

DECONSTRUCTION

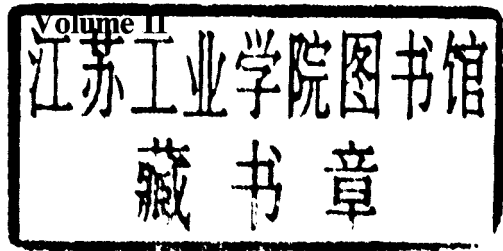
CRITICAL CONCEPTS
IN LITERARY
AND CULTURAL STUDIES

Edited by
JONATHAN CULLER

DECONSTRUCTION

Critical Concepts in Literary and
Cultural Studies

Edited by Jonathan Culler



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Part 3

LITERARY THEORY
AND CRITICISM

“THIS STRANGE INSTITUTION CALLED LITERATURE”

An interview with Jacques Derrida

Jacques Derrida

Source: D. Attridge (ed.), *Acts of Literature*, London, Routledge, 1992, pp. 33–75.

☛ The original interview, of which this is an edited transcript, took place in Laguna Beach over two days in April 1989. The translation is by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby.

D.A. You said to your thesis jury in 1980 that “my most constant interest, coming even before my philosophical interest I should say, if this is possible, has been directed towards literature, towards that writing which is called literary.” And you have published a number of texts which present readings of literary texts, about which we shall soon be talking. Yet a large part of your work has been concerned with writing that would be more likely to be called philosophical. Could you expand upon that statement concerning your primary interest in literature, and say something about its relation to your extensive work on philosophical texts?

J.D. What can a “primary interest” be? I would never dare to say that my primary interest went toward literature rather than toward philosophy. Anamnesis would be risky here, because I’d like to escape my own stereotypes. To do that, we’d have to determine what got called “literature” and “philosophy” during my adolescence, at a time when, in France at least, the two were meeting through works which were then dominant. Existentialism, Sartre, Camus were present everywhere and the memory of surrealism was still alive. And if these writings practiced a fairly new kind of contact between

philosophy and literature, they were prepared for this by a national tradition and by certain models given a solid legitimacy by the teaching in schools. What's more, the examples I have just given seem very different from each other.

No doubt I hesitated between philosophy and literature, giving up neither, perhaps seeking obscurely a place from which the history of this frontier could be thought or even displaced—in writing itself and not only by historical or theoretical reflection. And since what interests me today is not strictly called either literature or philosophy, I'm amused by the idea that my adolescent desire—let's call it that—should have directed me toward something in writing which was neither the one nor the other. What was it?

"Autobiography" is perhaps the least inadequate name, because it remains for me the most enigmatic, the most open, even today. At this moment, here, I'm trying, in a way that would commonly be called "autobiographical," to remember what happened when the desire to write came to me, in a way that was as obscure as it was compulsive, both powerless and authoritarian. Well, what happened then was just like an autobiographical desire. At the "narcissistic" moment of "adolescent" identification (a difficult identification which was often attached, in my youthful notebooks, to the Gidian theme of Proteus), this was above all the desire to inscribe merely a memory or two. I say "only," though I already felt it as an impossible and endless task. Deep down, there was something like a lyrical movement toward confidences or confessions. Still today there remains in me an obsessive desire to save in uninterrupted inscription, in the form of a memory, what happens—or *fails to happen*. What I should be tempted to denounce as a lure—i.e., totalization or gathering up—isn't this what keeps me going? The idea of an internal polylogue, everything that later, in what I hope was a slightly more refined way, was able to lead me to Rousseau (about whom I had been passionate ever since childhood) or to Joyce, was first of all the adolescent dream of keeping a trace of all the voices which were traversing me—or were *almost doing so*—and which was to be so precious, unique, both specular and speculative. I've just said "fails to happen" and "almost doing so" so as to mark the fact that what *happens*—in other words, the unique event whose trace one would like to keep alive—is also the very desire that what does not happen should happen, and is thus a "story" in which the event already crosses within itself the archive of the "real" and the archive of "fiction." Already we'd have trouble not spotting but separating out historical narrative, literary fiction, and philosophical reflexion.

So there was a movement of nostalgic, mournful lyricism to reserve, perhaps encode, in short to render both *accessible and inaccessible*. And deep down this is still my most naive desire. I don't dream of either a literary work, or a philosophical work, but that everything that occurs, happens to me or fails to, should be as it were *sealed* (placed in reserve, hidden so as to be kept, and this in its very signature, really like a signature, in the very form of the seal, with all the paradoxes that traverse the structure of a seal). The

discursive forms we have available to us, the resources in terms of objectivizing archivation, are so much poorer than what happens (or fails to happen, whence the excesses of hyper-totalization). This desire for *everything + n*—naturally I can analyze it, “deconstruct” it, criticize it, but it is an experience I love, that I know and recognize. In the moment of narcissistic adolescence and “autobiographical” dream I’m referring to now (“Who am I? Who is me? What’s happening?,” etc.), the first texts I got interested in had that in them: Rousseau, Gide, or Nietzsche—texts which were neither simply literary, nor philosophical, but confessions, the *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire*, the *Confessions*, Gide’s *Journal*, *La porte étroite*, *Les nourritures terrestres*, *L’immoraliste*, and at the same time Nietzsche, the philosopher who speaks in the first person while all the time multiplying proper names, masks and signatures. As soon as things become a little sedimented, the fact of not giving anything up, not even the things one deprives oneself of, through an interminable “internal” polylogue (supposing that a polylogue can still be “internal”) is also not giving up the “culture” which carries these voices. At which point the encyclopedic temptation becomes inseparable from the autobiographical. And philosophical discourse is often only an economic or strategic formalization of this avidity.

All the same, this motif of *totality* circulates here in a singular way between literature and philosophy. In the naive adolescent notebooks or diaries I’m referring to from memory, the obsession with the *proteiform* motivates the interest for literature to the extent that literature seemed to me, in a confused way, to be the institution which allows one to *say everything*,¹ in *every way*. The space of literature is not only that of an instituted *fiction* but also a *fictive institution* which in principle allows one to say everything. To say everything is no doubt to gather, by translating, all figures into one another, to totalize by formalizing, but to say everything is also to break out of [*franchir*] prohibitions. To *affranchise oneself* [*s’affranchir*]*—*in every field where law can lay down the law. The law of literature tends, in principle, to defy or lift the law. It therefore allows one to think the essence of the law in the experience of this “everything to say.” It is an institution which tends to overflow the institution.

For a serious answer to your question, an analysis of my time at school would also be necessary, and of the family in which I was born, of its relation or non-relation with books, etc. In any case, at the moment when I was beginning to discover this strange institution called literature, the question “What is literature?” imposed itself upon me in its most naive form. Only a little later, this was to be the title of one of the first texts by Sartre I think I read after *La nausée* (which had made a strong impression on me, no doubt provoking some mimetic movements in me; briefly, here was a literary fiction grounded on a philosophical “emotion,” the feeling of existence as excess, “being-superfluous,” the very beyond of meaning giving rise to writing). Bewilderment, then, faced with this institution or type of object which allows

one to say everything. What is it? What “remains” when desire has just inscribed something which “remains” there, like an object at the disposal of others, one that can be repeated? What does “remaining” mean? This question subsequently took on forms which were perhaps a little more elaborated, but ever since the beginning of adolescence, when I was keeping these notebooks, I was absolutely bewildered at the possibility of consigning things to paper. The philosophical becoming of these questions goes by way of the content of the texts of the culture I was entering—when one reads Rousseau or Nietzsche, one has a certain access to philosophy—just as much as through naive or marveling bewilderment at remains as a written thing.

Subsequently, philosophical training, the profession, the position of teacher were also a detour to come back to this question: “What is writing in general?” and, in the space of writing in general, to this other question which is more and other than a simple particular case: “What is literature?”; literature as historical institution with its conventions, rules, etc., but also this institution of fiction which gives *in principle* the power to say everything, to break free of the rules, to displace them, and thereby to institute, to invent and even to suspect the traditional difference between nature and institution, nature and conventional law, nature and history. Here we should ask juridical and political questions. The institution of literature in the West, in its relatively modern form, is linked to an authorization to say everything, and doubtless too to the coming about of the modern idea of democracy. Not that it depends on a democracy in place, but it seems inseparable to me from what calls forth a democracy, in the most open (and doubtless itself to come) sense of democracy.

D.A. Could you elaborate on your view of literature as “this strange institution which allows one to say everything”?

J.D. Let’s make this clear. What we call literature (not belles-lettres or poetry) implies that license is given to the writer to say everything he wants to or everything he can, while remaining shielded, safe from all censorship, be it religious or political. When Khomeini called for the murder of Rushdie, it happened that I put my signature to a text—without approving all its formulations to the letter—which said that literature has a “critical function.” I am not sure that “critical function” is the right word. First of all, it would limit literature by fixing a mission for it, a single mission. This would be to finalize literature, to assign it a meaning, a program and a regulating ideal, whereas it could also have other essential functions, or even have no function, no usefulness outside itself. And by the same token it can help to think or delimit what “meaning,” “regulating ideal,” “program,” “function,” and “critical” might mean. But above all, the reference to a critical function of literature belongs to a language which makes no sense outside what in the West links politics, censorship, and the lifting of censorship to the origin and institution

of literature. In the end, the critico-political function of literature, in the West, remains very ambiguous. The freedom to say everything is a very powerful political weapon, but one which might immediately let itself be neutralized as a fiction. This revolutionary power can become very conservative. The writer can just as well be held to be irresponsible. He can, I'd even say that he must sometimes demand a certain irresponsibility, at least as regards ideological powers, of a Zhdanovian type for example, which try to call him back to extremely determinate responsibilities before socio-political or ideological bodies. This duty of irresponsibility, of refusing to reply for one's thought or writing to constituted powers, is perhaps the highest form of responsibility. To whom, to what? That's the whole question of the future or the event promised by or to such an experience, what I was just calling the democracy to come. Not the democracy of tomorrow, not a future democracy which will be present tomorrow but one whose concept is linked to the to-come [*à-venir*, cf. *avenir*, future], to the experience of a promise engaged, that is always an endless promise.

As an adolescent, I no doubt had the feeling that I was living in conditions where it was both difficult and therefore necessary, urgent, to say things that were not allowed, in any case to be interested in those situations in which writers say things which are not allowed. For me, Algeria in the forties (Vichy, official anti-semitism, the Allied landing at the end of 1942, the terrible colonial repression of Algerian resistance in 1945 at the time of the first serious outbursts heralding the Algerian war) was not only or primarily my family situation, but it is true that my interest in literature, diaries, journals in general, also signified a typical, stereotypical revolt against the family. My passion for Nietzsche, Rousseau, and also Gide, whom I read a lot at that time, meant among other things: "Families, I hate you." I thought of literature as the end of the family, and of the society it represented, even if that family was also, on the other hand, persecuted. Racism was everywhere in Algeria at that time, it was running wild in all directions. Being Jewish and a victim of anti-semitism didn't spare one the anti-Arab racism I felt everywhere around me, in manifest or latent form. Literature, or a certain promise of "being able to say everything," was in any case the outline of what was calling me or signaling to me in the situation I was living in at that time, familial and social. But it was no doubt much more complicated and overdetermined than thinking and saying it in a few words makes it now. At the same time, I believe that very rapidly literature was also the experience of a dissatisfaction or a lack, an impatience. If the philosophical question seemed at least as necessary to me, this is perhaps because I had a presentiment that there could sometimes be an innocence or irresponsibility, or even an impotence, in literature. Not only can one say everything in literature without there being any consequences, I thought, no doubt naively, but at bottom the writer as such does not ask the question of the essence of literature. Perhaps against the backdrop of an impotence or inhibition faced with a literary

writing I desired but always placed higher up than and further away from myself, I quickly got interested in either a form of literature which bore a question *about* literature, or else a philosophical type of activity which interrogated the relationship between speech and writing. Philosophy also seemed more political, let's say, more capable of posing politically the question of literature with the political seriousness and consequentiality it requires.

I was interested by the possibility of fiction, by fictionality, but I must confess that deep down I have probably never drawn great enjoyment from fiction, from reading novels, for example, beyond the pleasure taken in analyzing the play of writing, or else certain naive movements of identification. I like a certain practice of fiction, the intrusion of an effective simulacrum or of disorder into philosophical writing, for example, but telling or inventing stories is something that deep down (or rather on the surface!) does not interest me particularly. I'm well aware that this involves an immense forbidden desire, an irrepressible need—but one forbidden, inhibited, repressed—to tell stories, to hear stories told, to invent (language and in language), but one which would refuse to show itself so long as it has not cleared a space or organized a dwelling-place suited to the animal which is still curled up in its hole half asleep.

D.A. You have just made a distinction between "literature" and "belles-lettres" or "poetry"; and it is a distinction that comes up elsewhere in your work (in "Before the Law," for instance). Could you be more precise about the difference that is being assumed here?

J.D. The two possibilities are not entirely distinct. I'm referring here to the historical possibility for poetry, epic, lyric or other, not only to remain oral, but not to give rise to what has been called literature. The name "literature" is a very recent invention. Previously, writing was not indispensable for poetry or belles-lettres, nor authorial property, nor individual signatures. This is an enormous problem, difficult to get into here. The set of laws or conventions which fixed what we call literature in modernity was not indispensable for poetic works to circulate. Greek or Latin poetry, non-European discursive works, do not, it seems to me, strictly speaking belong to literature. One can say that without reducing at all the respect or the admiration they are due. If the institutional or socio-political space of literary production as such is a recent thing, it does not simply surround works, it affects them in their very structure. I'm not prepared to improvise anything very serious about this—but I do remember having used some seminars at Yale (around 1979–80) to look at the appearance of this word "literature" and the changes which accompanied it. The principle (I stress that it's a *principle*) of "being able to say everything," the socio-juridico-politico guarantee granted "in principle" to literature, is something which did not mean much, or not that, in Graeco-Latin culture and *a fortiori* in a non-Western culture. Which does

not mean that the West has ever respected this principle: but at least here or there it has set it up as a principle.

Having said that, even if a phenomenon called “literature” appeared historically in Europe, at such and such a date, this does not mean that one can identify the literary object in a rigorous way. It doesn’t mean that there is an essence of literature. It even means the opposite.

D.A. Turning to the literary texts you have written on, it is notable that they form a more homogeneous group than the philosophical texts (still using these categories in a highly conventional way): mostly twentieth-century, and mostly modernist, or at least nontraditional (many would say “difficult”) in their use of language and literary conventions: Blanchot, Ponge, Celan, Joyce, Artaud, Jabès, Kafka. What has led you to make this choice? Was it a necessary choice in terms of the trajectory of your work?

J.D. In what way would the literary texts I write *about, with, toward, for* (what should one say? this is a serious question), *in the name of, in honor of, against*, perhaps too, *on the way toward*—in what way do they form, as you put it, a more homogeneous group? On the one hand, I almost always write in response to solicitations or provocations. These have more often concerned contemporaries, whether it be Mallarmé, Joyce or Celan, Bataille, Artaud, or Blanchot. But this explanation remains unsatisfactory (there were Rousseau and Flaubert too), the more so as my response to such expectations is not always docile. These “twentieth-century modernist, or at least nontraditional texts” all have in common that they are inscribed in a *critical* experience of literature. They bear within themselves, or we could also say in their literary act they put to work, a question, the same one, but each time singular and put to work otherwise: “What is literature?” or “Where does literature come from?” “What should we do with literature?” These texts operate a sort of turning back, they *are* themselves a sort of turning back on the literary institution. Not that they are only reflexive, specular or speculative, not that they suspend reference to something else, as is so often suggested by stupid and uninformed rumor. And the force of their event depends on the fact that a thinking about their own possibility (both general and singular) is put to work in them in a *singular* work. Given what I was saying just now, I’m brought more easily toward texts which are very sensitive to this crisis of the literary institution (which is more than, and other than, a crisis), to what is called “the end of literature,” from Mallarmé to Blanchot, beyond the “absolute poem” that “there is not” (“*das es nicht gibt*”—Celan). But given the paradoxical structure of this thing called literature, its beginning *is* its end. It began with a certain relation to its own institutionality, i.e., its fragility, its absence of specificity, its absence of object. The question of its origin was immediately the question of its end. Its history *is constructed* like the ruin of a monument which basically never existed. It is the history of a ruin, the