

correspondents at large

## The Future of Literary Criticism

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THE FUTURE OF LITERARY CRITICISM WILL BE DERRIDEAN, OR IT WILL NOT BE. AND IF IT IS NOT, IT WILL HAVE BEEN DERRIDEAN, SINCE IT was he who first envisioned critically the possibility of a future from which literature—and, a fortiori, literary criticism—might be absent. Derrida noted that the exceptional fragility of literature would become manifest in the event of a nuclear, biological, or nanotechnological holocaust (“No Apocalypse” 27). One can imagine a holocaust survivor producing an epic poem or a lyrical outburst, but literature will have vanished with no hope of ever being reconstituted. Derrida distinguishes literarity, the use of stylized language, which may be as old as civilization, from literature, by which he means the historical institution that began at the end of the seventeenth to the beginning of the eighteenth century in Europe, an industry of authors and publishers, readers and booksellers—and literary critics. It is on the grounds of the institution of literature that we academic critics continue, more or less tenuously, to survive.

The fragility of literature, its susceptibility to being lost, is linked to its having no real referent. The representations of literature are inherently unreliable; they are not even always fictional, sometimes factual but unreliably. Literature conforms to no referent from which it could be reconstituted if its canons were lost, the way chemistry might in a postnuclear age be rediscovered. It depends for its existence exclusively on the preservation of the archive.

The archive consists, Derrida reminds us, not only of physical books or bits and bytes but also in its systems of organization, which create the conditions for and guarantee the chances of intertextuality, the possibility of texts’ referring to other texts, as in citation, quotation, allusion, influence between and among texts. Intertextuality was often deemed in the twentieth century to be the essential characteristic of literature, its determining feature, *sine qua non*, and the specific object of literary criticism. It follows that our principal, our principal duty as literary critics is to preserve the archive, not only as a physical entity but also as practices of reading and commentary

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by which the archive's canons are continually transformed and its resources exploited. The least paper, written by the most innocent undergraduate, or the merest rereading serves to keep the literary archive alive.

There is another way for the archive of literature to vanish without any hope of recovery, a way that follows from what George Orwell called "the mutability of the past" (213). In 1984 his hero, Winston, is employed in the Ministry of Truth, in the records department, whose work is to rewrite all published texts, past and present, even the greatest lyric poems, so as to reflect the interests of Big Brother. The rewriting replaces the original work in the archive with a so-called definitive text to which all other texts must refer:

And a few cubicles away a mild, ineffectual, dreamy creature named Ampleforth [rhymes with Wordsworth], with very hairy ears and a surprising talent for juggling with rhymes and meters, was engaged in producing garbled versions—definitive texts, they were called—of poems which had become ideologically offensive, but which for one reason or another were to be retained in the anthologies. (42)

So whether literary criticism survives or not, it will have been Derridean. If it does persist, the field will need at least a century to understand and work through the implications of Derrida's discoveries in many areas that concern literary criticism. He wrote over eighty books, which display not only his extraordinary bibliographic grasp and astonishing erudition but also the seriousness with which he understood that to make a difference one has to command the bibliography. He confronted many of the major texts of our times and brought to light many authors we had no idea how to read. One cannot work on Genet or Hegel, Kant or Rousseau, Mallarmé or Baudelaire, Marx or Nietzsche, Heidegger, Schmidt, Bataille, Levinas, or Cixous (to name only a few) without acknowledging Derrida's magnificent readings of their texts.

Even as he reveals the logic at work in their tissues of allusion, stylistic tics, tones, echoes, or obsessive signs, he remains systematically alert, Argus-eyed, to the gestures of reading itself, to the positions and assumptions it implies, to his own investment in the critical act. His example will surely serve as a guide for what literary criticism in the future will aspire to become, no doubt in a different style. Derrida often repeated the koan that Nietzsche's Zarathustra addressed to his disciples: follow me by not following me.

He recast the very notion of text, of what it means to read. "A text is not a text," he famously wrote, "unless it hides from the first comer (*le premier venu*), from the first glance (*le premier regard*), the law of its composition and the rules of its game." What is dissimulated in the woven texture of the text is not a secret, accessible only to hermeneutic discovery. It is what weaves the text, constrains the text to repeat, but its web of motives (a web within a web) is never immediately visible, its principle not directly given. What is more, says Derrida, the laws and rules that govern the text may take centuries to be unraveled, and "they run the risk of being definitively lost" ("Plato's Pharmacy" 63).

Reading, in the Derridean sense, is a practice general in its aims and universal in its objects, but one example of it is psychoanalysis. Freud treats dreams like texts to be read. What "lie concealed behind the dream," says Freud, are unconscious thoughts running along "track[s]" that crisscross at "junction[s]" created by "switch-words," ambiguous words that appear in the dreamwork along a line of associations (207n). Reading a dream means uncovering the way those tracks of unconscious thoughts intersect to produce the figures and forms that appear to the mind in sleep. The text is thus both a woven web and the web of motives that weave the text: "a web that envelops a web" (Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy" 63).

Reading uncovers not only the laws and rules that constrain the production of the

text, that limit its play, but also whatever defies them. The reader, never the master of the game, is constantly surprised by the resources of its ruse.

What lies behind, beneath, or within the text—the law of its composition, the rules of its game—cannot be grasped like an object; there is no objective reading possible, no scientific truth to be observed. What is more, readers of a text have no access to what it dissimulates if they are not willing to risk injecting something of themselves, to add their thread to those of the woven texture of the text. If you are afraid that by reading you might add something of yourself to the text, you will not begin to read at all. But what is added must be motivated by the text, cannot be merely random thoughts, ungrounded assertions: pure subjectivism. Neither should one believe in objective literary criticism, the impersonality of methodological prudence, claiming to respect illusory norms of objectivity: rigid scientism.

Derrida rethinks not only the textuality of texts but also the spacing of the trace, the minimal condition of there being a sign. His reformulation of the concept of trace has given rise to new interpretations of the finitude of time and the presence of what is.

Derrida's style of reading aims at demonstrating coherence where earlier readers found only contradiction or confusion; it signals difference where continuity has been taken for granted. He is a professional philosopher, but his approach is more philological than philosophical: he always starts with the words for things. He pays unblinking attention to the smallest details, indistinct margins, ancillary footnotes, the barest signs or traces, on the assumption that what lies hidden betrays itself most frequently in out-of-the-way places, far from the central scene, in the most fragile details. On the same elegant heuristic principle, Sherlock Holmes writes a treatise on tobacco ash in which he indicates everything that can be learned about a smoker from the

least flick of his extinguished ember (Conan Doyle 91). Derrida, also a master of ash, analyzes its power to signify as well as the charm of its vanishing (*Cinders*).

At the same time, Derrida was polemically engaged with many of his contemporaries and denounced, in sometimes brutal, often witty terms, the forms of their mystification or the depths of their bad faith. His polemics always proceed by strengthening the argument of his adversary, giving it every benefit of the doubt, in order to demolish its unwarranted pretensions, its tendency to lapse into idolatrous stupefaction or wishful political fantasy.

Reading, he asserts, is teaching. *Deconstruction*, at its origin, was a technical term, invented by Derrida, to name a procedure, a quasi method by which one could recast the categories that governed, for example, literary criticism in twentieth-century America—categories like representation, imitation, expression or intention, metaphor, or theme. The word *deconstruction* has lately been taken up by the media and vulgarized: everything today can be deconstructed. The vulgar notion may be helpful, however distantly related to Derrida, when it is used to describe a composition whose unity or coherence consists in the disassembly and juxtaposition of its constituent parts. Suspecting the conventional understanding of traditional critical categories, Derrida spoke of them only after achieving an altered grasp of their implications, their limitations as well as their potentialities. He did so through the invention of what I call his logic machines, terms, like *trace*, *supplement*, *pharmakon*, *hymen*, *glas*, or *autoimmunity*, that eccentrically but coherently describe otherwise inexplicable textual phenomena. These terms are not easy to define briefly. For example, he uses Rousseau's work to illustrate the slippery movement of the supplement—an addition that is simultaneously necessary and inessential: both (and neither) a mere supplement, extraneous to the whole to which it is simply appended, and an essential complement,

without which there is no whole (“Dangerous Supplement” 143). The logic machine of the supplement allows one to think the possibility of a part that is smaller than the whole to which it is affixed but also larger—the whole whose totality it accomplishes plus the whole’s supplement. In discussing Mallarmé, Derrida deconstructs the premises of mimesis, of imitation and representation, by employing the strange logic of the hymen, a movement in the text that describes the posture of being inside and outside a barrier at the same time, a barrier that can be violently penetrated but remains intact (“Double Session” 260). Here’s a final example of a logic machine: autoimmunity is the mechanism by which any entity, not only a biological one, takes itself as an external threat against which it mobilizes its defenses, turning them back on itself so that they become, suicidally, its greatest danger. Those in power in Algeria canceled a national election when it appeared that the antidemocratic Islamic Brotherhood might prevail, thereby defending democracy by annulling it; the United States’ war on terror risks destroying the constitutional liberties it aims to protect. We literary critics have only begun to draw the conclusions to which these logic machines—quasi-philosophical notions—may lead. Academic literary criticism becomes in a Derridean perspective a means of illuminating texts by thinking differently about how they work, how they signify.

After Derrida, purely empirical critical approaches seem naive. All literary criticism operates tendentiously under the weight of

theoretical assumptions, and never more so than when critics resistant to theory ignore these presuppositions. We are only at the beginning of the task of exploring the implications and drawing the consequences of deconstruction for literary criticism, for what we are calling reading texts. The aim, aside from the pleasure of discovery, is to awaken this century of literary criticism from the “dogmatic slumber” into which it is constantly tempted to fall (“Autoimmunity” 104).

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