia guaranteeing the productivity of this venture?

J.-M. R.: Here, I fully subscribe to the drift of your argument. Like Stathis Gourgouris, whose book I really like, like Paul de Man, like Pierre Bayard, I believe that literature ‘thinks,’ and that the aim of theory, if it is also to help reading texts, is to show as clearly as one can, *how* they think. The point of my previous remark was to suggest that one can achieve the same results in a pedagogical setting by highlighting texts that are not so readily marked off as ‘philosophical.’ I would readily agree that this process presupposes a ‘*lethe*’ in the sense, as you put it well, of ‘remembering to forget what literature and Theory are supposed to be doing’—it would be so to do it differently. Yet this could not count as radical amnesia for me, since I do not see how one could pretend that “the previous modes of reading have never existed.” That would correspond to an impossible effort to become naïve again, a little like the cows Nietzsche admired so much when they grazed in their fields. Besides, are we really sure that these cows do not think when they chew their cud and look at trains?

A. L.: Then, one could probably describe amnesia both as manifesting a relationship with an *à-venir* and as referring to an overall pathological condition. Moreover, one could argue that if *lethe* is often linked to the desire or imperative choice to efface a ‘past,’ amnesia seems related to the inability to trace this past and to an urgency to remedy this state. Therefore, if amnesia exempts its subject from any links to a past, it risks providing it with an ‘unconditionality’ to be healed. Moreover, the symptoms of amnesia are primarily detected by those not affected by it; thus discourses on it are by definition based on a lack of immediate experience of it. In this sense, what would a possible relationship between Theory and amnesia be? Is there any loss of memory involved in its work? Can Theory’s undermining of some philological practices and philosophical traditions be described as a ‘lotus-eating’ effect which has nevertheless enabled it to obtain a distinguished status in the global marketplace of ideas? And who is the critical or historical subject enabled to talk about it? Are there any aspects of Theory which can only be seen from the outside?

J.-M. R.: First of all, one should be very cautious in order not to assimilate the issue of Derrida’s *à-venir* to something coming from a Leonard Shelby-like character that needs to write on his body events that have just taken place because he has lost his short-term memory; I am alluding to the excellent 2000 film *Memento* by Christopher Nolan. What I find more urgent is the need to think through a very common paradox, namely that we need to forget in order to remember, and that both processes cannot be controlled by consciousness. My general take is closer to a psychoanalytic positioning of the subject as subject of the unconscious—from the point of view of the unconscious, nothing is forgotten, for everything is still somewhat present as a trace, no matter how thin or

illegible. Thus, there would be a huge difference between telling someone: ‘You are forgetting something that I think is crucial, essential, etc...’ (which is more or less what you think one should tell people who engage with Theory in an uncritical or ideological way), and: ‘You are amnesiac,’ because in the second case you are not even sure that the person will recognize who you are after you have spoken. Otherwise, we are back less to a ‘vital paradox’ than to the old joke: ‘I theorize but only to forget. –Forget what? –I don’t know, I have forgotten.’”

A. L.: Let me return to the Derridean version of the concept of unconditionality. Derrida himself keeps going back to it on different occasions and a good example is the idea of unconditional hospitality wherein you neither ask nor know anything about your guest, not even ask his/her name. And this is thought to be an impossible task and a necessary philosophical strategy at the same time. Would a certain kind of amnesia enhance our understanding of unconditionality? Does unconditionality presuppose a kind of amnesia and can we think of unconditionality without thinking of amnesia? What would prevent us from doing so? And if we were to think along these lines, then how could we rethink the Derridean unthinkable or the totally unpredictable?

J.-M. R.: To me the unconditionality of amnesia would be sort of possible, it would not be impossible. Because if you are amnesiac, you are open to everything and you miss the element of impossibility, which in my opinion is important to Derrida. You need to have an impossibility in order to create some kind of possibility. If you do not have the impossibility of the task, if it is all too easy just because you are without expectations and you are by definition totally open to whatever might be arising, then everything is possible. Hospitality, for example, is by definition there. So, in a way, amnesia could be a way to the impossible, to unconditionality, and so on. On the other hand, total amnesia is also an impossibility. One way to put it is that, if you take amnesia in whatever way someone experiences it, then it is a given that you would miss what is thought to be a very important concept in critical theory today, that is to say total openness. You see, if it is too easy, it is simply not there. It is exactly the same thing, as far as the concepts of the unthinkable and the unpredictable are concerned. As you said, many thinkers before Derrida have talked about it, but (I think he would agree with that even though he would be a little critical as well) conditions of impossibility can replace conditions of possibility. That is the way I see Derrida: thinking through an apparent paradox. In that sense, amnesia is this dangerous limit.

A. L.: So, even if amnesia is not or cannot become Derridean or other, it seems to me that impossibility in the double sense that you described it would perhaps be “just another term for the experience of freedom” (Kristeva 136); here I quote Kristeva talking about Theory, especially French Theory. This very freedom might also be one of the reasons why Theory constantly surprises us, either in a good or in a bad sense. How does amnesia relate to this kind of freedom? Even if, as you said a bit earlier, we accept that amnesia itself (at least absolute, total or unconditional amnesia) is impossible, in which ways would it affect the experience of freedom?

J.-M. R.: I think I can be very clear on that. I see amnesia as an impediment to freedom. To me again, and this is perhaps my Lacanian side, this can only be the freedom of the psychotic. And I do not think that this is a good kind of freedom; it is not even good to live for a moment the freedom of the psychotic. Actually, I do not think this is a freedom at all. Indeed, the psychotic is free in a sense, but here I am more on the side of common sense which says that freedom is hard to win, is hard altogether. A sort of total innocence, a sort of endless openness of the moment of the psychotic, as we imagine the psychotic to be, does not coincide with my sense of freedom. I have worked a little with a number of real psychotics a long time ago, and they are nevertheless suffering somehow. It is not exactly the kind of utopia we might have in mind, this absolute freedom we might have been thinking of.

A. L.: In one of your previous answers you mentioned Christopher Nolan’s *Memento*. I think that this reference can lead us back to the discussion of pedagogy of and in Theory, in the sense that pedagogy could be necessary because of a kind of amnesia: when one starts learning, one may neither know nor

remember that something exists. I am also thinking about the way curricula and reading lists are established: they can be conceived of as snapshots of Theory, a partial yet necessary view on Theory, because it is by definition impossible to have the whole picture. At least in my view, there is both a kind of amnesia that has to be healed, and a consciousness of this amnesia. Is this something one can remedy through pedagogy in Theory? What happens when/if this effort fails?

J.-M. R.: This is a very good way of tackling the issue, because with good pedagogical strategies you both want to place students in the position of a Socratic interlocutor who thinks s/he knows something and then s/he has to realize that s/he doesn't know anything or has to forget everything s/he thinks s/he knows. In fact, s/he has to (re-)discover a different way of posing the question. And at the same time you show him/her that there is a long history to some questions that we have been discussing and that we are aware of. So, there is both a kind of strategic amnesia and –even though I do not know whether you will agree with that or not- the discovery that there has been more than one discussion of certain issues. As it is always the case in a conference, we always discover that we have talked about this or that before.

A. L.: You based your answer on the Socratic model which implies that there is something already there. Probably you are pointing to texts, ideas and concepts which are already inscribed in our consciousness, that is to say, in the subjects we are.

J.-M. R.: To me, what marks Theory from other discourses in a pedagogical situation is that it goes beyond the assumption that we are all here because we love Shakespeare, or because we love Keats, or any other writer. When we do Theory, yes, we might want to know something about Keats, Shakespeare, Flaubert or Marx. But we are mainly here because we want to go beyond some model questions like: 'Why am I interested in,' let's say, 'romantic poetry'? 'What can romantic poetry mean today'? 'What is there about sensibility'?

A. L.: So, would you say that Theory allows de-loving something (forgetting how and why one loves something) in order to re-love it? If yes, is there a particular form or technique of re-loving something, or is the confusion inevitable?

J.-M. R.: Exactly. And the confusion is endless because what matters, whatever angle you take, is that you need a marginal question, like the question of genre or the question of subjectivity; questions like 'Am I affected by a text?' or 'What does it mean to be affected by a text after all?' Then one needs to take a look at meanings like the meaning of life, in other words those border issues that generally one expects Theory to articulate more rigorously, in order to prevent us from remaining at the purely subjective level of 'I like it' or 'I do not like it.' You like it, but what kind of liking is this? What is the question? What kind of concept makes you declare that you are affected by, let's say, Keats?

A. L.: Let me add something to your point. The pedagogy of Theory uses Readers, Anthologies, Guides, Introductions, and so on. In a word, it is often based on what I would dare call a vulgate of Theory. This kind of approach sometimes temptingly reproduces pioneering concepts as if they were slogans, ready-mades or methodological tools; in that sense, dead authors, queerings and othernesses can be found everywhere and can do anything. But, even though it is the 'fate' of Theory to be taught like that in many places around the world, it does not seem to be inexorably trapped in this mode of thinking. Which is the mechanism that allows Theory to forget, or totally ignore this 'fate' and continue to live as Theory and not as an Introduction to or a Reader of itself?

J.-M. R.: For me this is a very crucial question. I agree that what you described is inevitable, even though it is sad to hear that. I have been teaching Theory to American students again and again, and I have changed my strategies. At times, I have tried to bypass the anthology by giving them particular texts and I think these were classes that worked better. And at the end, once students had really plunged into, let's say, Benjamin and Barthes, I did a series that I called 'Theory as letter B.' The names of the authors had to begin with the letter B and that was the only principle of my selection:

Benjamin, Barthes, Borges, Butler, and so on. Of course, this is an oblique way of reconstituting the anthology, but at least there was an element of arbitrariness that both my students and I were completely aware of. We could even go on to read Simone de Beauvoir, forgetting the nobility part of her name. In this way, Kristeva was excluded and Cixous was excluded, too. Through this method I am able to show that this is only a part of the whole story, that there is more. So students will say 'yes, indeed, we cannot cover everything.' The anthology is perhaps a good way to teach Theory, but then you have to show that everything depends on what you decide to require from the students. My strategy today is to ask students and make them read something different than what is in the anthology, so that they may sense that there is more. There is always the dilemma between 'coverage' and 'in-depth,' reading through and comprehensively studying a thinker. On the other hand, if you take most of the classical theoreticians (let us take the two examples I mentioned before, Barthes and Benjamin), you will see that not only do readers read in a fragmented manner but theoreticians write in fragments as well. This is real even when you have rather massive texts, written by someone like, let's say, Foucault. You can really explore this kind of writing in the same way: the questions are fairly dependent on the type of conversation you would like to have with texts and on what has been excluded. Even if you go back to Plato, which I do once in a while, you cannot deal with Plato fully; in one semester you can read one or two dialogues and then the students realize that there is a lot more. The same thing could go on almost endlessly, as it is a matter of showing the fragmentariness of the writings of most theoreticians. That is the project of Theory.

A. L.: In one of your answers to Gregg Lambert, you claim that "the very connotations of the word 'Theory' seem to lead you astray; that is to say, if you are in Theory, then you are in the realm of ideas and you are not dealing with the real world" (Rabaté-Lambert, par. 16). On the other hand, in *Archive Fever*, Derrida says that "the archive, if this word or this figure can be stabilized so as to take on a signification, will never be either memory or anamnesis as spontaneous, alive and internal experience. On the contrary: the archive takes place at the place of originary and structural breakdown of the said memory. There is no archive without a place of consignment, without a technique of repetition, and without a certain exteriority. No archive without outside. ... The archive is hypomnesic" (*Archive* 11). If the archive owes its importance to the collapse of a memory, how could it relate to Theory?

J.-M. R.: I do not think, quite simply, that the 'Real' (supposing we could agree on what this term refers to, which is unlikely) has been forgotten by Theory. Anyone who works concretely with History soon realizes that whatever is real has to be constructed painstakingly via documents, archives, testimonies, etc. I don't think that theory is 'archive intolerant' since for me Theory implies both a certain archive and a way of retrieving it, which, as we know, is the difficult stage.

A. L.: What about the fragmentariness you talked about before, then? Would this be a way of breaking with or being disloyal to the official archive? A way of rejecting the idea of an archive of Theory, or of an archive within Theory? Would Theory be intolerant to this kind of archive and to its being archived? Then, how would Theory combine its groundbreaking aura with the possibly hypomnesic function of its past achievements? Can it pretend that nothing has already been achieved?

J.-M. R.: I will try to answer your question through an example. I am always a little upset to see that people in the human sciences—it has changed now but it was like that for quite some time— only knew about Derrida's "Structure, Sign, and Play," which I think is not his best piece. I think it is a juvenile, early piece that leaves people with the impression that they have understood everything about Claude Lévi-Strauss, while they have a very partial view of him. So, there is something to redo here. Honestly I do not know what and this is exactly the discussion I had with Laurent Milesi once: 'if you had a new anthology of Derrida, what texts would you have?' In my view, this would be a letter to a Japanese friend as an echo of Heidegger's letter; I also like another text "'Che cos'è la poesia?'" because there you have a Derrida that is totally not opposed to the voice, which is interesting because everyone believes 'oh, Derrida thinks that voice is bad and writing is good.' The direct consequence of this would be the re-stratification of the archive providing us with a Derrida who loves writing.

A. L.: Let me move to a slightly different direction. In various disciplines, there are still (and very probably there will be in the future) non-Theory enclaves. I am talking about historical approaches to literature the way this was done a century ago, or exclusively archive-oriented approaches to historiography, in the opposite sense of what Dominick LaCapra proposes when he talks about empathy with the archived. In this context, Theory seems to be treated like a pestilent infant. Non-theoretical, anti-theoretical, or a-theoretical discourses try to avoid it so as not to be somehow contaminated by it. In order to achieve this, sometimes they pretend that Theory had never existed, as if it was wiped out, or as if it could be totally forgotten. How is it possible to establish this kind of programmatic amnesia, and always already think that Theory will not affect them?

J.-M. R.: I think we have here the problem of nomenclature and of categories, because the same people will be obliged to say that, after all, the same thing has existed under a different name, let's say philosophy. You know that Theory is now accepted in France, but it was not ten years ago. So, when I was going to France in the nineties and I had to explain what I was doing with philosophy, I was saying that, in spite of everything, Theory is basically a certain version of philosophy. To come back to your question, even people who believe that they are satisfied with archive as such, or with history as such, or with literature as such, know that there is something going on with philosophy and they have to decide what they will do with philosophy. Because to say that you are not a philosopher, or that you do not tackle philosophical questions, is, in a way, to declare that you had to be a specialist in philosophy, or a full-time philosopher, in order to deal with such issues. But even in this case, there is always a certain way in which you can ask certain questions of the archive, or of history, or of the event: 'is that an event?' or 'what do you mean by 'event'?' or 'how do you know that this archive is true?' or 'could it be fake?', etc. Then you have philosophical questions that you can always ask as a way of returning to that kind of problematisation.

A. L.: Lately, we have gotten used to a specific critique of structuralism—or at least of some 'applied' versions of structuralism like narratology—which is supposed to have forgotten the 'real.' The same has purportedly happened with some versions of New Criticism before that, or with some deconstructive habits more recently, like the notorious deconstructionists' incapacity to articulate an affirmative sentence. In these, let me say, easy translations of theoretical trends, I am tempted to see a tendency to forget most of what has already happened in order to profit from the newness of the new trend. And it is quite obvious why this tendency is now widely disapproved and even laughed at. But what exactly have we lost from this kind of exaggeration and misinterpretation of structuralism, New Criticism or deconstruction? If, for the sake of my question, we accept that the 'real' was one of the victims of this peculiar Theoretical amnesia, was it a 'real' forgetting?

J.-M. R.: Let me comment on the case of structuralism. I think it all depends on what kind of structuralism we are talking about. What was said, for example, about Foucault's structuralism is that it simplifies the historical complexities that he dealt with. And I take that very seriously, in a way. As Roger Chartier, an excellent historian of the book, has pointed out, Foucault's reconstruction is wrong by two centuries. And a similar critique of Foucault is possible in other cases as well. As I just told you, I do take that seriously. It is not, I think, a total rejection of Foucault's model, as he would by definition forget in his effort to establish a model. It is simply because he starts his history at the wrong time. And I do not think that we can easily forget Foucault as a historian in order to be able to remember him uniquely as a theoretician of historiography. In a sense, here I am on the side of historians. If Foucault the historian's episteme is wrong by two centuries, this is a big problem with his theory, just because a lot is false. There, it is not a question of forgetting when it is impossible not to forget, but it is a question of interpreting. In other words, it means that there is a task; and the task is grappling with the archive differently and perhaps using different concepts, thus establishing a different model, as Chartier or others do.

A. L.: Given that you focus on structuralism and particularly on the case of Foucault, I should perhaps rephrase my question. In a case like that of *Les mots et les choses*, for example, we face a situation either of deliberate forgetting that is supposed to suit the needs of a pre-formed theoretical scheme or of a simple mistake. Nevertheless, a number of Foucault's ideas have been extensively used either in

similar or in very different contexts. How can one explain the success of a theoretical scheme despite its forgetting, or, perhaps through its forgetting? To which audience would this forgetting matter the most?

J.-M. R.: To me, it is not so much an alternative between remembering and forgetting. It is mostly reading better and avoiding certain traps that Foucault failed to avoid. What has been said—and I think that this is probably true—is that in *Les mots et les choses*, Foucault has been trying very hard to use the opposite of Cassirer's symbolic forms. And if this is what he does, I cannot be Foucauldian in that sense, even though I do teach him. Very often what you see in Foucault is a wish to use a tiny portion of historical evidence for his other theses. And I am open to the way history forces us to be myopic towards certain acts of interpretation. In that sense, history is already there, and I do not think that this would have shocked Foucault very much. On the contrary, I think that Foucault said something like 'criticise me,' 'give me the chance to think through it': this is the way I see the link between *Les mots et les choses* and *L'Archeologie du savoir*, where he tries to refine his positions. I think that *L'Archeologie du savoir* is very interesting, I like this book very much and that is why I use it each time I teach Foucault. That is where you see Foucault trying to say 'yes, it is true, I did not see that.' Taking the production of Foucauldian discourse into consideration, *L'Archeologie du savoir* is a very self-defeating book. On the other hand, you always see Theory undoing itself as it were. And in a way this is an answer to the objection to structuralism on the basis that it forgot about history: no, Foucault did see himself as a historian. And you don't even have to go beyond the 'big names' of structuralism; I think that *Les mots et les choses* is a structuralist book, even though Foucault denied it later: in that book there is the idea that you could describe epistemes as just structures and everything would make sense falling into categories that were pre-ordered by a given structure. To me, that is typical structuralism. Maybe Lévi-Strauss of a certain time was also a typical example of that structuralism.

A. L.: Let me interrupt you and insist a little bit on the idea of a typical example of structuralism, which could probably be extended to many other theoretical schools. Isn't this 'typicality' the most suitable way to forget what is 'irrelevant,' 'inconvenient,' 'too easy,' or 'disturbing' in a theory? Isn't it a way to admit that we always talk about a certain theory, a certain portion of theory, most likely the one we find most intriguing or productive?

J.-M. R.: As I try to show in an introduction to a book about structuralism ("Introduction 2003: Are You History?" 1-16), structuralism has often been misunderstood as being a very tiny moment of the intellectual history or, you might say, of the philosophical history of the twentieth century, whereas I think that structuralism is much broader starting with Husserl and not at all limited to de Saussure, who, I think, has been misunderstood as a structuralist and I do not think he was particularly a structuralist himself. So, there has been a whole approach to structuralism as if it was founded on linguistics; that was also a very short moment in Lacan, Foucault, Lévi-Strauss, when they argued that we knew what language was. I think that this is the wrong structuralism and that there is a much broader structuralism that begins with some part of Husserl's work and continues with Merleau-Ponty, a more philosophical structuralism, if you wish, which is also a much more powerful one. And this structuralism might not have been totally eliminated up to now, because I see, for example, a constant return to all the questions of Merleau-Ponty. If we see this as a chance to start discussing a certain structuralism, then one immediately forgets the assertion that now we are in the era of post-structuralism, as if we knew what this is. I like what Simon Critchley once said: when we start using those notions, we do not use structuralism for the sake of structuralism. Post-structuralism, on the other hand, was a genre or an invention of people who were angry with the success of the French school and despised it. I am very suspicious of all the "post-s" which have emerged. What exactly do they mean? Where does Merleau-Ponty belong in that context? Is his work a non-structuralism? A pre-structuralism? An anti-structuralism? Does it oppose structuralism?

A. L.: If I get it right, you are opposed to all 'post-s' which remain suspicious of current developments in Theory. What about the moments of theoretical euphoria celebrating these 'post-s' and enjoying a pure sense of possibility?

J.-M. R.: This is based on an illusion. It is always an illusion. This is my simple answer. Whenever theoretical euphoria happens, it can be nothing other than that. But the fact that illusion and euphoria go together could also be a good example of amnesia. I mean the fact that we tend to forget what is really going on right now.

A. L.: In an ironic exclamation, Geoffrey Bennington calls on us to “bury our differences. We can all agree now, or soon enough. Consensus is nigh. Theory is finished. They think it’s all over. Dead and buried. Interred. Sound the last post. Post-theory; post post. Theory...is over because we have no differences: and if we have no differences, it’s because we all love difference so much. Post-theory, we all do very different things, but they’re all the same, because they all proclaim difference. That...is the call more or less concealed and more or less encouraged by recent, post-theoretical appeals to difference as a value” (Bennington 103). Is this a pertinent way of warning against the perspective of an ideologised Theory and perhaps against an amnesia *vis-à-vis* differences?

J.-M. R.: I usually follow Geoff Bennington’s lead when it comes to arguing that the consensus on the death of theory and the erasure of differences constitute a purely ideological fabrication. But I don’t think, once more, that theory can or should become amnesiac to its surroundings. That would not be the way. The hystericisation would be too sudden, too disruptive, too unproductive.

A. L.: One last question, given that I teach in Cyprus, a country marked by the phrase “I don’t forget;” it could be more or less the same in Québec, linked to the ‘*Je me souviens*.’ Both ‘I don’t forget’ and ‘*Je me souviens*’ imply, of course, that I am also in the process of forgetting, that I am aware of risking to forget and that I am trying not to succumb to my forgetting. I was thinking of the concept of the Museum, which is also, perhaps by definition, a place of ‘I don’t forget.’ As far as I know, no ‘museum of Theory’ has been proposed. Would it be conceivable to have such a museum? Would Theory and the museum be compatible notions and what could be exposed in such a museum? Or would this be a totally inconceivable project, because the one contradicts the other?

J.-M. R.: That is a very complex and interesting question, which presupposes that we agree on the idea of the museum. In principle, I am not opposed to the notion of the museum as many avant-gardists would be. It also has to do with my experience in cultures which tend to be amnesiac, like the American culture where people basically remember the three previous years. Amnesia for me is also an everyday occurrence. I remember Žižek’s disappointment when he thought he would teach students popular culture through Hitchcock. For American students this is just as much in the museum as is Nicolas Poussin; what they would say is that it was their grandparents who liked Hitchcock, who in that sense belongs to the remote past. So the present is shorter and shorter, no longer, let’s say, than two years. So a good museum, and I think many people would agree with that, is a dynamic interactive museum where you have this mass of unmovable artifacts and then you do something with them. This is quite different from what you would do in a, let’s say, more traditional museum. Therefore, if you could define the museum this way, then you could have the museum of Theory or a museum for Theory. And then, a good museum may not have a unique form; there are several types of museum. And I am always interested in the tiny little museums on small islands for example, like a museum I saw about Portuguese colonizers of the seventeenth century, often with amazing artifacts, even though they reflect no pedagogy whatsoever. But this is definitely not to say that Theory belongs to the museum.

JEAN-MICHEL RABATÉ
UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

INTERVIEWED BY
APOSTOLOS LAMPROPOULOS UNIVERSITY OF CYPRUS
LA VALETTA, MALTA – NOVEMBER 2009

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Dr. Vassiliki Markidou for her valuable help in the preparation as well as the editing of this interview.

Works Cited

- Bennington, Geoffrey. "Inter." *Post-Theory: New Directions in Criticism*. Eds. Martin McQuillan, Graeme MacDonald, Robin Purves, and Stephen Thompson. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999.
- Chartier, Roger. "Foucault's Chiasmus: Authorship between Science and Literature in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries." *Scientific Authorship: Credit and Intellectual Property in Science*. Eds. Mario Biagioli and Peter Gallison. New York & London: Routledge, 2003. 13-31.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. Trans. Eric Prenowitz. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- . "Che cos'è la poesia?" *Points de Suspension*. Paris: Galilée, 1992. 303-308.
- . *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning & the New International*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. London: Routledge, 1994.
- . "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." *Writing and Difference*. Trans. Alan Bass. London: Routledge, 1980. 278-94.
- Gourgouris, Stathis. *Does Literature Think? Literature as Theory for an Antimythical Era*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003.
- Kristeva, Julia. "French Theory." *World Writing: Poetics, Ethics, Globalization*. Ed. Mary Gallagher. Toronto, Buffalo & London: University of Toronto Press, 2008.
- Rabaté, Jean-Michel. "Introduction 2003: Are You History?" *Structuralism [1986]*. Ed. John Sturrock. 2nd edition. Malden & Oxford: Blackwell, 2003.
- . *La Pénultième est morte : Spectographies de la modernité*. Paris: Champ Vallon, 1993.
- . *The Future of Theory*. Oxford & Malden: Blackwell, 2002.
- and Gregg Lambert. "Conversation on The Future of Theory." *Journal for Critical and Religious Theory* 4.2 (2003), Web. June 27 2010.
- Stirner, Max. *The Ego and its Own: The Case of the Individual Against Authority*. Ed. James J. Martin. Trans. Steven T. Byington. Mineola NY: Dover Publications, 2005. [Original German title: *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*. Leipzig, 1844.]