

解构与批评

DECONSTRUCTION AND CRITICISM

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丛书作者均是国际上英美文学界声名卓著的学者；丛书文字简练，语言生动，对我国的外国文学及理论研究者、在校学生及其他文学爱好者都是不可多得的珍品。

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Preface

This is neither a polemical book nor a manifesto in the ordinary sense. If it wants to “manifest” anything, by means of essays that retain the style and character of each writer, it is a shared set of problems. These problems center on two issues that affect literary criticism today. One is the situation of criticism itself, what kind of maturer function it may claim—a function beyond the obviously academic or pedagogical. While teaching, criticizing, and presenting the great texts of our culture are essential tasks, to insist on the importance of literature should not entail assigning to literary criticism only a service function. Criticism is part of the world of letters, and has its own mixed philosophical and literary, reflective and figural strength. The second shared problem is precisely that of the importance—or *force*—of literature. What does that force consist in, how does it show itself? Can a theory be developed that is descriptive and explanatory enough to illuminate rather than pester works of art?

There are many ways of describing the force of literature. The priority of language to meaning is only one of these, but it plays a crucial role in these essays. It expresses what we all feel about figurative language, its excess over any assigned meaning, or, put more generally, the strength of the signifier vis-à-vis a signified (the “meaning”) that tries to enclose it. Deconstruction, as it has come to be called, refuses to identify the force of literature with any concept of embodied meaning and shows how deeply such logocentric or incarnationist perspectives have influenced the way we think about art. We assume that, by the miracle of art, the “presence of the

word" is equivalent to the presence of meaning. But the opposite can also be urged, that the word carries with it a certain absence or indeterminacy of meaning. Literary language foregrounds language itself as something not reducible to meaning: it opens as well as closes the disparity between symbol and idea, between written sign and assigned meaning.

Deconstructive criticism does not present itself as a novel enterprise. There is, perhaps, more of a relentless focus on certain questions, and a new rigor when it comes to the discipline of close reading. Yet to suggest that meaning and language do not coincide, and to draw from that noncoincidence a peculiar strength, is merely to restate what literature has always revealed. There is the difference, for instance, between sound and sense, which both stimulates and defeats the writer. Or the difference which remains when we try to reduce metaphorical expressions to the proper terms they have displaced. Or the difference between a text and the commentaries that elucidate it, and which accumulate as a variorum of readings that cannot all be reconciled.

Our essays move toward a theory of this difference, but because they retain the form of commentary they also move toward a theory of commentary. They expose the difficulty of locating meaning totally within one textual source. (Derrida's double analysis is an emblem of this, an expanding hendiadys, exegesis within or upon exegesis.) Each text is shown to imbed other texts by a most cunning assimilation whose form is the subject both of psychoanalytic and of purely rhetorical criticism. Everything we thought of as spirit, or meaning separable from the letter of the text, remains within an "intertextual" sphere; and it is commentary that reminds us of this curious and forgettable fact. Commentary, the oldest and most enduring literary-critical activity, has always shown that a received text means more than it says (it is "allegorical"), or that it subverts all possible meanings by its "irony"—a rhetorical or structural limit that prevents the dissolution of art into positive and exploitative truth.

If Federal Law obliged us to list the ingredients of our book, we would have to acknowledge a higher than average proportion of theory in the form of poetics and semiotics, and philosophical speculation generally. The separation of philosophy from literary study has not worked to the benefit of either. Without the pressure of philosophy on literary texts, or the reciprocal pressure of literary analysis on philosophical writing, each discipline becomes impoverished. If there is the danger of a confusion of realms, it is a danger worth experiencing. Since the era of the German Romantics, however, and of Coleridge—who was deeply influenced by the

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philosophical criticism coming from Germany around 1800—we have not seen a really fruitful interreaction of these “sister arts.” Yet the recent revival of philosophic criticism, associated with such names as Lukács, Heidegger, Sartre, Benjamin, Blanchot, and even Richards, Burke, and Empson, is like a new dawn that should not fade into the light of common day. The important place taken in these essays by Romantic poetry is also worth noting: perhaps we have begun to understand what kind of thinking poetry is, especially Romantic poetry that was often held to be intellectually confused or idle. The emphasis on Shelley in some of the essays reflects an earlier scheme to acknowledge the importance of Romantic poetry directly, by focussing all contributions on that poet.

It should be repeated, in conclusion, that the critics amicably if not quite convincingly held together by the covers of this book differ considerably in their approach to literature and literary theory. *Caveat lector*. Derrida, de Man, and Miller are certainly boa-deconstructors, merciless and consequent, though each enjoys his own style of disclosing again and again the “abysm” of words. But Bloom and Hartman are barely deconstructionists. They even write against it on occasion. Though they understand Nietzsche when he says “the deepest pathos is still aesthetic play,” they have a stake in that pathos: its persistence, its psychological provenance. For them the ethos of literature is not dissociable from its pathos, whereas for deconstructionist criticism literature is precisely that use of language which can purge pathos, which can show that it too is figurative, ironic or aesthetic.

GEOFFREY HARTMAN

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1

The Breaking of Form

HAROLD BLOOM

I

The word *meaning* goes back to a root that signifies "opinion" or "intention," and is closely related to the word *moaning*. A poem's meaning is a poem's complaint, its version of Keats' Belle Dame, who looked *as if* she loved, and made sweet moan. Poems instruct us in how they break form to bring about meaning, so as to utter a complaint, a moaning intended to be all their own. The word *form* goes back to a root meaning "to gleam" or "to sparkle," but in a poem it is not form itself that gleams or sparkles. I will try to show that the lustres of poetic meaning come rather from the breaking apart of form, from the shattering of a visionary gleam.

What is called "form" in poetry is itself a trope, a figurative substitution of the as-it-were "outside" of a poem for what the poem is supposed to represent or be "about." Etymologically, "about" means "to be on the outside of" something anyway, and so "about" in regard to poems is itself only another trope. Is there some way out of this wilderness of tropes, so that we can recover some sense of either a reader's or writer's other-than-verbal needs and desires?

All that a poem can be about, or what in a poem *is* other than trope, is the skill or faculty of invention or discovery, the heuristic gift. Invention is a matter of "places," of themes, topics, subjects, or of what Kenneth Burke rephrased as the implicit presence of forms in subject-matter, and named as "the Individuation of Forms." Burke defined form in literature as "an

arousing and fulfillment of desires." The Burkean formula offered in his early *Counter-Statement* is still the best brief description we have:

A work has form in so far as one part of it leads a reader to anticipate another part, to be gratified by the sequence. [P. 124]

I will extend Burke, in a Burkean way, by investing our gratification not even in the disruption of sequence, but in our awareness, however precarious, that the sequence of parts is only another trope for form. Form, in poetry, ceases to be trope only when it becomes topos, only when it is revealed as a place of invention. This revelation depends upon a breaking. Its best analogue is when any of us becomes aware of love just as the object of love is irreparably lost. I will come back to the erotic analogue, and to the making/breaking of form, but only after I explain my own lack of interest in most aspects of what is called "form in poetry." My aim is not to demystify myself, which would bore others and cause me despair, but to clarify what I have been trying to say about poetry and criticism in a series of books published during the last five years. By "clarify" I partly mean "extend," because I think I have been clear enough for some, and I don't believe that I ever could be clear enough for others, since for them "clarity" is mainly a trope for philosophical reductiveness, or for a dreary literal-mindedness that belies any deep concern for poetry or criticism. But I also seem to have had generous readers who believe in fuller explanations than I have given. A return to origins can benefit any enterprise, and perhaps an enterprise obsessed with origins does need to keep returning to its initial recognitions, to its first troubles, and to its hopes for insight into the theory of poetry.

By "theory of poetry" I mean the concept of the nature and function of the poet and of poetry, in distinction from poetics, which has to do with the technique of poetical composition. This distinction between the concepts "theory of poetry" and "poetics" is a fruitful one for knowledge. That *de facto* the two have contacts and often pass into each other is no objection. The history of the theory of poetry coincides neither with the history of poetics nor with the history of literary criticism. The poet's conception of himself . . . or the tension between poetry and science . . . are major themes of a history of the theory of poetry, not of a history of poetics.

I have quoted this paragraph from Curtius' great book, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (Excursus VII). My own books from *The Anxiety of Influence* through my work on Wallace Stevens are all attempts to develop a theory of poetry in just this sense. The poet's conception of

himself necessarily is his poem's conception of itself, in my reading, and central to this conception is the matter of the sources of the powers of poetry.

The truest sources, again necessarily, are in the powers of poems *already written*, or rather, *already read*. Dryden said of poets that "we have our lineal descents and clans as well as other families." Families, at least unhappy ones, are not all alike, except perhaps in Freud's sense of "Family Romances." What dominates Freud's notion is the child's fantasy-making power. What counts in the family romance is not, alas, what the parents actually were or did, but the child's fantastic interpretation of its parents. The child provides a myth, and this myth is close to poets' myths of the origin of their creativity, because it involves the fiction of being a changeling. A changeling-fiction is one of the stances of freedom. The changeling is free because his very existence is a disjunction, and because the mystery of his origins allows for Gnostic reversals of the natural hierarchy between parents and children.

Emerson, in his most idealizing temper, said of the poets that they were liberating gods, that they were free and made others free. I would amend this by saying that poets make themselves free, by their stances towards earlier poets, and make others free only by teaching them those stances or positions of freedom.

Freedom, in a poem, must mean freedom of meaning, the freedom to have a meaning of one's own. Such freedom is wholly illusory unless it is achieved against a prior plenitude of meaning, which is tradition, and so also against language. Language, in relation to poetry, can be conceived in two valid ways, as I have learned, slowly and reluctantly. Either one can believe in a magical theory of all language, as the Kabbalists, many poets, and Walter Benjamin did, or else one must yield to a thoroughgoing linguistic nihilism, which in its most refined form is the mode now called Deconstruction. But these two ways turn into one another at their outward limits. For Deconstruction, irony is not a trope but finally is, as Paul de Man says, "the systematic undoing . . . of understanding." On this view, language is not "an instrument in the service of a psychic energy." De Man's serene linguistic nihilism welcomes the alternative vision:

The possibility now arises that the entire construction of drives, substitutions, repressions, and representations is the aberrant, metaphorical correlative of the absolute randomness of language, prior to any figuration or meaning.

Can we prevent this distinguished linguistic nihilism, and the linguistic narcissism of poets and occultists, from turning into one another? Is there a difference between an *absolute* randomness of language and the Kabbalistic magical absolute, in which language is totally over-determined? In Coleridge's version of the magical view, founded on the Johannine Logos, synecdoche or symbol also was no longer a trope, but was the endless restitution of performative rhetoric, or the systematic restoration of spiritual persuasion and understanding. This remains, though with many refinements, the logocentric view of such current theorists as Barfield and Ong.

Whether one accepts a theory of language that teaches the dearth of meaning, as in Derrida and de Man, or that teaches its plenitude, as in Barfield and Ong, does not seem to me to matter. All I ask is that the theory of language be extreme and uncompromising enough. Theory of poetry, as I pursue it, is reconcilable with either extreme view of poetic language, though not with any views in between. Either the new poet fights to win freedom from dearth, or from plenitude, but if the antagonist be moderate, then the agon will not take place, and no fresh sublimity will be won. Only the agon is of the essence. Why? Is it merely my misprision, to believe that good poems must be combative?

I confess to some surprise that my emphasis upon strong poets and poems should have given so much offence, particularly to British academic journalists, though truly they do live within a steadily weakening tradition, and to their American counterparts, who yet similarly do represent a waning Modernism. The surprise stems from reading historians as inevitable as Burckhardt, philosophers as influential as Schopenhauer, scholars as informative as Curtius, and most of all from reading Freud, who is as indescribable as he is now inescapable. These writers, who are to our age what Longinus was to the Hellenistic world, have defined our Sublime for us, and they have located it in the agonistic spirit. Emerson preceded all of them in performing the same definition, the same location for America. These literary prophets teach us that the Greeks and the Renaissance were fiercely competitive in all things intellectual and spiritual, and that if we would emulate them, we hardly can hope to be free of competitive strivings. But I think these sages teach a harsher lesson, which they sometimes tell us they have learned from the poets. What is weak is forgettable and will be forgotten. Only strength is memorable; only the capacity to wound gives a healing capacity the chance to endure, and so to be heard. Freedom of meaning is wrested by combat, of meaning against

meaning. But this combat consists in a *reading encounter*, and in an interpretive moment within that encounter. Poetic warfare is conducted by a kind of strong reading that I have called *misreading*, and here again I enter into an area where I seem to have provoked anxieties.

Perhaps, in common parlance, we need two very different words for what we now call "reading." There is relaxed reading and alert reading, and the latter, I will suggest, is always an agon. Reading well is a struggle because fictions and poems can be defined, at their best, as works that are bound to be misread, that is to say, troped by the reader. I am *not* saying that literary works are necessarily good or bad in proportion to their difficulty. Paul Valéry observed that "one only reads well when one reads with some quite personal goal in mind. It may be to acquire some power. It can be out of hatred for the author." Reading well, for Valéry, is to make one's own figuration of power, to clear imaginative space for one's own personal goal. Reading well is therefore not necessarily a polite process, and may not meet the academy's social standards of civility. I have discovered, to my initial surprise, that the reading of poetry has been as much idealized as the writing of it. Any attempt to de-idealize the writing of poetry provokes anger, particularly among weak poets, but this anger is mild compared to the fury of journalists and of many academics when the mystique of a somehow detached yet still generous, somehow disinterested yet still energetic, reading-process is called into question. The innocence of reading is a pretty myth, but our time grows very belated, and such innocence is revealed as only another insipidity.

Doubtless a more adequate social psychology of reading will be developed, but this is not my concern, any more than I am much affected by the ways in which recent critical theories have attempted to adumbrate the reader's share. A theosophy of reading, if one were available, would delight me, but though Barfield has attempted to develop one in the mode of Rudolph Steiner, such an acute version of epistemological idealism seems to me remote from the reality of reading. Gnosis and Kabbalah, though heterodox, are at once traditional and yet also de-idealizing in their accounts of reading and writing, and I continue to go back to them in order to discover properly drastic models for creative reading and critical writing.

Gnostic exegesis of Scripture is always a salutary act of textual violence, transgressive through-and-through. I do not believe that Gnosticism is only an extreme version of the reading-process, despite its deliberate