

‘YOU CANNOT MAKE A LIVING
JUST BEING A THEORETICIAN’
AN INTERVIEW WITH JEAN-MICHEL RABATÉ
With Jeroen Lauwers & Thomas Van Parys

It is near midnight when we enter the lobby of the hotel where the Franco-American theoretician and literary critic Jean-Michel Rabaté enjoys his temporary stay in Leuven, Belgium. Despite a marathon four-hour session teaching a specialised course in literary theory earlier in the afternoon, Rabaté looks impressively lucid and ready to answer our questions – “the hours around and after midnight are my best,” he confesses. Very calm and relaxed, at times thoughtfully staring in his glass of brandy, Rabaté talks about his work, literature, psychoanalysis and the American “I-like-your-shirt” syndrome.

EVOLUTION

Q How would you describe the evolution in your work? In *The Future of Theory*, you state that you have been pigeonholed into various categories, like deconstruction, Lacanian thought, post-structuralism, textual geneticism with New Historical influences. How would you position yourself instead within the academic world, *vis-à-vis* your peers?

J-MR I started out working with two mentors, Jacques Derrida and Hélène Cixous. Happily, I was moving between the one and the other, and that is how I understand the reference to deconstruction, which, by the way, was never a term I actually used to describe my way of working. I had a debate with Derek Attridge a few years ago about the meaning of the term deconstruction. He uses it and claims it as his own, whereas I have always felt that even though I have been heavily influenced by Derrida I could not say that in my reading method I was deconstructing texts. To me, deconstruction is not really an appropriate way to describe what I do. Hélène Cixous was perhaps more of an influence, because I started my career working with her on Joyce, but also on Theory at the time when she was moving beyond Lacanian Theory into Feminist Theory, so I was obliged to move through the basics of Lacanian Theory very quickly in order to reach a certain post-Lacanian or neo-Lacanian position closer to feminist theory in the continental or French mode. That is how I would define my initial approach to literature and to Theory. In my earlier books I focus on authors that I had worked on extensively for my doctoral dissertation, James Joyce, Ezra Pound and Hermann Broch. Then I moved into the direction of Theory *an sich*, which is an American invention influenced by Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida and others. Today I just try to find my own way, not by rejecting the mentors or influences that shaped my work, but by continuing certain investigations in the critical dialogue. The book on lies, for instance, that I wrote in French and which is now going to be published in English, is a discussion with Derrida and on my not being convinced by Derrida’s ideas on the lie. I still consider my works as a sort of discussion with my mentors. Hélène Cixous is still alive and we can keep on having interesting conversations still today, while, unfortunately, with Derrida I

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can now only have *discours d'outre tombe* (a conversation beyond the grave).

Q Can you also assess Hélène Cixous's influence on your particular reading of texts? Was she a big factor in your choice never to turn towards a totally formalistic view, which, at the beginning of your career, became very fashionable? It seems that it has always been self-evident for you to keep text and context together.

J-MR I agree with that. I recently discussed this topic in a seminar at Penn, since I had observed that there is a recent return to formalism in the U.S. and I wanted to work those issues through with my students. It was not only via Hélène Cixous, but also via people like Georges Bataille that I wanted to understand what form, formalism and being formalistic in literary studies would mean. In that respect, I take neither deconstruction nor feminism to be formalistic. When I was a student, formalism was for me the kind of post-semiotic Theory like that of Michael Riffaterre. According to Riffaterre, you could study any work without any consideration of real-life determinations, contexts, history, and so on. For various reasons, I rejected that position very early and it seemed to me that even someone like Roland Barthes, who had at some point been identified with a certain kind of formalism had rejected that, which is also what interested me in his evolution. I think that I rejected formalism without necessarily doing what most Americans had done in the nineties, which was to burn what they had adored, namely Theory, and move back to History. I always wanted to be able to combine the two.

OUTSIDER

Q As a Frenchman who immigrated to the States in the early nineties and who is now even a member of the American Academy of Sciences, you can play an important reconciliatory role. How would you describe your present situation as a French scholar in America? Would you see your own work as a cultivation of a sort of continental diversity to American criticism? And, conversely, how do you feel as an 'American' scholar in the contemporary French intellectual milieu?

J-MR First, being a French scholar in America gives you a strange connection with what Americans believe we know because we are French and this is how I was asked to teach Theory. However, initially, when I arrived in the U.S., I came as a Joyce specialist and not particularly as a theoretician – at least, this was never mentioned. I think it is indeed a defining characteristic that, if you are French, it is not simply that you have read certain authors as a student, but also that you are more acquainted with continental philosophy in general than Americans are at the same age. French students will more or less know where to situate philosophers as Heidegger and Hegel, whereas to American students, or even colleagues, these are floating references, for they do not see them within the complex historical context, with names and relationships. Since we have a sense for the cultural background of these philosophers, it is easier for us to gain a broader understanding. However, within the French world, I see myself as an *angliciste*, in the sense that, in France, it is quite common for the *anglicistes* to have been philosophers as well. Many of my friends and people I admire, like Jean-Jacques Lecercle and others could have been philosophers but have remained *anglicistes*, who write theoretically in English and in French, but who also know a lot of corpses quite closely. This is something I have always insisted on as well and something I always try to teach my American students: “Do not be just a theoretician; you need to be very professional and very thorough facing at least one literary period or one literary field that you know well. You cannot make a living just being a theoretician.” When I came to the U.S. in the nineties, I saw that perversion of Theory, which considers Theory as a world of its own, where people have no time left to read literature. They were very ignorant facing literature and literary history, which I see as a mistake. The whole investment was reading about Foucault, Derrida, et cetera, and that view was rejected by older colleagues of mine, and I agree with them, because I do not think this is a good way of being a scholar in an English department.

Q So you consider yourself as a kind of outsider to both the French and the American academic system. How did this double outsider position affect your work?

J-MR The small distance I have towards both communities I write for and talk about makes me feel like an observer. It is not easy being an observer, because you generally do have stakes and the simple fact that I do not vote in America, but in France, while being more in touch with the American political situation than with the European, makes me always a kind of *décalé* (in a kind of interval). Therefore, I do not consider myself as a middleman, bringing some French rationality to the American world, rather I see myself as a person who, at a very broad and almost blurred level, tries to develop a theoretical and philosophical discourse built on certain things he sees in American critical life and who also observes some things in the French cultural life that he can bring closer to those American paradigms. This is why in the introduction to *Ethics of the Lie* I included a discussion about a very popular series in France and in the U.S., in which the focus of the program is on lying people and people caught lying. It struck me how lying can provide a link between the two communities. It is obvious that, in the position of the external observer, you tend to have a better view on the way people lie and also what is expected of the lie.

Q To continue on your outsider position, then: in your book *1913: The Cradle of Modernism*, you make a statement about Morton Fullerton that it took an American to analyze a European movement like modernism properly. Is this a role you can play as well, adopting an American perspective on Europe?

J-MR If I had to generalize this in a very radical manner, I would say that this is true of interpersonal relationships. That is an aspect that psychoanalysis brought home to me, namely Freud's invention of the technique of being in the position of exteriority. It just takes a little distance to see what people carry with them as symptoms. I believe that this position – not of radical exteriority but of relative exteriority – gives a good explanation for the fact that I can detect more easily some blind spots among my friends. For me, for instance, religion is not taken for granted, but, for many of my friends, it is. I think I can denaturalize certain things and I also found myself caught in my being French by trying to see myself as an observer from outside, posing questions that seemed a little absurd from an American point of view. I believe that this is the condition for a certain understanding and a certain series of transcendental or quasi-transcendental – as Derrida would say – questions, questions not about the meaning that is being produced, but about the frame in which this meaning is being produced. To me, it is about being able to see the frame.

Q Your answer about the difficulties of this observer position is somewhat reminiscent of Roland Barthes's afterword of his *Mythologies*, in which he describes the *mythologue* as automatically excluded, in a manner of speaking, from the world he wants to define and defile.

J-MR I love *Mythologies*. In this remarkable book, Barthes managed to make things as simple as wine, French fries, soap, etc, strange, by 'defamiliarizing' those objects. But what surprised me was one of Barthes's most interesting but also most contested works, *The Empire of Signs*, a book about Japan, which was debunked by friends of mine who lived in Japan then and who had met Barthes and thought that he was totally naive. And indeed, even though I like the book, I know that Barthes made many mistakes about Japanese culture. What he sees as a *zen*-like utopian cult of the blank meaning is not at all what Japanese people would recognize as their culture. It is funny to see how a smart and sophisticated intellectual as Barthes could fall prey to the same kind of mistake of naturalizing something that he had seen in three trips of two weeks each.

Q Do you feel the need as an academic subject and, as you said, an observer of society, to participate actively in real life as well? Is this where we can situate your interest in the Slought Foundation, of which you are one of the founders and curators, along with Aaron Levy and Osvaldo Romberg? How does this institution affect your academic career?

J-MR A space like Slought is not so much a result of the desire to be in the real world. It is a sort of invention of a world – and I am not sure if it is the *real* world. For me, it is a way of doing certain things with other people, and everything that can be done in that way is transformative. The project started from a certain dissatisfaction. I remember very well that when the three of us founded Slought we said: "Okay, let's get together, let's do

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something! We want to change the city of Philadelphia. Can we do it? Yes, we can do it! Let's make it different! Let's make it better! Let's do something that we like!" Maybe it is just a fiction of the three of us, but it is at least shared by other people. It happens to have a critical function in the way that we can bring together slightly off-limits or controversial discourses and artistic practices. That is great, but it is also our fantasy of art, our fantasy of being political, our fantasy of cutting edges, and so on.

Slought is very important for my work at the academy, because – and this is something I always believed in and always insisted on – it is a necessity when one is an academic not only to be in academia. If one is only in academia, there is a certain *joie de vivre*, spontaneity, lacking. I have always reacted against that by doing other things with certain people. When I was in Dijon, I had a press, we did poetry readings, and so forth; in Philadelphia, we have Slought; and if I would go to Helsinki, I might start a golf club or something like that, why not?

SCHOLARSHIP

Q There seems to be a strong sense of academic 'heritage' in your work, in that you quote extensively (for instance, see the registers of your books), never to press your points home but to acknowledge previous criticism. How do you regard your relation to the academic tradition?

J-MR I do believe in scholarship and I know that people that I respect also believed in it. You cannot be a specialist in everything. That is what I learned via working on difficult authors who had been in a way cornered by a whole industry, like Joyce. What I do not like and what I think is a mistake in scholarship, is the tendency that I see at times in American students, namely that they take the last book on a topic, not knowing that it might have been preceded by twenty other books that might have been better. This is not to give credit to anteriority, but it seems to me that one should make the effort of going back to that history. It is curious to see – and maybe it is something that I consider as a little failure of the French system – that, maybe because of Deleuze or maybe because of an adherence to a certain 'easy' way of doing Theory, people tend to 'poopoo' that long tradition, which I regard as a terrible mistake and shortcoming. In America, on the contrary, because of the good peer evaluation in the presses, magazines and reviews, there is an insistence on the fact that one should at least be aware somehow of that long history. I have worked for many American publications and at the beginning I tapped some of my French and European friends, who sent many good articles, but, when their articles were sent back by American boards, each time there was this question: "Could we have a few footnotes, showing that you have in fact read the literature?" And most of the time, the articles were not returned. In this case, both the authors of the articles and the editors had a point. The authors mainly had one or two insights, and they did not want to go through the boring task of checking the bibliographies, checking the journals, and so on. They had a sort of 'take-it-or-leave-it' attitude. The American idea of scholarship, on the other hand, was that you had to check whether what you had discovered was new or not. When I have to talk for myself, I am completely on the American side and I can say quite globally that I am no Deleuzian on that account. To my mind, the introduction of this very offhand way of playing with broad intuitions was one of the main effects Deleuze had on American cultural life, although we know that Deleuze himself was extremely cultured and knew all the previous literature, but many of his epigones do not have that same respect for scholarship.

Q Getting acquainted with secondary literature before being able to write something yourself is perhaps an inherent characteristic of the Humanities. Do you regard this as a fruitful academic paradigm? Or can it have a sort of paralyzing effect on scientific thought?

J-MR I think that it is both simpler and more complicated. It is simpler in the sense that one cannot read everything anyway, so there is always a limitation. I think that writing and reading should overlap in a certain way. This is also why 'immature' students can be as good as 'mature' students, because they sometimes have better ideas and are at times closer to the real issues that they had detected themselves, precisely because they had not read everything. Good ideas, to my mind, come from a point of ignorance, but, in order to say that

you have reached that point of ignorance, you have to know a lot. This is why I tell my students to try to work from something that strikes them as being obscure. Seeing something as obscure is not the same as not seeing something. If you see something as obscure, it means that there is something that ‘worries’ you, something you cannot really conceptualize. This is exactly where a little immaturity is at times an asset, whereas the idea of being totally prepared and then writing is a mistake, because as soon as you start writing – and everybody who writes knows this – you discover new problems that you had not foreseen. And, indeed, once you have started writing, you need to check the bibliography, not before. Working according to this method, you can maintain an active relationship towards your literature and still absorb the secondary material, but in a different, more conscious way. You also will be able to go a lot faster through it, quickly seeing whether something is useful and relevant or not. I still write my books following that methodology, first trying to be astonished by something, and only then reading about it.

Q You have been ‘worrying’ quite a lot the last ten or fifteen years, as you have been very productive lately. Has writing become easier for you? Has your academic prestige become a way to gain more intellectual freedom in your seminars, your interests, and in your books?

J-MR What distinguishes me from my American colleagues, I think, is that I now believe that I can work on things I do not know. I liked, for instance, the idea of writing about lies, because I knew very little about this subject. It is of course true that there were moments in my life where I lied a lot to various people, but that is not why I decided to write about lies. It was actually a friend of mine, Margary Arent Safir, who invited me to a conference on ethics and lies, and I convinced myself to join this conference, not because I was a specialist on lying – I had never read or thought anything about it – but, having written a certain amount of books, you can trust yourself enough to think: “Well, what have I to say there?” Most people would conclude that they do not have anything to say, since they are no specialists, but I know now that the non-specialist has certain things to say as well – things that might differ from what the specialist might say. This insight came to me earlier, when I worked on Mishima, even though I was not a specialist, since I do not know Japanese, and had only just discovered him. But I think that, especially because I was an outsider, I asked some different questions and I had a totally different reading of the text than the traditional Japanese critics.

LITERATURE

Q To disarm the intentional fallacy debate, that still turns up time and again and which seems important in art historical discourse, you bring in psychoanalysis precisely as a means to foreground the unconscious and to point out that an author does not necessarily know what he or she wanted to write. This could also be seen – in a broader context – as the contemporary relevance of psychoanalysis with regard to literature and art. Could you say a few words about how you see the relation between psychoanalysis and literature?

J-MR My use of psychoanalysis is relatively restricted when I deal with literature, because I think it is less a method of hermeneutics that will give you access to meanings in the text, than a certain awareness of the intersubjective dialectics that is taking place, to put it very broadly. I do not expect particularly exciting meanings to be discovered from the side of psychoanalysis, because here I would agree with Deleuze and others that there is something unhappily strangely limited in what seems to be produced in terms of the truth, the content, the meaning, and so on. Basically, as Deleuze convinced me in *Anti-Oedipus*, it is always the same family story: daddy, mummy, castration, incest. That is not wrong, but it is not very productive. It is true in a sense that it is always true; therefore, it is not very relevant. It is a kind of truth that is not an event. But, what I personally learn from psychoanalysis is this awareness that there is always a certain positioning, to go back to Freudian or Lacanian insights, of a divided subject with a big Other. So, saying that the subject is divided excludes the illusion of a mastery on the side of the subjective reader, and saying that there is something like the big Other implies that there is something like the unconscious language or culture that works as a determining factor. That to me is very important in my dealing with texts, and in my dealing with people who read texts with me, among which students. For that I am very thankful to psychoanalysis, because in my interactions with my classes, I think I

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have a practice that is inflected by psychoanalysis, not in my answers to questions, but more in the way I *pose* certain questions...

I believe it is a kind of awareness that you need. For instance what justifies for me a certain intervention of Theory when reading literature is that I do not take for given that it is enough to know what a text means. So I am always ready to hear somebody who will say: "What are we doing here? We are wasting our time, and it is sunny outside. What is the point?" I am always ready to answer to that question, which is a question that can come from boredom and frustration, but which questions the very meaning of what is being done. To me this is not irrelevant; it is not a question that I see as terrorist, absurd or horrible, but one that can be fed back into some kind of discussion. It is more about the effects of the frame and desire: how can one deal with one's split, with subjectivity? That is what psychoanalysis brings to me. That awareness of subjectivity *is* at stake, but it is not a subjectivity of ideological formations of the idea that I am me and I know who I am and I know what I think.

Q In *Given: 1° Art 2° Crime* and *Ethics of the Lie* you focus on a kind of tension between fiction and non-fiction. How do you view the ambiguous interaction between facts and fiction, with facts pervading fiction and fiction pervading reality? How would you describe the tension between the aesthetic and the ethical dimension of crimes in fiction that turn back onto reality? Is there a model in fiction that can be applied to reality?

J-MR This is a very important and central question. My generation has been marked by Jean Baudrillard and the idea of simulation. I rejected it as too easy, so this is why I also reject the idea of the Postmodern except as a cultural moment. For this reason I began *Given: 1° Art 2° Crime* with a reference to Baudrillard. He is a smart person, no doubt, but personally I do not buy what he writes in one of his books, namely that the Iraq war never took place. I do not believe this idea that the real world is now a pure simulation. That is not to say that I believe in the real world, but I do believe in the fact that the more one works on complex cases like: "Did the Bush administration lie or not about the Iraq war?"; "Did Elizabeth Short know what she was doing when she was spending her last days in LA?"; or "Who was Jack the Ripper?" (there is a certain continuity between the three questions) we realize that these are all three events that happened at some point in what is taken to be the real world: the war was declared; somebody was killed; many women were killed. We realize that we do not really know, that it is very hard to know, and that, by comparison, fiction is much simpler than reality. So, rather than saying reality is like fiction, we realize that fiction offers us simplified ways of making hypotheses about tangled facts.

What brought this to me very concretely in a simple manner is the reflection of a friend of mine who is a very successful lawyer. I was asking her exactly the same question: "You as a lawyer, do you think you are dealing with fiction or with reality?" At that time I was trying to ask how she would view rhetorics and she said: "Of course, fiction." I said: "What do you mean?" She said: "You have to have a fiction. If you want to stick to reality, you will lose your case. If you want to stick to the facts as you know them, they will not convince any jury. You need to have a good fiction, hope that it is not too far from the facts, and convince the jury. Then you will win." That is not exactly what I do personally, but I do believe that the more we know about real cases and events, the more they will adopt a structure of fiction, or even more a structure of multiple fictions. So we will have to untangle something like that.

This is why, for instance, I am so interested in the documentary about Aileen Wuornos: *The Selling of a Serial Killer*, which is the real-case story of a woman who was dramatized as this prostitute who had killed many men. What you see is in fact real footage of the woman who was executed. What the film-makers want to know is whether she was guilty or innocent, in the sense that there may have been extenuating circumstances. The journalist believes that because she has been raped and treated horribly, she is a victim and she should not be sent to the electric chair. But there is a moment, obviously, when *she* has decided to die, and wanting to be killed, she then says she has done it all for the money. So she lies by saying that she is guilty, which shatters the journalist. It is only at the end that she says: "Yes, it is true; I lie when I say that I lie." What is this? Is she crazy?

Does she know what she is saying? Is she really a victim, or is she not? Is she a victim to the point that she is ready to say that she killed those men in cold blood, just to be sent through death? What you realize, even as you watch the documentary, is that to make a fiction out of this, you have to simplify.

PEDAGOGY

Q In *The Future of Theory*, you go back to Plato to rediscover the value of teaching, to prove “the necessity of teaching”. In what light do you see the ethical dimension in the act of teaching? To what extent do you want to go beyond the commonsensical point that teaching theory is teaching to be critical?

J-MR Indeed, I really believe in teaching and in pedagogy. Since you mention my reading of *Protagoras* in the context of *The Future of Theory*, what I notice is that it is hard to distinguish between Plato and the sophists. This is a paradox, because philosophy begins there. As you know, *philosophia* is the love of knowledge for itself and not for mercenary exchange, as Plato sees the sophists. But at the same time, it is the sophists that invented the idea of pedagogy rather than Plato. With his aristocratic essentialist leanings, Plato believed that one is good or bad, but one cannot really learn. I myself am on the side of the sophists, which is why I accept being paid – and relatively well paid – in an American university to teach; otherwise I would be a contradiction of myself. From this perspective, pure ethics would be what Plato’s Socrates does, namely without being paid talking to people in the street just for the sake of pure truth. The irony, of course, is that he ended up being condemned as a sophist...

Q Still, Socrates made a good impression as a teacher, and was confronted with his own pedagogical problems. In Plato’s *Symposium*, Alcibiades walks in drunk, praising Socrates as his ideal teacher and the erotic object of his desire...

J-MR... and Alcibiades goes on by saying that he could never seduce Socrates. Part of the discussion is that Alcibiades wanted to sleep with Socrates, but Socrates refuses. Then Alcibiades says that what he sees in him is under the rugged appearance, namely the beautiful objects inside, which Lacan describes as the *agalma* or the *objet petit a*. I think this is a good image of pedagogy. It is also something that I often have to deal with personally and psychoanalysis provides a very good model for it, happily. After all, part of the experience of teaching has something to do with the psychoanalytic treatment of transference. With students, I know that there is a transference level, but I have to be aware that if they fall in love with me, they are mistaken. I need to act on the situation not by telling them that, but by continuing where I am in my position, that is turned towards the object. So this is how I see the ethical aspect.

Love is *philo-sophia*, not ‘philo-Socrates’, or ‘philo-Jean-Michel’. It is capturing a certain interest and mobilizing it towards a certain aim, which ultimately enriches the other person, and enriches yourself through what can be gained in that process, but it is not counselling. Indeed, becoming a kind of counsellor – or ‘best friend’ – is a danger in American universities, more than in European universities. When people come and talk about their girlfriends, break-ups, and so on, you are in another role. When this happens, I immediately cut the conversation. When people ask me whether they should continue with their relationship, or whether they should come out of the closet, I refuse to intervene, since that is up to them to decide and it is not my place to make those kind of decisions. In this respect, one concrete thing that I have learned from Lacanian psychoanalysis is that you need to cut it short so as to deflect many of such incidents. The short session is really a fantastic Lacanian invention.

Q Let’s shift the discussion at this point from your teaching to your books. Could you comment on the ‘associative’ nature of your writing? Do you see it as a discursive method to escape simplification yourself, or is it simply a result of the way you think criticism should function?

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J-MR I think it is a way of writing intuitively. I try very hard to keep in mind a certain conceptual logic without making it explicit all the time, but I will show once in a while that I know where I am with regard to the larger conceptual frame. I shift between the various levels, so as to avoid pure abstraction on the one hand, and pure content analysis on the other. When I am not dealing with texts as texts, but with texts as thematic chains of images or reasons, I like once in a while to remind the audience rapidly that this could all be a very abstract discourse with a chain of pure concepts. So that is where I will go down to the text and show how those concepts can work at the level of minute structural mechanisms.

In this respect, I think you can learn a lot from Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which is a strange book, written at full speed, but amazingly smart and exciting. Sometimes you get pure architectural concepts, but at other times there are pure examples. You discover the moments that really work, and where Hegel integrates one approach with the other, like in the case of 'the Master and the Slave' or 'the beautiful soul'. Ideally, the various levels interact, and I am happy when I can have them do that.

Q Of course, it requires much intellectual input from the reader. But *Ethics of the Lie* seems more readable for the layman, in a manner of speaking. Is there a relation between that kind of readability and its political meaning? Does this heighten in any way its political relevance?

J-MR In the case of *Ethics of the Lie*, what you read is an English translation of a French book, intended for a French audience. I wrote this book in the first place because I felt that my audience did not know enough about American politics. But now that this book is going to return to the American public, I am not exactly sure how it will be pitched, because what I tried to do was to start from a number of cases – mostly from American politics, but also from elsewhere – and then articulate a certain theoretical discourse about this phenomenon of the lie. I do not really believe that it would make a lot of difference to the composition of my book if I would have taken examples from French politics.

The French book *Logiques du mensonge* is in fact deceptive, it begins very simple but it gets more and more complicated. For instance, my brothers, who are nonetheless literate, said that they were having a hard time with the second part. Because I begin with Clinton, Bush, a few examples, and then move on to logics, Freudian and Lacanian theory without really signposting it, the book gets denser and denser. So, now I am going to write a simple book – if I can – about lies. I feel that I have been carried along by my aim to get at what really makes the issue complicated. When talking about lies, what happens is you move away from the idea of intentionality, which is a Freudian issue. This is why in the book there is a progression from the journalistic to the philosophical, unlike my other books, which tend to be fairly unified in tone and style. But in the next book, *The Color of Lies*, I believe I have found how to talk about these matters in a simpler, less philosophical, and less Freudian way.

ETHICS AND POLITICS

Q In the afterword of the English translation of *Ethics of the Lie*, you hint at the political interests of your work, especially with regard to your evaluation of the Bush policy. How would you tie your book to the politics of the U.S. today and to Hillary Clinton's and Barack Obama's campaigns?

J-MR The difficulty is to accept that political men and women lie once in a while but that some lies are damaging whereas others are not. I was surprised by the generational gap between the younger Obama partisans and the older Clinton partisans, which I regard as different attitudes facing the previous lies. Personally, I would have been in favour of an alliance between Obama and Clinton, because we have to be pragmatic and simply change the system in power. In this case, the issues hinging around lies are absolutely central. Although it is an old strategy to discredit your adversary by saying that he or she has lied, this is what Obama has found against Clinton, arguing that she said she was against the war, but voted in favour of the war, therefore she has lied! This is the only thing that all my friends who root for Obama see as absolutely detrimental to Hillary Clinton. For me the paradox is the following. We all know that politicians lie a lot, and Eric Alterman shows in *When*

Presidents Lie how most American presidents have lied and were caught lying in their careers. But when does it become intolerable? Or do we forget that we know this? This is where ethics should step in. What needs to be avoided is the simplification of a pure philosophical investigation like that of Kant, who somehow deduces that one should never lie and lies are always bad. This is a fantastic idea, but as we know, no society could exist without lies. There is a certain contradiction here.

Q Grappling with lies through ethics, then, you take a political stance towards the negative dimension of the lie, but at the same time you award it a positive dimension, for example in fiction or in love. How would you reconcile those two positions?

J-MR I realize, in fact, that part of my argument is not unlike Peter Sloterdijk's distinction between classical cynicism and modern cynicism in his *Critique of Cynical Reason*. As a European, or at least as a Frenchman, I belong to a more cynical culture compared to American culture. For instance, most of the French were totally aghast to see that Clinton's thing with Monica Lewinsky became a political scandal, because we all assume that men in power will have affairs once in a while, *et alors?* Of course, we saw it as ridiculous American puritanism, manipulation from the right and so on. However, such an attitude can also degenerate into pure cynicism: "All the politicians are lying all the time anyway, therefore politics is shit, so I do not want to be bothered!" That is negative cynicism. The American people, on the other hand, especially the younger generation, still holds a belief in the trustworthy politician who never lies, which, as we know, cannot exist. Necessarily, they are in the situation of the Romantic idealist, who, sooner or later, will be like the beautiful soul and become disillusioned. But there should be a position in between, you see. So, this is the role that ethics plays, I think. For me the solution is just the title, *Ethics of the Lie*, yet most people are shocked by the oxymoron. It is a realistic oxymoron, though. We have to be aware that we are all liars and lie quite often, for good and bad reasons. That is basically what psychoanalysis teaches us. For example, we lie when we say: "I love your shirt", or "I love your class." There is nothing to be ashamed of or to be cynical about, so we simply have to acknowledge it. Another thing that psychoanalysis taught me is that in rehabilitation clinics the first step is usually to bring the patient who drinks to the admission that he or she drinks, because most addicts deny that they have a drinking problem, although it is quite clear to everybody that they do. So, it is the same in politics.

Q Hopefully you did not feel compelled to lie much during the interview. Thank you very much.

J-MR Everything is a lie that tells the truth. Which why I'd like to thank you as honestly as I can. Thank you, thank you.

Jeroen Lauwers is a classicist who is currently preparing his PhD as a research assistant of the Research Foundation Flanders. His research revolves around the use of "authority" in Imperial Greek Literature, which he considers in light of both ancient and modern methodological approaches.

Thomas Van Parys is a PhD student and teaching assistant in the research unit 'Literature and Culture' at the University of Leuven, Belgium. He is writing a thesis on science-fiction novelizations. His research interests include adaptations and novelizations, film stills, space and description in literature and film, and science fiction.

Jean-Michel Rabaté is the Vartan Gregorian Professor in the Humanities at the University of Pennsylvania. In the past, he has taught at Princeton, Université de Montréal, Manchester, Paris 8 and Dijon. He is one of the founders and executive directors of Slought Foundation. He is one of the managing editors of the *Journal of Modern Literature*. Since 2008 he has been made a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He has authored or edited more than thirty books on modernism, psychoanalysis, contemporary art, philosophy and writers like Beckett, Pound and Joyce. Recent books include *Given: 1) Art, 2) Crime*, Sussex University Press (2006, forthcoming in French in 2009), *Helène Cixous--On Cities*, co-ed., Slought (2006), *Lacan Literario*, Siglo 21 (2007), *1913: The cradle of modernism*, Blackwell (2007) and *The Ethic of the Lie*, The Other Press (2008). He is currently working on a sequel to his "lies" book, entitled *The Color of Lies*.