

Will Deconstruction Be the Death of Literature?

Today, college students often describe their English courses in jargon that barely sounds like English at all. Hearing the word *deconstruction*, puzzled parents may suppose that their children are talking about urban renewal, not literary criticism. Yet deconstruction is the reigning school of literary theory. It is also the most difficult to comprehend, and the most controversial. Deconstructionist theory, Frank McConnell shows, not only challenges the way we think about “texts,” authors, and readers: It attacks the ideal of tradition, even as it raises doubts about the notion of meaning itself. No wonder it has sparked debate in and around the academy. But, as McConnell reminds us, literary criticism since the time of Matthew Arnold has rarely been an innocent, ivory-tower pursuit. At stake in the “lit-crit” wars are our most cherished cultural values.

by Frank D. McConnell

A popular joke defines comedy as the second oldest profession, which, like the first, has been ruined by amateurs.

I would suggest that the truly oldest profession is poetry—or storytelling, or mythmaking, or whatever tag you put on people’s habit of describing themselves, their experience, and their mortality as if they all somehow mattered. If this is so, then surely the second oldest profession is that of critic, the interpreter, judge, and custodian of the primal fables. And the question of whether the craft has been ruined by amateurs—or, indeed, by

professionals—is at the center of a vituperative debate that has been raging on American and British campuses for at least a decade.

The debate may sound like an esoteric academic squabble. But it has serious implications for the future of humanistic studies in both countries and, for that matter, throughout the West. It does because it touches on the sensitive connections between our inherited culture and our political lives.

Quite apart from these larger implications, however, the study of literature is itself in crisis, as momentous a crisis as it has known for a very long time. The cause

is the school, or theory, or method, that both its adherents and its adversaries—and a growing number of bewildered innocent bystanders—refer to as “deconstruction.”

As with most controversial terms, it is hard to say exactly what “deconstruction” means. Trying to do just that, in fact, is largely the point of this essay. But let’s begin with a caricature: Deconstruction is a critical theory, deeply French at least in its origins, that finds the real significance of literary and philosophical texts not in their explicit meanings, nor even in their implied meanings, but in their unintentional meanings—in the slips, evasions, and false analogies that betray the text’s “ideology.” It is a way of reading *against* the text, and its aim is to achieve an unprejudiced, value-free vision of the societal and political power-structures underlying the classical “canon” of great works of Western literature. Drawing its analytic technique mainly from the methods of modern structural linguistics, deconstruction is suspicious of, and sometimes openly hostile toward, the tradition of bourgeois liberal humanism that has long dominated European thought. Many of its high priests are French—the philosopher-critic Jacques Derrida, the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, the social historian Michel Foucault; in America, the priesthood includes the literary critics Paul de Man, J. Hillis Miller, and Geoffrey Hartman.

All this, as I said, is a caricature. Deconstructionists doubtless will find it distorted and loaded with unjustified assumptions. They are very good at finding such things. But caricatures, while distortions, are not necessarily falsifications. (Nixon *did* have bushy eyebrows; Reagan *did* have a weirdly overtrained pompadour.) And not even the most insecure adherent of the school would deny two other facts. First, deconstructionist criticism is almost invariably written in a convoluted style and with a specialized vocabulary that ex-

cludes all but the initiated from penetrating its arguments. And second, despite their obscurity, papers of a deconstructionist bent dominate the proceedings of such weighty assemblies as the annual convention of the American Modern Language Association. More to the point, the people who deliver those papers are being hired, in increasing numbers, by the faculties of the most prestigious British and American universities.

The interplay among economics, academic politics, and “disinterested” thought should surprise no one. Frederick J. Newmeyer’s *Politics of Linguistics* (1986) convincingly traces the rise and fall (and funding) of linguistic theories in relation to their usefulness to the American defense establishment, despite the “liberal” or even anti-establishmentarian content of many of those theories. Two distinguished scholar-critics, Lee Patterson in *Negotiating the Past* (1987) and Jerome J. McGann in *Social Values and Poetic Acts* (1988), similarly suggest that deconstruction, despite its radical critique of the humanist tradition, is, in its politically hygienic disengagement, the perfect academic support-wing for an acquisitive, historically irresponsible, and globally rapacious society. Such claims, especially voiced in rhetoric like this, can sound unduly partisan, if not shrill. Surely, deconstruction is not necessarily the running-dog tool of an “insidious establishment.”

And yet the critics have a point. It is a truism that systems which explain—or claim to explain—“everything” (consider German philosophical systems such as Schopenhauer’s and Hegel’s) are usually systems that leave the objective status quo unscathed. Deconstruction is profoundly “conservative” if only because its concentration on all human reality as somehow linguistic implies that the universe is an infinitely complex but unchanging and unchangeable text.

Even the magisterial Derrida is sensitive to this charge. In 1987 he published a

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THE CRITICS: TWO FAMILY TREES

THE ANGLO-AMERICANS

THE FRANCOPHONES



Ferdinand de Saussure
(1857-1913)
Ordinary language is, in reality, a code.



Claude Lévi-Strauss
(1908-)
Even cooking is a language, with its own grammar.



Paul de Man
(1919-83)
The critic creates the book.



Roland Barthes
(1915-80)
A wrestling match can be read like a book—and vice versa.



Jacques Derrida
(1930-)
Literary texts have no "meaning."



Matthew Arnold
(1822-88)
The critic serves as secular priest.



Thomas Stearns Eliot
(1888-1965)
Every great writer revises the Tradition.



Ivor Armstrong Richards
(1893-1979)
Literature is therapy, making the reader whole.



Cleanth Brooks (1906-) & Robert Penn Warren (1905-1989)
Irony, metaphor, ambiguity—the stuff literature is made on.



Northrop Frye
(1912-)
Books are old myths in new bottles.

long essay on the imprisoned South African black leader Nelson Mandela in an attempt to demonstrate the political "engagement" of his method. But, perhaps predictably, Derrida's argument amounted to little more than the assertion that, under enforced silence, Mandela had become a kind of mute text. It is hard to suppress a sigh: Is *this* all the new school has to tell us about as clear and present an evil as apartheid?

Such charges against the deconstructionists are serious. They amount, in fact, to a writ of *mauvaise foi*, or hypocrisy (the worst sin in the existentialist's index), against the theory's originators and especially the comfortably tenured, spouse-kid-and-Volvo practitioners who are paid to teach something called "literature" and who achieve professional success by writing essays comprehensible only to fellow inductees. No anti-deconstructionist that I know of has yet applied the parable of "The Emperor's New Clothes" to deconstruction, as tempting as the comparison might be. But after 1987, the parable may no longer be needed.

That is because 1987 was the year of the de Man scandal. Until his death in 1983, Paul de Man was the major proponent of deconstruction in the United States. It was de Man, a scholar of French and comparative literature at Yale University, who established the dogma that the difference between "critic" and "creator" of a literary text was an illusory one. Spreading the new gospel, the Belgian-born scholar became the guru of hundreds of bright Yale students, many of whom went on to establish themselves as professors of literature throughout the nation. But in late 1987, four years after his death, history intruded upon de Man's reputation and influence. It was revealed—first in the *New York Times*—that during World War II, in his native Belgium, de Man had written essays for a pro-Nazi newspaper. Quite a few essays.

Such discoveries, though disturbing, are not that uncommon in the history of this century. The great German philosopher Martin Heidegger not only wrote pro-Nazi essays but was a member of the Party; in France, Paul Claudel, François Mauriac, and even the mandarin André Gide wel-

comed the Vichy government as the fulfillment of historical destiny. There is no lack, in any nation at any period, of respectable intellectuals capable of rationalizing the unspeakable.

Yet de Man had not merely rationalized it; he had *suppressed* the rationalizations, and had done so while busily becoming the leader of a movement which argues that history and politics are irrelevant to critical apprehension. It could appear, in other words, that de Man's exultation of the critic as an intelligence somehow above or beyond the chaos of history was really a way of reinventing himself, distancing himself from his real—and thoroughly dishonorable—involvement in that chaos. "Trust the tale, not the teller," said D. H. Lawrence. And of course it is vulgar to criticize an idea in terms of the conduct of the person who formulates or proclaims that idea: It would be difficult to take Ezra Pound, or even Socrates, very seriously if we did. And yet, as the puzzle-of-the-week panel on the Sunday comics page says, something was wrong—quite wrong—with this picture.

Something was wrong enough, anyway, for the *New York Times*, *Newsweek*, and *Time* to feature the story as a sign of serious problems in the halls of academe. In *Harper's* (July 1988), Mark Edmundson, a professor of English at the University of Virginia, wrote an article about the scandal entitled "A Will to Cultural Power." Literary critics, explained Edmundson, trained on the largely American and humanistic New Criticism and anxious to preserve their perceived role as ethical arbiters, found in deconstruction a denial of the moral and political function to which they were dedicated. Naturally, and sometimes with unbecoming glee, they welcomed the de Man revelations as evidence of the moral bankruptcy of a position they were predisposed to loathe.

The deconstructionists were equally quick to come to the defense not just of the method but of de Man himself. Geoffrey Hartman in the *New Republic* and J. Hillis Miller in the *London Times Literary Supplement*, among others, rationalized or attempted to diminish de Man's culpability. In the spring 1988 issue of the journal

Critical Inquiry, Derrida published an essay which analyzed the *style* of de Man's pro-Nazi, anti-Semitic articles, discovering in them "incessant conflict . . . a *double-edge* and a *double-bind*." Derrida concluded that even while writing the articles de Man had also inserted "a counter-text," anti-Nazi and anti-anti-Semitic. The defense, to put it mildly, was ingenious.

Even before the de Man scandal, however, many people in and around academia thought something was at stake in the debate over the latest French philosophical import. Outsiders were a little more sceptical: Could there really be that much at issue in what is, after all, only the way we read poems and novels and plays?

The short answer, I believe, is yes. For the ways we read literature also affect the ways we read advertisements, and newspaper articles, and ultimately the instructions in the voting booth. The answer in its longer form, like the long form of the Internal Revenue Service, is both more complicated and more revealing.

I earlier described criticism as the second oldest profession. But in Anglo-American culture, the *institution* of the profession is fairly recent. In fact, it can be assigned a precise date. In 1857, Matthew Arnold, the son of the headmaster of England's famous Rugby School, was elected Professor of Poetry at Oxford. He was the first non-cleric elected to that position and the first to lecture on the subject of English literature. Both facts are significant. Arnold (1822-1888) can justly be called the "father" of Anglo-American literary criticism. One of the renowned poets of his age, an assiduous public servant (Government Inspector of Schools), and a man of impeccable moral virtue, he established the model of the academic critic not just in his writing but in his very presence: genial, learned, open but judicious, perhaps a trifle stuffy (one would never say, "pompous"), and *very* serious about the function of literature. "I am bound," he wrote in "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" (1865), "by my own definition of criticism: a *disinterested endeavor to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world*."

As self-conscious heir of the Romantic vision (Arnold is chiefly responsible for the

use of "Romantic" to describe Wordsworth, Shelley, and Byron), as witness to the cultural and economic ravages of industrialism, and as a troubled victim of the 19th-century religious crisis, Arnold found in criticism the best antidote to the confusion of his time. The inculcation of civilized values ("the best that is known and thought") would, he believed, help raise his age out of the materialist morass into which it was sinking. At the same time, and in the conclusion to "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," Arnold acknowledged the sadness of his nobly-chosen task. "That promised land [a truly humane society] it will not be ours to enter," he writes, "and we shall die in the wilderness; but to have desired to enter it . . . will certainly be the best title to esteem with posterity."

Arnold imagined the critic as Moses, the prophet and lawgiver. But the critic was *not* the Messiah. According to Arnold's scheme, the "Messiah" would be the fully energetic, fully visionary poet—who the critic, by dint of his profession, could never be. The fact that Arnold was the first Oxford Professor of Poetry to lecture on English rather than on classical literature was a sign of his commitment to making the business of criticism relevant to the literature of his time. But as heir to all the clerics who had previously held the post, Arnold, and his Anglo-American successors, continued to regard their function as a quasi-clerical one, a theology in search of objects of worship.

Arnold made this clear in his famous prediction of 1883, in "The Study of Poetry": "More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us. Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete; and most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry." Arnold's great precursor among the English critics, Samuel Johnson, would never have made such an assertion (or experienced the anxiety underlying it). For all his internal conflicts, Johnson *was* a fiercely devoted believer and *was not* an officially sanctioned prophet of culture.

Arnold broke new ground. And in do-

ing so, he introduced tensions into the critic's role that have endured until this day—at least until the recent advent of deconstruction. The critic's task, according to Arnold, is to stand apart from the vulgarizing, leveling spirit of the age and to guide it to finer, more humane attitudes by the example of his own sensibility. For while Arnold shared in the religious skepticism of his time, he fiercely maintained the moral standards that had been upheld by the old, lost creeds.

Oscar Wilde, whose first volume of poems was published in 1881, the year after Arnold published "The Study of Poetry," is a crucial example of the Arnoldian influence. If Arnold was a diffident poet, and a trifle stuffy, Wilde was self-advertising and almost unbearably flamboyant. "Would you like to know the great drama of my life?" Wilde once said to André Gide. "It is that I have put my genius into my life—I have put only my talent into my works." In fact, the title of his most brilliant play, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), is a send-up if not specifically of Arnold then of the whole Victorian standard of "high seriousness," of which Arnold was the chief voice.

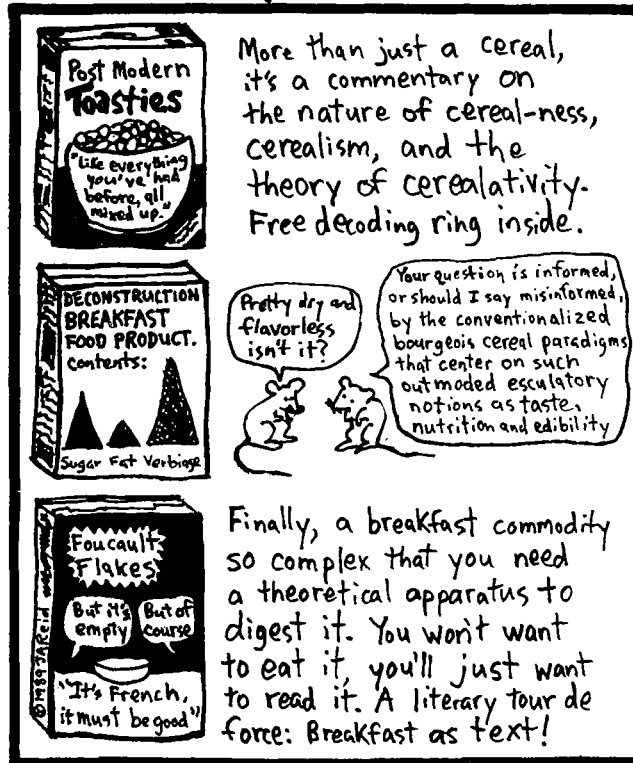
But in his very aestheticism, in his inversion of the Arnoldian values, Wilde not only admits their force but in fact explores their further implications. "Art should never try to be popular," he writes in *The Soul of Man under Socialism* (1891); "the public should try to make itself artistic." Beneath the flair and arrogance of this pronouncement lies the idea of the critic as culture-bearer carried to its logical conclusion. Wilde asks the question, "Is criticism really a creative art?" He answers it by saying, "Why should it not be? It works with materials, and puts them into a form that is at once new and delightful. What more can one say of poetry?"

By the first decades of our century Anglo-American criticism had become a fairly well-es-

tablished affair. It was humane, generous, centered on a canon of "great works," and profoundly committed to the idea that, by a proper "appreciation" of the canon, a person participates in the life of the culture altogether. It was, in short, Arnoldian.

Genial as this approach was, it nevertheless implied a certain class consciousness, or, put bluntly, a certain snobbery. It implied that *not* being capable of perceptions, and the *right* perceptions, about art was a sign of the vulgar and the declassé. It barred one from the tribe of the elect. Not having the right perceptions left one in the category of the Texas millionaire in the British Museum who complained to one of the guards, "You know, I've looked at all of these pictures, and I sure don't see anything so great about them." "But sir," replies the guard icily, "the pictures are not on trial."

Breakfast Theory: A MORNING METHODOLOGY



The deconstructionist rage to reduce all things to "textuality" knows no limits, cartoonist Jeff Reid makes clear.

The very idea of a literary "canon" is borrowed from the study of sacred texts (the Bible, the Koran), where the texts themselves tend to dictate the possible responses to them. Not surprisingly, then, the next important phase of criticism turned out to be a revision of the idea of the "canon" itself, and a shift of emphasis from "appreciation" to "analysis." It was what came to be called during the 1930s, '40s, and '50s the "New Criticism." Its indisputable fathers were I. A. Richards and T. S. Eliot.

Richards was a Cambridge, and later a Harvard, professor; he was also a distinguished semanticist. Eliot, of course, was the most unavoidable poet of the age, widely perceived as the herald of modern poetry after the long Victorian-Edwardian twilight. What the two men had in common was a reorientation of the critical stance. Eliot, beginning with the essays in *The Sacred Wood* (1920), argued for a revision of the "tradition" in terms of its relevance to the sensibility of a modern reader. His enormous influence brought about a virtual revolution in taste, with previously "minor" poets (e.g., John Donne) usurping the place of previously "major" ones (e.g., Percy Bysshe Shelley). Eliot's cautious "modernizing" of the tradition to suit a contemporary intelligence was reinforced by Richards's books. In *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924) and *Practical Criticism* (1929), Richards insisted that the correct reading of poetry entails a careful attention to the verbal and metaphoric structures *intrinsic* to the poem (or novel or play) itself and not to its general cultural or historical resonances.

A generation of young critics and teachers on both sides of the Atlantic developed these notions into the New Criticism. Among the New Critics were William Empson (*Seven Types of Ambiguity*, 1930), Kenneth Burke (*A Grammar of Motives*, 1945), Cleanth Brooks (*The Well Wrought Urn*, 1947), and René Wellek and Austin Warren, whose *Theory of Literature* (1949) achieved almost sacred status, at least among American practitioners of the craft.

The New Criticism insisted on the independence of the literary work of art from considerations of political relevance or of

historical "rank." This school of criticism assumed that literature is a form of knowledge completely different from our everyday, practical knowledge; that its ambiguity and irony (favorite concepts of the New Critics) are much closer to our most intimate experiences of life; and that learning to read these ambiguities is to learn to deal with the universal life experiences they describe. The "high seriousness" of the Arnoldian plan is still there. But now literature is no longer the test of universal civilization; instead, it constitutes personal civilization. This was an appropriate ideal for a culture that was becoming increasingly fragmented and individualistic.

No one who took a college English class between 1945 and 1970 fully escaped the influence of the New Criticism. In America especially, the New Criticism amounted to a glorious revolution in the role and self-image of the English teacher. Literature was not just a poor academic relation of the sciences; it was a discipline with its own innate value, its own mysteries. Journals were founded and academic careers were made.

Two points must be made about this, on the whole, immensely valuable movement. First, the requirements for interpreting the texts had been relaxed. One no longer needed to be Matthew Arnold, a carefully cultivated model of civilization; one needed only to *keep one's head* in reading the text. The New Criticism represented a kind of democratization of culture, and that is the second point to be made about it. The demographics of the profession of English altered radically after World War II. People for whom the leisurely sounding "profession of humanities" would previously have been out of the question now found that such work was within their grasp. The dominance of the New Criticism was due not only to its ideological appeal but also to the coincidence of its emergence with the passing of the G.I. Bill. Thanks to this piece of legislation, a generation of young men—and, with more struggles, women—found themselves able to enter a profession which previously would have been beyond their economic means. More important, they had at hand a critical approach which

did not require readers of poetry to fit the Arnoldian mold of upper-class gentlemen. The liberal arts had been liberated.

But any school of thought, once established, begins to generate dissidents. In 1957, the Canadian critic Northrop Frye published his *Anatomy of Criticism*, which at the time seemed a radical challenge to the New Criticism. Frye, a former Anglican cleric, took his cue from anthropology and comparative religion rather than from semantics and stylistics. He argued that the "meaning" of a literary work lies in the way that work reincarnates one or another of the elementary mythic structures of consciousness by which human beings have always understood their lives. Reading the poem is learning to re-read the myth behind it. But for all the controversy it initially generated, Frye's approach now seems in the mainstream of Anglo-American assumptions about literature: There is still a text, there is still a method of approaching and deciphering the text; and there is still the belief that, somehow, to do this is *good* for you.

And now we can begin to understand why deconstruction tends to disturb so many critics trained in the mainstream English critical tradition—and why it intends to do so.

"What is at stake," wrote Jacques Derrida in his seminal book *Writing and Difference* (French publication, 1967), "is an adventure of vision, a conversion of the way of putting questions to any object posed before us." Derrida's statement is not the definition of deconstruction—even deconstructionists admit that the method is almost impossible to define. What it articulates is the *fervor* with which the school announces itself, the sense that something grand and definitive is about to be achieved. Derrida's chief American disciple, de Man, wrote in his last book, *Allegories of Reading* (1979), that deconstruction "will in fact be the task of literary criticism in the coming years," and that "the distinction between author and reader is one of the false distinctions that deconstruction makes evident." De Man's statement recalls Wilde's aphorism that one should either be a work of art or wear a work of art. But Wilde, unlike de Man,

was joking.

It is virtually impossible to say what deconstruction *is*; indeed, it is the nature of the beast to elude definition. "For it is precisely this idea," observed Christopher Norris in his book *Derrida* (1987), "this assumption that meaning can always be grasped in the form of some proper, self-identical concept—that Derrida is most determinedly out to deconstruct." Norris here indicated one keynote of the school: the denial or repression of nostalgia for the idea of *meaning itself*, the denial of the unity of utterance and intent upon which Western criticism is founded.

An old parable says that the hare was the fastest runner of God's creatures, until he began to wonder *how* he ran. Similarly, you are a natural deconstructionist if you have ever, while reading a book, realized that you *were* reading a book, or, in the middle of a conversation, realized that you were having a conversation, and that part of your mind was scripting your role. Such moments, when they occur, as they do to all of us, we ordinarily suppress as bothersome interruptions of the business of reading or speaking. But what—asks the deconstructionist—if these moments of vertiginous self-awareness are actually the *reality* of our life in language?

What I have called the "unity of utterance and intent," Derrida calls by the much more resonant name "presence." Quite simply, the Derridean position is that such presence, an inviolate meaning in the text, the sentence, or the word, is never really present. "It is only in God that speech as presence . . . is realized without defect," he wrote in *Writing and Difference* (and of course, for Derrida, "God" in this sense is an untenable hypothesis). Derrida insists that language is an arbitrary choreography of symbols. And to say this is to say that what language teaches us is precisely that we are linguistic animals.

If one were to search history for a patron-saint of deconstruction, a suitable choice might be the pre-Socratic philosopher Parmenides. Parmenides had an excessive, almost mad faith in the evidence of language over the evidence of experience: Deconstruction returns to that Parmenidean sense of the unity of all being in language. In *Allegories of Reading*,

de Man implies that man's whole universe is encased in various levels and kinds of language, or at least language-like structures: "Literature as well as criticism . . . is condemned (or privileged) to be forever the most rigorous and, consequently, the most unreliable language in terms of which man names and modifies himself."

In his two great books of 1967, *Writing and Difference* and *On Grammatology*, Derrida argues for this essential emptiness at the heart of all Western discourse and bases his argument on a critique of the very founder of that discourse, Plato. It was Plato's "invention," Socrates, who not only perceived the Idea—the pure truth which lies behind all thought—but spoke it in dialogue. Derrida points out that "Socrates" only exists for us because Plato wrote about him. That paradox, of course, is almost as old as the study of Plato himself. But for Derrida it suggests something besides paradox. It suggests that *writing*, the artificial production of meaning, is prior to speaking.

This assertion—the primacy of *writ-*

ing—at first blush violates everything we know about human evolution. Deconstructionists would not be unduly disturbed: Their concern is not human evolution in an objective sense but human self-perception as reflected in the universe of human speech. In fact, discussion of the *artificiality* of the word derives from Ferdinand de Saussure's posthumous *Course in General Linguistics* (1913)—the text that serves as the cornerstone of 20th-century structural linguistics. In describing language as a *code* understandable only in its own terms, without reference to a myth of "meaning," de Saussure not only founded modern linguistics but made possible the science—or technique—of structuralism.

When practiced by de Saussure's most brilliant followers, Michel Foucault and Claude Lévi-Strauss, there was something strikingly anti-humanistic about the "new science" of structuralism. In *The Savage Mind* (1966), Lévi-Strauss declared "the ultimate goal of the human sciences" was "not to constitute, but to dissolve man." And Foucault, surveying the origins of humanism in *Les Mots et les Choses* (*The Or-*

A (SORT OF) RETURN TO HISTORY

Deconstructionists have not been alone in challenging the received idea of the humanistic tradition. A group of scholar-critics calling themselves the New Historicists have, in the last decade, mounted an attack upon the authority of the text from what initially seems a quite different perspective: not the denial or the escape from history, but rather an insistence on the pressure of history upon the creation of art.

The New Historicism insists that an individual work of art is comprehensible *only* within the context of the economic, behavioral, and political forces of the culture out of which it arises. This is not really a *new* approach—Confucius insisted that from reading a poem one ought to be able to deduce the poet's own province and personal habits. Nor is it especially *historical*—these are mainly English professors who rely largely on secondary sources and catchy anecdotes. Nevertheless in the work of clever, thoughtful critics like Stephen Greenblatt, Richard Helgerson, and Mark Rose, the New Historicist impulse—it can hardly be called a method—has produced suggestive re-readings of classic texts, especially from the Renaissance.

And yet the New Historicism, as a movement, may be only a more Anglocentric version of the deconstructionist enterprise. In both cases, the critic or interpreter—the second oldest professional—usurps the place of the first. And if the text disappears into a haze of semiological abstraction, or if it disappears beneath catacombs of historical complexity, the result is the same. Like Alice according to Tweedledum and Tweedledee, it isn't really *there* anymore. So are we again confronted with a new literary criticism that betrays the very idea of literature?

der of Things, 1966), argued that, "in every culture, between the use of . . . the ordering codes and reflections upon order itself, there is the pure experience of order and of its modes of being." In other words, the point of studying the codes as codes—of studying systems of signals as signals while dispensing with the reality being "signalled"—is to allow you to grasp the nature of codification itself: to see that all human activity is somehow "encoded," organized according to rules that may lie far below the surface of behavior. And to think this way, at least implicitly, is to free yourself from the codifications of your own culture—to become that Cartesian ideal, an unconditioned intellect.

Lévi-Strauss and Foucault thus originally represented a liberating endeavor, a shattering of encrusted cultural and intellectual prejudices. Likewise Roland Barthes, that most generous and gentle of literary critics, structuralized or "semiologized" culture as a way of freeing or making "unconditional" our enjoyment of it. In his inaugural lecture as Professor of Semiology at the Collège de France (1977), Barthes identified the tyranny of cultural codes by saying that, "In every sign sleeps a monster, a stereotype: and I can never speak without dragging along what my language *implies*." He went on to apply semiology to everything from Racine and the Gospels to fashions of dress and professional wrestling. Barthes's intentional playfulness had the ironic effect of making "anti-humanist" structuralism (or semiotics) into a covert form of humanism: He devalued "the tradition" in order to rediscover it as a living thing.

But the danger that lurks in this kind of approach to the "text"—whether an individual book or a whole culture—is that the "text" may disappear or, worse, become irrelevant under the self-serving complexity of the analysis applied to it. Derrida's emphasis on the "primacy of writing" can in fact lead to the assertion, glamorous but suicidal, that "writing" is all there is, that the world of references no longer matters. At one extreme of deconstruction, all dictionaries become thesauruses. Everything is destroyed but the voice of the critic himself, presumably

blessed by a vision of the meaning within the meaning of the text he pretends to be discussing. Text becomes, once and for all, *pretext*. It is not that there are no values. It is that to ask about values is to betray a deplorable enslavement to history and lack of taste.

This is the real significance of Derrida's most important term, *différance*. There is no such word in French. By the invented French term *différance*, Derrida means to imply the inescapable difference, gap, or void between sign and signified ("word" and "thing" in old-fashioned terms). *Différance* suggests the way meaning is always deferred. In later writings, Derrida and Derrideans have even taken to the use of a new typographical sign: as in ~~tree~~, ~~justice~~, ~~fire-hydrant~~, or ~~class-struggle~~. In each case, the ---- is supposed to indicate the simultaneous absence and presence of the concept in the written sign for the concept, suggesting that the text can never really say what the text seems to want to say. As with so much of deconstructionist theory, the concept of absence-in-presence implied by those ---- (or "erasures," as deconstructionists like to call them) can be demonstrated through the work of Lewis Carroll. In *Through the Looking Glass*, Alice meets Tweedledum and Tweedledee, good deconstructionists, who insist that she is only a figment of the Red King's dream, and that if he awakens she will disappear. She is, in other words, not Alice but ~~Aliee~~. But "I *am* real" says Alice, beginning to cry, and leaving herself open for a masterstroke of deconstructionist argument: "You won't make yourself a bit realer by crying," Tweedledee remarks: "There's nothing to cry about."

We have come a long and twisting way from a "disinterested endeavor to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world." But the fact is that an original, quasi-revolutionary movement in French intellectual life has taken firm root among those safe and conservative people, Anglo-American academics. *Why* this has happened is a matter for sociologists. However, since the question affects not just the internecine feuds of literary intellectuals among themselves—about which nobody wisely cares much—but the very nature of literary education in Amer-

ica and England, it is a question worth examining.

Matthew Arnold may or may not have been right, but he was certainly righteous. Anglo-American universities still honor his idea that a literary education somehow contributes to good citizenship. Deconstruction not only challenges the idea that it does so contribute but argues seriously that the *idea itself* is a form of institutionalized conditioning—or, to put it in a Derridean way, a form of **humanism**. Yet deconstruction presents an approach to literature almost void of any connection between what we read and what we do, between literature and the so-called “real world.” Does this gap, as a number of critics have suggested, violate the idea of criticism and constitute a betrayal of the sacred texts by the very people charged with protecting those texts?

Although I am not myself a deconstructionist, my answer is no. Economics, tenure, and faddism aside—a very large aside—I think the current deconstructionist vogue can be seen as a necessary phase in the history Arnold set in motion over a century ago. Since literature, in Arnold’s vision, had assumed from religion its functions of illumination and instruction, it seemed almost a corollary that literary critics establish a canon. By the mid-20th century, however, mainstream Anglo-American criticism had not only a mission and a canon, it had settled into an orthodoxy. Yet orthodoxies inevitably produce countermovements of dissent, or heresies. And to some extent, deconstruction can best be understood as a literary heresy paralleling Christendom’s best-known religious heresy—gnosticism.

Suppressed by the official Christian Church, the early gnostics were philosopher-mystics who found in the scriptures a meaning beyond, or sometimes counter to, the public, “canonical” meaning of the text. Re-reading or misreading the established Christian texts, the gnostics were, in a fashion, deconstructionists. And the point of their “deconstruction” was pre-

cisely the liberation of the *self*; their use of the text to that end was more important than the “historical” reality of the text itself. The gnostics thought the unity and stability of the world a delusion, beyond which lay a greater reality, pure Being itself. In analogous fashion, deconstructionists find the unity and stability of the text an illusion, but now the greater reality, the true being, is the critic’s or reader’s. The deconstructionists’ debunking of the text’s supposed meanings and coherent patterns, in effect, liberates the critic-reader—like the gnostic “self” set free—from all orthodoxies of language, text, and interpretation.

Without the gnostics, the history of Western thought would have been immeasurably poorer. For all the censorship of their ideas, they directly or indirectly produced figures as essential as St. Francis and Martin Luther and Søren Kierkegaard. They kept alive, *against* orthodoxy, the essential tension of dissent, without which orthodoxy inevitably degenerates into a lifeless formation.

That is a comforting, reassuring evaluation of the deconstructionist invasion of American literary criticism. About historical necessity, about the elementary importance of reading great (or trivial) books, about the best that has been known and thought, the younger practitioners of deconstruction seem to know and care nothing. And yet the very energy of their unconventionality is a stimulant, and even the arrogant complacency of their insularity is a challenge. What they may have to teach us, even in their final failure, is that the enterprise of criticism still matters, that reading *is* training for thinking, and that however hard we try to deface the canon—however hard we deny the ideal, bourgeois-humanist picture correlating what we say and what we do—one equation nevertheless holds. Literature matters to us, because we are the matter of literature. In our culture, in the beginning was the word, whether written or spoken. And as deconstructionists would put it, the *wor*d is not on trial.