

A COMPANION TO
LITERARY *T*HEORY

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Deconstruction

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I

“Deconstruction” has migrated from philosophy and literary theory into popular culture and journalistic discourse, so at the risk of appearing a purist, it is worthwhile to recall how the term was used by its major proponent, Jacques Derrida (1930–2004). Derrida’s writings encompassed an extraordinary range of topics which he treated with an underlying continuity of approach for all the dazzlingly inventive and unexpected turns in his numerous books and essays. Getting clear about his usage will help us distinguish between “philosophical” and “literary” variants of deconstruction, a distinction we need to think through with the utmost care and precision. We should heed Derrida’s warnings against the “vulgar” deconstructionist idea that, “as Derrida has shown,” philosophy is just a kind of literature, concepts a species of (erased or sublimated) metaphor, reason a variety of rhetoric, or other such notions presaged by Nietzsche in his genealogies of Western philosophical thought from Plato to Kant, Hegel, and Schopenhauer (see Nietzsche 1954; Norris 1987).

To be sure, there are passages of Derrida that press a long way in that direction, as for instance in the early part of his essay “White Mythology: Metaphor in the Texts of Philosophy” (Derrida 1982a: 207–2). However, he then goes on to demonstrate that oppositions such as concept/metaphor, reason/rhetoric, or philosophy/literature cannot be analyzed or critically assessed—let alone deconstructed—except by way of a disciplined approach that avails itself of the conceptual resources provided by philosophers from the ancient Greeks to the present. Nor should we assume that, if literary (poetic or fictional) texts are to be treated “philosophically,” then this must be either by extracting certain, for example, ethical themes for discussion, or by focusing on topics—like authorial intention, aesthetic value, or the ontological status of the literary text—remote from the activity of close reading or textual exegesis. A Derridean deconstructive reading, as distinct from a

good many readings that have passed as instances of deconstruction, is one that relentlessly quizzes and complicates but never simply rejects or denies the pertinence of categories like “philosophy” and “literature” (Derrida 1981a, 1992). To let them go as ideological baggage left over from the epoch of “Western metaphysics”—a sweeping designation used by early Derrida with no such wholesale dismissal in mind—is to give up those very critical resources that deconstruction brings to bear through its unique combination of textual close reading with acuity of logical-conceptual grasp.

Certainly nothing could be further from the truth than the sloppy and ill-read characterization of Derrida, prevalent among analytic philosophers, that casts him as a latter-day sophist out to score points off any thinking that aspires to logical consistency and truth (Derrida 1988; Searle 1977). Such terms recall Plato’s *Republic* and his attack on the poets—like the sophists—as peddlers of a false though superficially beguiling way with words (Plato 2007). Plato’s allusion to what he already sees as an “ancient quarrel” between poetry and philosophy will give some idea of how far back the issue goes. It also helps to explain why the philosophy/literature pair takes its essentially contested place within the system of binary oppositions that Derrida reveals as underlying—but also subverting—the certitudes of Western “logocentric” thought. They include, most saliently, nature and culture, male and female, presence and absence, identity and difference, origin and supplement, proper and improper, self and other, and (Derrida’s theme in some of his later, more overtly politicized essays) “legitimate” and “rogue” states (Derrida 2005).

In earlier works such as *Of Grammatology* (1976), *Writing and Difference* (1978), *Dissemination* (1981), and *Margins of Philosophy* (1982) his approach is for the most part closely exegetical. That is, it engages with an enormous range of texts from Plato and Aristotle to Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Husserl, Saussure, Freud, Lévi-Strauss, and Lévinas—not to mention poets and novelists like Mallarmé, Celan, Joyce and Sollers—in a way that is both attentive to linguistic detail and keenly responsive to conceptual strain. These aporias (from the Greek “impasse” thus “logical cul-de-sac”) he takes as intrinsic to the whole way of thinking that privileges one term in each binary with superior status (Derrida 1976). This may have to do with its being “natural” (as opposed to unnatural or perverse), “proper” (as opposed to deviant or aberrant), “male” (classically as opposed to “female” but also to other gender-descriptors implicitly marked as abnormal, hence in need of further specification) (Derrida 1979). Or again—here reverting to the philosophy/literature dyad—it may involve “concept” (with the values of rationality, logic, clarity, and truth) and “metaphor” (regarded, even by its friends, as involving a swerve from the norm of literal straightforward discourse) (Derrida 1982b). Derrida’s procedure is to show that these binaries are in fact highly unstable and that what at first appears as the primary term in each case must instead be understood as in some way (logically or conceptually) dependent upon its poor relation. And in the third and final moment of a deconstructive reading, there emerges an interminable oscillation between the two orders of priority, since the dependence-relation runs both ways and prevents the rigorous reader from essaying any more than a provisional assignment of values.

There is no space here for a detailed account of how this three-stage approach works out in the various readings that make up the early, “classical” period of Derrida’s work. It is, I think, reasonably described, despite his explicit reservations, as constituting something like a “method” or a set of broadly specifiable stages. His doubts in this regard are perhaps

best explained by the fact that, although those readings bear a strong family resemblance, they are each highly distinctive and could scarcely have been predicted in advance of first acquaintance even by readers familiar with much of his previous work. Using one of Derrida's own etymological ventures, I would call him, as surely few would deny, an "inventive" reader of texts (Currie 2013; Derrida 2007). The Latin term "*inventio*" meant either "invention" or "discovery," an ambiguity that nicely hits off what occurs when readers engage with texts in an active (i.e., a creative-critical) as opposed to a passive or routine way. Thus to the student of classical rhetoric, "invention" means both the process of *discovering* certain strikingly apt cultural-linguistic resources and—not incompatibly—the act of creatively deploying those resources in a novel way. Much of Derrida's writing transpires in precisely that space of invention where a reading minutely attentive to details—often supposedly "marginal" details of the text in hand—goes along with an, at times, quite uncanny power of discovering/creating new possibilities of sense.

This is no doubt one reason for his insistence that deconstruction is categorically not to be thought of as a method, a theory, a technique, a procedure, or a set of reading protocols specifiable in advance to be applied, *mutatis* always *mutandis*, across a range of texts (Derrida 1985). It is something that Derrida's work has not escaped at the hands of his many commentators and exegetes, although his own writing always managed—through that quite extraordinary quality of inventiveness in its twofold sense—to keep perpetually more than a few jumps ahead of them. On the other hand, Derrida was quick to register principled objections when he thought other exegetes were pushing too far in the opposite direction, that is to say, raising the non-existence of any deconstructive "method" to a high point of critical doctrine, or claiming that textuality goes "all the way down" and hence a priori disqualifies anything that philosophically minded readers might have to say about it. Indeed, one major difference between Derridean deconstruction and the broader, more distinctly "literary" movement loosely described as post-structuralism is that the latter prescriptively rejects such claims and asserts—as in the later writings of Roland Barthes—the impossibility of any discourse that could (or should seek to) achieve such a "meta-linguistic" standpoint (Barthes 1975, 1977).

Derrida puts the counter-argument in essays such as "White Mythology," where having shown the value-laden nature of binaries such as concept/metaphor, literal/figural, or philosophy/literature he goes on to argue that merely inverting the order of priority is only the first stage in any deconstructive reading that merits the name (Derrida 1982b). Thus in his essay "The Supplement of Copula," Derrida argues against ethno-linguists of a strong cultural-relativist persuasion who maintain that truth-claims of every kind are constructed by the logico-semantic resources available in various natural languages (Derrida 1982c; Benveniste 1971). His response is that Benveniste could not present that case without taking for granted, as trans-linguistically and trans-culturally valid, many invariant structures that must be regarded as *necessarily* operative in any language capable of functioning in a conceptual-communicative fashion. This goes especially for the copulative or predicative function—the word "is" as it figures in sentences of the form "A is B"—which Benveniste asserts to be absent from certain languages but which is, according to Derrida, a condition of possibility for language in general. Thus Derrida demurs when Benveniste moves from the defensible position that languages differ in all sorts of ways—mostly with

regard to the range of nouns or adjectives available according to localized need—to the indefensible position that holds such variability to extend beyond the realm of semantics or pragmatics to that of logico-syntactic structure. For if it did so (and here Derrida agrees with analytic philosophers including Donald Davidson), we should be at a loss to understand how successful translation could ever take place or even how we could make sense of utterances within our own native language community (Davidson 1984). More generally, it is the presupposition at work whenever Derrida takes a text to be stating, arguing, maintaining, expressing, or conjecturing some proposition, and then draws out the implicit counter-logic (of “supplementarity,” “*différance*” “parergonality”) by which its overt intentional purport is complicated to the point of logical undecidability. Such readings would manifestly lack all demonstrative force were it not that the points of conflict—or aporias—are arrived at through a process of close textual exegesis and rigorously logical reasoning.

Derrida’s work from his earliest to his latest periods offers many examples of this process, all of them distinctly individual. It would include Plato’s aporetic logic of the *pharmakon* (or writing as simultaneously poison and/or cure) in the *Phaedrus* (Derrida 1981b); the “logic of supplementarity” in Rousseau’s discussions of language, music, and civil society, along with his own deeply ambivalent attitude toward writing as a way of life (Derrida 1976); Kant’s *parergon*—or metaphor of framing—as the deconstructive marker of recurrent self-contradictory arguments or logical tensions in the *Critique of Judgment* and elsewhere (Derrida 1987); J. L. Austin’s provision of examples, instances and analogies that implicitly subvert his own express account of the requirements for the authentic or sincere speech-act (Derrida 1977; Austin 1963); Karl Marx’s hesitation between a confident statement of what would constitute a communist political order if actually achieved and his implied proviso that such a vision must retain a certain tentative or promissory (i.e., performative) character (Derrida 1994); the idea of *hospitality* as subject to a perpetual oscillation of values between that notion in its absolute and unconditional (and hence impracticable) form and the various real-world restrictions to which it is always subject (2000); and the self-implicating logic of “rogue states” as described by American policy wonks who fail to perceive how their own country’s actions on the world stage meet all the criteria for membership in that category (2005). Finally, there is Derrida’s late meditation, in *The Beast and the Sovereign*, on the failed pseudo-logic of self-exemption by which human animals have sought to place themselves outside and above every species of non-human animal (2009).

With each of these new departures in his thinking Derrida has spawned a new sub-discipline or area of study in the remarkably diverse field of literary criticism. What is notably consistent despite and across this bewildering range of topics is the fact that, in each case, there emerges a certain deviant or non-bivalent logic that creates a kind of running fracture through the text or discourse in question, yet which cannot be exposed unless the analyst adheres to the axioms of logic in its classical bivalent mode. For, as Derrida pointedly but no doubt mischievously chides the analytic philosopher John Searle, issues in philosophy are not—like preferences in ice-cream—fit subjects for treatment according to an approximative “logic” that, as in judgments of subjective taste, makes allowance for differences of degree between truth-values (Derrida 1988; Searle 1977).

II

My discussion so far has emphasized the philosophical aspects of Derrida's work because only by this route can we adequately grasp its significance for literary criticism and theory. Deconstruction in Derrida's hands, and as practiced by others who have responded most keenly to his example, is a mode of philosophically informed exegetical commentary that brings philosophy and literature into a closer, more intimate but also more deeply interrogative relationship than had been the case since Plato issued his joint condemnation of poetry and rhetoric as mendacious sister-arts. Indeed, one way of characterizing that relationship is to say that Derrida—along with his colleague Paul de Man—is engaged in giving rhetoric back its good name as a discipline of critical thought. Thus it doesn't, as in the pejorative sense of the term, offer lessons in how to use language to persuasive effect without regard for reason or truth but, on the contrary, examines how texts may—if read deconstructively—put up resistance to rhetorical strategies that seek to bypass such critical reckoning (de Man 1979, 1983, 1986, 1996). Derrida and de Man both read with an eye to those moments of contradiction, paradox, or aporia that may be passed over by other, more orthodox commentators. The latter, understandably enough, take a face-value approach to overt expressions of authorial intent. For Derrida and de Man, conversely, some hitherto neglected "marginal" detail is found to create insuperable problems for customary modes of interpretation.

Thus they both offer deconstructive readings of Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Husserl, and others which show the existing consensus to rest on what amounts to a systematic blindness—or pattern of recurrent cognitive resistance—to whatever might disrupt its conservative habits of response. In early de Man this takes the form of a repeated demonstration that readers have most to gain in terms of critical insight if they focus on just those symptomatic moments of blindness in philosophers, theorists, or interpreters that enable a corresponding or compensatory moment of insight on their own part. It is where critics are most heavily (hence uncritically) invested in some ruling ideology that they tend to ignore features of the text that might otherwise not escape their notice (de Man 1983). Such doctrinal adherences may have to do with literary concepts (or metaphors) such as those of organic form in the US New Criticism against the evidence of verbal detail that disrupts or contests such naive organicist ideas (de Man 1996). Or, again, it may concern the phenomenological approach adopted by thinkers such as Poulet, Starobinski, and the Geneva School during the 1960s and 1970s (Lawall 1968; Miller 1966). This stakes its claim on the possibility of the critic's entering so intimately into the author's thoughts and feelings through empathetic inwardness that the poetry or fiction becomes linguistically translucent, the text itself falling away to reveal a perfect meeting of minds. However, de Man maintains, this is a consummation that can never be achieved no matter how devoutly wished since texts are too complex, many-levelled, and often refractory to admit of any such unimpeded union between author and critic. Just as the New Critics disqualified their own organicist doctrine by focusing so intently on the poem itself—the sacrosanct "words on the page"—thus revealing discrepant textual details that just wouldn't fit that program, so the critics of consciousness were forced up against linguistic structures that got in the way of their idealized mind-meld (see de Man 1983; also Miller 1987).

Hence the title of de Man's landmark first collection of essays, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (1971; revised and expanded 1983). Later on his writing became increasingly austere as he determined to expunge from his own texts an existential pathos which betrayed the residual influence of Sartre's humanistic reading of Heidegger. De Man's chief topic during this period was "aesthetic ideology" in its various guises, mostly resulting from a failure by Romanticists to perceive the dangers, political as well as intellectual, in the usual understanding of privileged Romantic tropes such as metaphor and symbol (de Man 1984, 1996). Naively read, these tropes lay claim to a transcendent vision or insight that would collapse at a stroke the ontological gulf between subject and object, mind and world, or (in Kantian terms) the phenomenal realm of sensory-perceptual experience and the noumenal realm of pure reason. Such was the task laid upon them by English and German poet-philosophers, with Coleridge as the chief exponent of metaphor and symbol as figures of thought able to deliver the wished-for state of hypostatic union. Looking closely at the texts in question, De Man demonstrates that language simply will not offer an achieved example of the transcendent state envisaged (de Man 1984, 1996). Metaphor and symbol are complex tropes whose internal workings—the mechanics behind their semblance of unitary form—undermine the already shaky foundations of orthodox Romantic scholarship, so heavily invested in what had been promised on their behalf by over-credulous interpreters (as for instance Abrams 1971, 1973).

De Man's favored way of showing this is by means of a rhetorical analysis that, like Derrida's earlier practice, deploys all the instruments of "literary" close-reading (as developed by its modern pioneers from I. A. Richards and William Empson to the American New Criticism) of certain philosophical and literary works in subtle, ingenious and often wire-drawn textual exegesis (see Norris 1988). His approach—baldly put—is to deconstruct instances of (seeming) metaphor until they prove to incorporate chains of suppressed or occluded metonymic linkage, and to deconstruct instances of (supposed) symbol until they prove to rest upon other, less elevated tropes (de Man 1979, 1996). Allegory is the trope de Man finds most frequently at work, since to read allegorically is to follow the temporal unfolding of a discourse—whether narrative, argument, commentary, or exposition—wherein the various characters, events, or other elements of a progression have to be taken in precisely that sequence if the whole thing is to make any sense. This is why the Romantic poet-critics and their present-day apostles have habitually valued symbol far above allegory, just as they have valued metaphor far above metonymy. Symbol, even more than metaphor, holds out the enticing notion of what Coleridge called the "translucence of the Eternal through and in the Temporal," the quasi-divine power of creative imagination to lift us momentarily out of time while also annulling the distance between mind and world inflicted by our quotidian habits of thought (Coleridge 1816: 29).

This aesthetic ideology might seem innocuous enough, but de Man argues that it can come to exert large claims "on the shape and limits of our freedoms" (de Man 1984: 264). It does so by promising that language can indeed attain such a state, that metaphor and symbol can magically collapse all those vexing antinomies—subject/object, mind/world, and culture/nature—bequeathed to modern thought in the wake of Kant. And we should add "sense" as verbal signification versus "sense" as perceptual experience. De Man doesn't for a moment underestimate the appeal of that promise, the near-irresistible power it has

exerted on generations of critics and readers. The theme of an ultimate union between thought and feeling, or intellect and the emotions, brought together through the healing agency of language in its highest (poetic) forms, pervades the discourse of criticism since Coleridge. It is as much present when an avowed classicist like T. S. Eliot praises the poetry of Shakespeare and Donne for exhibiting a “unified sensibility” with “intellect at the tips of the senses” as it is when orthodox Romanticists exalt the reconciling powers of metaphor and symbol (Abrams 1971; Eliot 1964).

De Man argues that very different belief-systems or critical ideologies, ranging historically from Kantian idealism (among thinkers such as Fichte, Schiller, and Herder) to post-1950 schools of literary criticism and theory, have all bought into the same tenacious but ultimately corrigible confusion between language on the one hand and on the other whatever extra-linguistic reality is afforded us by phenomenal perception (de Man 1986, 1996). What gives de Man’s minatory rumblings their force is his claim—at least partially borne out (in my view) by his numerous writings on the topic—that aesthetic ideology, thus defined, has often functioned as the source, motivation, or leading premise for a notion of certain natural languages as “natural” in a value-laden sense. It can readily be made to connote the intrinsic superiority of certain languages—most often, in this context, German—on account of its special capacity for transcending the limits of narrowly rational thought and achieving, as Coleridge writes in “The Aeolian Harp,” a plenary sense of “the one life, within us and abroad.”

Such ideas take their most overt and heavily politicized “national-aestheticist” form in a thinker like Heidegger, whose writings are therefore a main focus for de Man as for Derrida (see especially Derrida 1989; de Man 1983a). On Heidegger’s account the modern German language stands in a uniquely privileged relation to ancient Greek and hence provides the fittest starting point for journeying back through the history of Western metaphysics to the pre-Socratic sources of a truth unknown to philosophers from Plato to Husserl (Heidegger 1975). Should we wish to catch the echo of this truth beneath the muffling conceptual accretions, then, so the later Heidegger counsels, we must harken to what the poets have to say, particularly German poets from Hölderlin to Rilke and Celan. This, according to de Man, is merely the most explicit version of an ideology that naively conflates the linguistic with the phenomenal and the phenomenal in turn with the real, the concrete, or the material (de Man 1986).

Harold Bloom once called de Man a “boa-deconstructor,” pointing perhaps to the intellectual fierceness of de Man’s essays, a near-obsessional fixity of purpose which set them apart from the free-wheeling style of other, more stylistically and hermeneutically adventurous exponents of deconstruction. They also contrast with Derrida’s writing where the dominant approach, despite its logically precise character, is far more “appreciative” in the literal sense that it brings out subtleties that enhance our readerly admiration of the text concerned. In de Man any appreciative remarks tend to be reserved for the earliest (most often the “original”) text in any given temporal series: for Rousseau rather than his commentators, for Kant rather than post-Kantians like Fichte, for Nietzsche rather than his present-day epigones, for Hölderlin rather than Heidegger’s readings of Hölderlin, and so forth (de Man 1979, 1983, 1996). Indeed, despite their mutual regard, de Man early on takes issue with Derrida precisely over his supposed failure to give Rousseau due credit for having pre-empted everything that his interpreters, Derrida included, have said about his

texts (de Man 1983b). In fact, Derrida explicitly credits Rousseau in just that way. It is a central precept of deconstruction (unlike post-structuralism and other more “radical” movements in literary criticism) that authorial intention is an “indispensable guardrail” for interpreters, even if it has only ever “protected” and never “opened” a reading (Derrida 1976).

That deconstructive reading “opens” when the reader perceives unresolved issues in a text—moments of paradox, contradiction, uncertainty, logical tension, indecision, or aporia—requiring a break with those standard responses that lead to deeply familiar, hence reassuring aesthetic pleasures: organic form, unified sensibility, sensuous enactment, metaphorical vitality, visionary power, or symbolic transcendence achieved through mind communing with nature. De Man is quite clear: to read deconstructively is to read obstinately, even perversely against the grain of responses that have become so deeply habitual and reliably rewarding that they constitute something like interpretative second nature. This goes along with his austere Kantian view of the “ethics of reading” as a battle to hold out against the siren calls of reader-satisfaction that bewitch our critical intelligence. The alternative—an ethics of reading based on the Aristotelian idea of *eudaimonia*, or self-fulfillment through the exercise of our distinctively human powers—strikes him as unworthy of the name of ethics, since it refuses the duty to find one’s desires or expectations regularly thwarted by recalcitrant textual details or by intransigent moral conscience. Thus the Kantian moral law with its anti-eudaimonic maxims and imperatives is here transmuted into a textualist injunction that would have us submit ourselves to the rigors of deconstruction in this sternly ascetic mode.

III

De Man’s work proved not just highly influential but almost contagious in its power to affect other critics—among them his Yale colleague J. Hillis Miller—with a kindred suspicion of the pleasures attendant upon reading poetry and fiction. This was especially striking in Miller’s case since his previous writings had evinced no such self-denying ordinance. He had moved, broadly speaking, from an early phase of phenomenological studies influenced by the Geneva School and focusing on states of consciousness in various nineteenth-century poets and novelists, to a post-1970 middle period when Derrida’s works persuaded him that literary texts were complex and rhetorically self-reflexive to a degree beyond capture by any such approach (Miller 1966, 1987). Unlike de Man, Miller at first greeted this Derridean revelation with a good deal of exuberant etymological wordplay and a marked emphasis on its promise to open up new and hermeneutically adventurous ways of reading (Miller 1987).

However, in a second very striking shift of tack, Miller seems to have fallen at least temporarily under de Man’s anhedonic spell by turning his mind to an “ethics of reading” that consisted in an absolute fidelity to the letter of the text. That is, such readings start out from the idea that with any text that manifests a certain degree of rhetorical complexity it will be bad faith to go along with the kinds of satisfaction that derive from standard modes of interpretative practice. Miller pushes de Man’s doctrine pretty hard, to the point where—despite their both having subjected Kant’s aesthetic and ethical doctrines to the

rigors of deconstructive critique—it begins to look distinctly Kantian. This ascetic imperative is presented by both of them as a matter of implacable necessity once the reader has grasped the jointly interpretative, ethical, and (not least) political issues at stake (see also Harpham 1987).

One may think that, in de Man's case, this rigorist insistence at times has more to do with aspects of his formative intellectual and life-historical experiences—including his now infamous war-time writings which espoused a decidedly German-nationalist ideology with its roots in Romantic (i.e., post-Kantian) poetics and aesthetics—than with anything arguably “in” the text itself (Norris 1988). Although he makes the highest virtue of a scrupulously close rhetorical reading and excoriates others for falling short of that standard, it has nonetheless been shown by some commentators that de Man is not above looking for ways to slant the outcome in favor of his own predisposed deconstructive bias (Corngold 1982). More generally, it is a main point of contrast between the two thinkers—despite their later close friendship and professions of mutual respect—that Derrida's commentaries are always, in a certain sense, appreciative while de Man's tend always toward a negative, cautionary, or drastically counter-intuitive and hence (for the typecast naïve reader) disconcerting conclusion. De Man's essays seem relentlessly devoted to closing off certain self-evidently “right” as well as attractive (he would say seductive) readings, whereas the effect of Derrida's writing is to open up new and singular perspectives on texts very often worn smooth by the consensus of mainstream critical opinion.

Thus when Derrida discovers hitherto unnoticed problems, complications or aporias the effect is not at all to diminish the standing—the value or interest—of the text in question. Rather it is to show (what de Man conspicuously fails to credit in taking him to task *à propos* Rousseau) that it invites and sustains deconstructive treatment just in virtue of those logico-semantic complexities that cannot be resolved on straightforwardly intentionalist or canonical terms. Nor indeed—a point made more explicitly by de Man—can they be cashed out in the aesthetically valorizing fashion of the American New Criticism where tropes or attributes such as irony, paradox, ambiguity, or semantic tension are taken to constitute both the hallmark of poetry in general and an index of especial literary-aesthetic worth as regards certain highly valued poems (de Man 1983c). Hence Derrida's consistent stress on the strictly aporetic—as opposed, say, to “paradoxical”—character of the various complications or unresolved conflicts encountered in the course of a deconstructive reading. On the one hand it signifies a refusal of any too hasty recourse to aesthetic criteria that would call a halt to further questioning at the borders of that privileged entity, the “verbal icon” or “well-wrought urn” of orthodox New-Critical doctrine (Brooks 1956; Wimsatt 1954). On the other, it makes the point yet again that there is simply no escaping from “philosophy” into “literature,” that is, no “turning the page” on philosophically informed ways of thought in order to embrace a Rortian conception of metaphor, narrative, and “literary” language as somehow going “all the way down” (see especially Rorty 1982). Or rather, one can take that rhetorical line but one's discourse will then either lapse into incoherence or undermine its own claim by exhibiting at least some measure of conceptual grasp and critical acumen.

When Derrida speaks of “philosophy” in this context he is not referring to the discipline that goes under that name in university departments. What he has in mind, rather, is the non-negotiable requirement that a deconstructive reading not relax those standards of

textual fidelity, conceptual rigor, and logically cogent thought which may, as that reading proceeds, come up against conflicts that could not have been exposed by any other means even if they cannot be resolved except by envisaging alternatives beyond their unaided grasp (Norris 2012). This applies to every aspect of Derrida's thinking and interpretative practice, from his earliest extended writings on Plato, Rousseau, and Husserl to his later short texts on topics such as forgiveness, hospitality, the gift, autoimmunity, and the political rhetoric of "rogue states." In each case it is a matter of determining the scope of a certain concept, classically construed, and going on to show, through closely reasoned analysis, how it undergoes a continual oscillation between a restricted sense of common usage and an unrestricted (or absolute) sense where hospitality would carry no limiting conditions, forgiveness be unqualified, gifts be of infinite generosity without any recompense sought, and so forth. Nor is this due to some failure of conceptual grasp on the part of those who use such terms without having thought their assumptions through with sufficient care. Rather it has to do with the way that certain categories, among them "philosophy" and "literature," inevitably overrun any boundary set for their proper application while nonetheless requiring us, so far as we can, to use them in a responsible way.

One widely canvassed quasi-solution to issues of definition like this is provided by the later Wittgenstein with his notion of "family resemblance" between items that may have no essences or distinctive traits in common (Wittgenstein 1952). On this view it is fruitless to strive to identify just what it is about philosophy that sets it apart from literature, or what it is about poetry that sets it apart from prose, or about fiction apart from historical or documentary writing, or any literary genre apart from any other. Instead, we should accept that such debates merely reflect the grip on our minds of a bad old Platonist habit of thought that prevents us from seeing that resemblances—the sense that things somehow belong together without falling under a determinate unifying concept—are enough for all practical purposes. At which point we either give up philosophy altogether, as Wittgenstein frequently urged his students, or redefine it as reminding its would-be practitioners of the various follies to which more ambitious types had been led in pursuit of their chimerical ideas. This "post-philosophical" outlook with its major sources in Wittgenstein, Rortian neo-pragmatism, and various strains of postmodernist thinking is remote from Derrida's work. If deconstruction has one major claim above others to have redefined the terms of literary theory for our time then it is precisely in its having shown the possibility—and, what's more, the achievability in practice—of a philosophical criticism wherein both disciplines have moved decisively beyond the "ancient quarrel" that Plato discerned between poetry and philosophy.

The work of Geoffrey Hartman, another Yale critic much influenced by Derrida, provides a useful point of reference here. Hartman started out in the early 1960s as a literary scholar trained up in the ways of the "old" New Criticism (see Cain "British and American New Criticism," Chapter 1 this volume) but increasingly restive under its doctrinal constraints and looking to move "beyond formalism" to explore more hermeneutically adventurous regions of speculative thought (Hartman 1971). This went along with a plea that criticism should cast off the self-denying ordinance—again, one central to New Critical doctrine—that required the maintenance of a strict boundary between, on the one hand, the expressive dimension of poetic utterance and, on the other, the discourse of criticism where self-expression had absolutely no place and where the ruling ethos was that of

a studiously impersonal style. Hartman's liberation campaign accordingly took two forms, both of which affronted the rearguard defenders of New Critical orthodoxy (Wimsatt 1977). On the one hand he reproached their formalist precepts for setting up the poem as a "verbal icon" or a self-enclosed, autotelic construct presumptively sealed off from any contact with the kinds of speculative interest that might lead criticism into dangerous regions where intellect was apt to over-reach itself. On the other he claimed a degree of expressive freedom which went far beyond the bounds of formalist propriety and allowed for a criticism that would could—in principle—come out on a level with the poets for stylistic brilliance, metaphorical inventiveness, or narrative power (Hartman 1975).

These commitments found ample validation when Derrida arrived as a visiting professor at Yale and acquired a following amongst US literary critics and theorists that soon—through one of the many curious ironies that marked the Anglophone reception of his work—far surpassed any interest in it amongst philosophers. What it offered most strikingly from Hartman's point of view was the prospect of freeing literary criticism to draw on resources across the whole range of styles, vocabularies, disciplines, and genres. Yet, as Hartman somewhat disarmingly acknowledged, the role of philosophy in all this was not—or not chiefly—to provide an added measure of conceptual precision, reflective depth, analytical focus, or explanatory power. Rather it was meant to enliven the discourse of criticism by opening it up to speculative interests and stylistic departures from the academic norm (Hartman 1982). All the better, in cultural-political terms, that this liberating impulse made common cause with ideas imported from continental Europe and especially, given Derrida's rapid rise to fame, from the most advanced quarters of French academe. Indeed Hartman is quite explicit in claiming a common ancestry here, with deconstruction cast in a quasi-salvific role that more than incidentally recalls the impact of French revolutionary ideas on Thomas Paine who in turn played a major role in promoting the cause of American independence. Its advent marked a decisive break with the New Criticism's combination of conservatism in politics, classicism in literature, orthodoxy in religion, and—stylistically speaking—a decorous observance of certain distinctions, including those between criticism and poetry on the one hand and criticism and philosophy on the other. Thus, in Hartman's words, deconstruction would put an end to the "Arnoldian concordat" that had pretty much ruled the discourse of English criticism from Matthew Arnold to T. S. Eliot and beyond. At the same time it would encourage the critic to widen criticism's field of reference, and to defy those who treated any mention of Hegel, Nietzsche or Heidegger as intellectually pretentious and professionally out-of-place. Still one might want to question Hartman's notion of what counts as a "deconstructive" reading. Hartman readily admits that his is a very "snippety" version of Derrida, one that has to leave out whole swathes of his work (Hartman 1982; Derrida 1988). And so, for all his good intentions, the net effect of this Rorty-Hartman "literary" take on Derrida's work has been to further alienate the analytic community from anything associated with it and to persuade some literary critics that they don't really need to engage with all the philosophical stuff.

Philosophy, at least as practiced in the Anglophone academic community, doesn't cope well with those of its practitioners who lay claim to study not only as significant thinkers but also as writers of striking creativity and resource. Purists may lament value-laden binaries such as thought and writing, philosophy and literature, or indeed creativity and (what Derrida is often keen to stress) deconstruction as engaged in the discovery, not the

creative devising, of hitherto unperceived textual complications. Still it is worth hanging onto those distinctions in order to pinpoint the error of those who either, like Searle, fail to grasp the philosophical import of Derrida's work and attack it for that reason or, like Rorty, value it precisely for sinking its differences with poetry or literary criticism (Searle 1977; Rorty 1982). There have been a good many philosophers who wrote well and a few whose writings may be said to have achieved canonical status as "literary" texts. What is strictly unique about Derrida's corpus is the way that it describes, demonstrates, performs, enacts, reflects upon, and at the same time theorizes the history of vexed yet intimate relations between philosophy and literature. What typically marks the resistance to it is often a flat refusal to conceive that deconstruction might be more than a jumped-up "literary" ruse for dispensing with elementary standards of philosophical debate. Just as wrong, on the other hand, is a "post-philosophical" zeal to dismiss philosophy altogether as a product of the logocentric will-to-power combined with an unwitting blindness to its own textual constitution. I use quotation marks around terms like "philosophy" and "literature," not in some attack of ultra-nominalist nerves but in consequence of following Derrida's lead and *thinking through* the relationship between those categories. Derrida's genius (I use the word without apology) was to write of such matters in an "answerable style": a style answerable not only to literature—Geoffrey Hartman's idea in offering that usefully suggestive phrase—but also to the interests of philosophical clarity, rigor, and truth (Hartman 1981).

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