

focuses on the adventures of meaning." Part of what he means by "the adventures of meaning" is explicated by the essay reprinted here, "Beyond Interpretation." Culler does not address the New Critics' dilemma over interpretation directly, except to suggest that its characteristic focus on developing a "reading" of the single, isolated text is radically insufficient—just as he had earlier suggested in *Structuralist Poetics* that the insistence on "organic unity" for the individual text makes a fetish of the idea of the end or telos presumed to be realized in the text itself. Even so, Culler's pursuit of semiotics is (as he indicates in the title of another essay in *The Pursuit of Signs*) the elaboration of "Semiotics as a Theory of Reading." As such, Culler's work remains within the tradition he seeks to go beyond, expanding the scope and scale of the New Criticism to include what he calls in the essay here an "analysis of the conditions of meaning." This is not at all to diminish the importance of Culler's objection to interpretation, as if it were the defining task of criticism, but only to place that objection within a history. Indeed, just as Culler suggests that "one source of energy for criticism in the coming years may be the reinvention of literary history," so too a source of energy for theory may be the reinvention of the history of criticism.

Culler's works include *Flaubert: The Uses of Uncertainty* (1974); *Structuralist Poetics* (1975); *The Pursuit of Signs* (1981); and *On Deconstruction* (1982).

BEYOND INTERPRETATION

In the years since World War II, the New Criticism has been challenged, even vilified, but it has seldom been effectively ignored. The inability if not reluctance of its opponents simply to evade its legacy testifies to the dominant position it has come to occupy in American and British universities. Despite the many attacks on it, despite the lack of an organized and systematic defense, it seems not unfair to speak of the hegemony of New Criticism in this period and of the determining influence it has exercised on our ways of writing about and teaching literature. Whatever critical affiliations we may proclaim, we are all New Critics, in that it requires a strenuous effort to escape notions of the autonomy of the literary work, the importance of demonstrat-

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ing its unity, and the requirement of 'close reading.'

In many ways the influence of the New Criticism has been beneficent, especially on the teaching of literature. Those old enough to have experienced the transition, its emergence from an earlier mode of literary study, speak of the sense of release, the new excitement breathed into literary education by the assumption that even the meanest student who lacked the scholarly information of his betters could make valid comments on the language and structure of the text. No longer was discussion and evaluation of a work something which had to wait upon acquisition of a respectable store of literary, historical, and biographical information. No longer was the right to comment something earned by months in a library. Even the beginning student of literature was now confronted with poems, asked to read them closely, and required to discuss and evaluate their use of language and thematic organization. To make the experience of the text itself central to literary education and to relegate the accumulation of information about the text to an ancillary status was a move which gave the study of literature a new focus and justification, as well as promoting a more precise and relevant understanding of literary works.

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But what is good for literary education is not necessarily good for the study of literature in general, and those very aspects of the New Criticism which ensured its success in schools and universities determined its eventual limitations as a program for literary criticism. Commitment to the autonomy of the literary text, a fundamental article of faith with positive consequences for the teaching of literature, led to a commitment to interpretation as the proper activity of criticism. If the work is an autonomous whole, then it can and should be studied in and for itself, without reference to possible external contexts, whether biographical, historical, psychoanalytic, or sociological. Distinguishing what was external from what was internal, rejecting historical and causal explanation in favor of internal analysis, the New Criticism left readers and critics with only one recourse. They must interpret the poem; they must show how its various parts contribute to a thematic unity, for this thematic unity justifies the work's status as autonomous artifact. When a poem is read in and for itself critics must fall back upon the one constant of their situation: there is a poem being read by a human being. Whatever is external to the poem, the fact that it addresses a human being means that what it says about human life is internal to it. The critic's task is to show how the interaction of the poem's parts produces a complex and ontologically privileged statement about human experience.

Though they may occasionally attempt to disguise the fact, the basic concepts of the New Critics and their followers derive from this thematic and interpretive orientation. The poem is not simply a series of sentences; it is spoken by a *persona*, who expresses an *attitude* to be defined, speaking in a particular *tone* which puts the attitude in one of various possible modes or degrees of commitment. Since the poem is an autonomous whole its value must lie within it, in richness of attitude, in complexity of judgment, in delicate balance of values.

Hence one finds in poems *ambivalence*, *ambiguity*, *tension*, *irony*, *paradox*. These are all thematic operators which permit one to translate formal features of the language into meanings so that the poem may be unified as a complex thematic structure expressing an attitude toward the world. And in place of a theory of reading which would specify how order was to be achieved, the New Criticism deployed a common humanism or, as R. S. Crane

calls it, a 'set of reduction terms' toward which analysis of ambivalence, tension, irony, and paradox was to move: 'life and death, good and evil, love and hate, harmony and strife, order and disorder, eternity and time, reality and appearance, truth and falsity . . . emotion and reason, simplicity and complexity, nature and art.'¹ A repertoire of contrasting attitudes and values relevant to the human situation served as a target language in the process of thematic translation. To analyze a poem was to show how all its parts contributed to a complex statement about human problems.

In short, it would be possible to demonstrate that, given its premises, the New Criticism was necessarily an interpretive criticism. But in fact this is scarcely necessary since the most important and insidious legacy of the New Criticism is the widespread and unquestioning acceptance of the notion that the critic's job is to interpret literary works. Fulfillment of the interpretive task has come to be the touchstone by which other kinds of critical writing are judged, and reviewers inevitably ask of any work of literary theory, linguistic analysis, or historical scholarship, whether it actually assists us in our understanding of particular works. In this critical climate it is therefore important, if only as a means of loosening the grip which interpretation has on critical consciousness, to take up a tentative position and to maintain that, while the experience of literature may be an experience of interpreting works, in fact the interpretation of individual works is only tangentially related to the understanding of literature. To engage in the study of literature is not to produce yet another interpretation of *King Lear* but to advance one's understanding of the conventions and operations of an institution, a mode of discourse.

There are many tasks that confront criticism, many things we need to advance our understanding of literature, but one thing we do not need is more interpretations of literary works. It is not at all difficult to list in a general way critical projects which would be of compelling interest if carried through to some measure of completion; and such a list is in itself the best illustration of the potential fecundity of other ways of writing about literature. We have

¹R. S. Crane, *The Languages of Criticism and the Structure of Poetry*, University of Toronto Press, 1953, pp. 123-4. [Au.]

no convincing account of the role or function of literature in society or social consciousness. We have only fragmentary or anecdotal histories of literature as an institution: we need a fuller exploration of its historical relation to the other forms of discourse through which the world is organized and human activities are given meaning. We need a more sophisticated and apposite account of the role of literature in the psychological economies of both writers and readers; and in particular we ought to understand much more than we do about the effects of *fictional* discourse. As Frank Kermode emphasized in his seminal work, *The Sense of an Ending*, criticism has made almost no progress toward a comprehensive theory of fictions, and we still operate with rudimentary notions of 'dramatic illusion' and 'identification' whose crudity proclaims their unacceptability. What is the status and what is the role of fictions, or, to pose the same kind of problem in another way, what are the relations (the historical, the psychic, the social relationships) between the real and the fictive? What are the ways of moving between life and art? What operations or figures articulate this movement? Have we in fact progressed beyond Freud's simple distinction between the figures of condensation and displacement? Finally, or perhaps in sum, we need a typology of discourse and a theory of the relations (both mimetic and nonmimetic) between literature and the other modes of discourse which make up the text of intersubjective experience.

The fact that we are so far from possessing these things in what is, after all, an age of criticism—an age where unparalleled industry and intelligence have been invested in writing about literature—is in part due to the preeminent role accorded to interpretation. Indeed, one of the best ways of talking about the failures of contemporary criticism is to look at the fate which has befallen three very intelligent and promising attempts to break away from the legacy of the New Criticism. In each case the failure to combat the notion of interpretation itself, or rather the conscious or unconscious persistence of the notion that a critical approach must justify itself by its interpretive results, has emasculated a highly promising mode of investigation.

My first case, in many ways the most significant, is that of Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*. Frye's polemical introduction is, of course, a powerful indictment of contemporary criticism and an ar-

gument for a systematic poetics: criticism is in a state of 'naïve induction,' trying to study individual works of literature without a proper conceptual framework. It must recognize that literature is not a simple aggregate of discrete works but a conceptual space which can be coherently organized; and it must, if it is to become a discipline, make a 'leap to a new ground from which it can discover what the organizing or containing forms of its conceptual framework are.'² Working on this new ground involves assuming the possibility of 'a coherent and comprehensive theory of literature, logically and scientifically organized, some of which the student unconsciously learns as he goes on, but the main principles of which are as yet unknown to us.'³

This is certainly a direct attack on the atomism of the New Criticism and the assumption that one should approach each individual work with as few preconceptions as possible in order to experience directly the words on the page, but Frye does not realize the importance of attacking interpretation itself. He hovers on the edge of the problem, characterizing as 'one of the many slovenly illiteracies that the absence of systematic criticism has allowed to grow up' the notion that 'the critic should confine himself to "getting out" of a poem exactly what the poet may vaguely be assumed to have been aware of "putting in";' but the function of this argument in his overall enterprise is anything but clear. It is wrongly assumed, he continues, that the critic needs no conceptual framework and that his job is simply 'to take a poem into which a poet has diligently stuffed a specific number of beauties or effects, and complacently to extract them one by one, like his prototype Little Jack Horner.'⁴

One might take this sentence as a general attack on interpretation, especially interpretation of a complacent and fundamentally tautological kind, but in fact, as the earlier sentence makes clear, Frye's real target is interpretation of an intentionalist kind. Joining the New Critics in rejecting criticism which is guilty of the intentional fallacy, Frye has picked the wrong enemy and opened the door to a trivialization of his enterprise. The systematic poetics for which he calls and to which he makes a sub-

²Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, New York, Atheneum, 1965, p. 16. [Au.]

³Ibid., p. 11. [Au.]

⁴Ibid., pp. 17-18. [Au.]

stantial contribution can thus be seen as a prelude to interpretation. Approaching the text with a conceptual framework—the theories of Modes, Symbols, Myths, and Genres as outlined in the *Anatomy*—the critic can interpret the work not by pulling out what the poet was aware of putting in but by extracting the elements of the various modes, genres, symbols, and myths which may have been put in without the author's explicit knowledge. In this case, interpretation would still be the test of a critical method, and the value of Frye's approach would be that it enabled one to perceive meanings which hitherto had been obscure.

Certainly this is not the justification Frye would wish to give his project. His repeated assertions that criticism must seek a comprehensive view of what it is doing, that it must try to attain an understanding of the fundamental principles which make it a discipline and mode of knowledge, show that he has other goals in mind. But his failure to question interpretation as a goal creates a fundamental ambiguity about the status of his categories and schemas. In identifying Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter as the four mythic categories, what exactly is Frye claiming? He might be suggesting that these categories form a general conceptual map which we have assimilated through our experience of literature and which lead us to interpret literature as we do. In other words, he might be claiming that in order to account for the meanings and effects of literary works one must bring to light these fundamental distinctions which are constantly at work in our reading of literature. Alternatively, he might be claiming that he has discovered categories of experience basic to the human psyche and that in order to discover the true or deepest meaning of literary works we must apply to them these categories, as hermeneutic devices.

Though the difference between these alternatives may seem slight, it is in fact crucial to the project of a poetics. In the second case one is claiming to have discovered distinctions which serve as a method of interpretation: which enable one to produce new and better readings of literary works. In the first case one is not offering a method of interpretation but is claiming to explain why we interpret literary works as we do. In the context of the polemical introduction and the suggestion that we should try to make explicit the implicit theory of literature which students unconsciously acquire in their literary edu-

cation, the first interpretation would certainly be preferable; but in terms of the traditional tasks and preoccupations of criticism, which Frye has not thought to reject, the second interpretation is more likely to prevail.

In fact, this is exactly what has happened. Though it began as a plea for a systematic poetics, Frye's work has done less to promote work in poetics than to stimulate a mode of interpretation which has come to be known as "myth-criticism" or archetypal criticism. The assumption that the critic's task is to interpret individual works remains unchanged, only now, on the theory that the deepest meanings of a work are to be sought in the archetypal symbols or patterns which it deploys, Frye's categories are used as a set of labeling devices. Frye failed to recognize that the enemy of poetics is not just atomism but the interpretive project to which atomism ministers, and this led not only to deflection of systematic energy but to the promotion of a rather anodyne mode of interpretation.

The second example of a potentially powerful theoretical mode that had adopted the project of interpreting works is psychoanalytic criticism. In the 1960s the best works of psychoanalytic criticism avoided the questions concerning the status and effects of fiction which might have been elucidated by a psychoanalytic approach and concentrated on interpretation, as if they could only prove themselves by demonstrating their interpretive prowess. In *The Sins of the Fathers: Hawthorne's Psychological Themes* Frederick Crews demonstrates the appropriateness of a psychoanalytic method for making sense of many powerful and puzzling elements in Hawthorne's work. Oddities of plot, character, and fantasy become more interesting and their force more intelligible when they are analyzed as representations of the consequences of unresolved Oedipal conflicts: the works 'rest on fantasy, but on the shared fantasy of mankind, and this makes for a more interesting fiction than would any illusionistic slice of life.'⁵

The Sins of the Fathers is admirable, except in its implication that the goal of the psychoanalytic critic is to identify and interpret what the subtitle calls 'psychological themes.' If critics devote themselves to identifying in literary works the forces and

⁵Frederick Crews, *The Sins of the Fathers*, New York, Oxford University Press, p. 263. [Au.]

elements described by psychoanalytic theory, if they make psychoanalysis a source of themes, they restrict the impact of potentially valuable theoretical developments, such as the insights that have emerged from recent French rereadings of Freud. This body of work provides, among other things, an account of processes of textual transference by which critics find themselves uncannily repeating a displaced version of the narrative they are supposed to be comprehending—just as the psychoanalyst, through the process of transference and counter-transference, finds himself caught up in the reenactment of the analysand's drama.⁶ Contemporary psychoanalytic theory might have much to teach us about the logic of our interaction with texts but it is impoverished when it is treated as a repository of themes—themes to be identified when interpreting literary works. Leo Bersani's perceptive and original *Baudelaire and Freud* slides into this perspective in treating *Les Fleurs du Mal* as a drama of the struggle between what Lacan calls the Symbolic and the Imaginary.⁷ In Lacan these are two modes of representation. Interpretive criticism makes them two psychic conditions, one good and the other bad, and translates events of the narrative into a struggle between them, thus producing something like an updated version of the hunt for Oedipus complexes and phallic symbols.

My third case is the 'Affective Stylistics' of Stanley Fish, which begins with a determined attempt to break away from the assumptions and procedures of the New Criticism but which, again, fails to identify interpretation as the real enemy and so compromises the theoretical insights on which it is based. Wimsatt and Beardsley had argued that one must not confuse the poem and its effects ('what it is and what it does') lest 'the poem itself, as an object of specifically critical judgment . . . disappear.'⁸ This is precisely what should happen, replies Fish, for meaning lies not in the object but in the event or experience of reading. To ask about the meaning of

a word or sentence is to ask what it *does* in the work, and to specify what it does one must analyze 'the developing responses of the reader in relation to the words as they succeed one another in time.'⁹

This is a fruitful reorientation, for reasons to be discussed later. Above all, it makes clear the need for a poetics, for if the meaning of works lies in the successive effects of their elements on readers, then one needs a powerful theory that will account for these effects by analyzing the norms, conventions, and mental operations on which they depend. A theory focussed on the reader and reading ought to undertake to make explicit the implicit knowledge that readers deploy in responding as they do.

But Fish fails to take this step because he assumes that the task of criticism is to interpret individual works, and he proposes to do this—for *Paradise Lost* and then for a series of 'self-consuming' seventeenth-century artifacts—by describing the reader's experience of hazarding judgments and then finding them proved wrong. In fact, this interpretive orientation has placed him in a rather tight corner: to claim simultaneously that one is describing the experience of the reader and that one is producing valuable new interpretations is a difficult act to sustain, and despite Fish's skill and energy he will not sustain it for long.¹⁰ The future lies, rather, in the theoretical project that he flees.

These three cases, though very different in the content of their proposals and results, suggest a gloomy prognosis: the principle of interpretation is so strong an unexamined postulate of American criticism that it subsumes and neutralizes the most forceful and intelligent acts of revolt. However, the increasing influence of European criticism is making available a greater variety of ways of writing about literature, and if we can refrain from redirecting them to the restricted task of interpretation, American criticism will be much the richer.

At its most basic the lesson of contemporary European criticism is this: the New Criticism's dream of a self-contained encounter between innocent

⁶See Shoshana Felman, 'Turning the Screw of Interpretation,' *Yale French Studies*, 55/56 (1977) pp. 94–207, and Cynthia Chase, 'Oedipal Textuality: Reading Freud's Reading of *Oedipus*,' *Diacritics*, 9:1 (Spring 1979) pp. 54–71, for excellent discussions and applications. [Au.]

⁷Leo Bersani, *Baudelaire and Freud*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1977. [Au.]

⁸W. K. Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon*, Lexington, Kentucky, University of Kentucky Press, 1954, p. 21. [Au.] See CTSP, pp. 1022–31. [Eds.]

⁹Stanley Fish, *Self-Consuming Artifacts*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1972, pp. 387–8. [Au.]

¹⁰Fish's later book, *The Living Temple: George Herbert and Catechizing*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1978, combines a description of readers' responses to Herbert's poems with a historical thesis about Herbert's model of organization. The redescription of response alone would not suffice to produce a new and valuable interpretation. [Au.] See *Fish*. [Eds.]

reader and autonomous text is a bizarre fiction. To read is always to read in relation to other texts, in relation to the codes that are the products of these texts and go to make up a culture. And thus, while the New Criticism could conceive of no other possibility than interpreting the text, there are other projects of greater importance which involve analysis of the conditions of meaning. If works were indeed autonomous artifacts, there might be nothing to do but to interpret each of them, but since they participate in a variety of systems—the conventions of literary genres, the logic of story and the teleologies of emplotment, the condensations and displacements of desire, the various discourses of knowledge that are found in a culture—critics can move through texts towards an understanding of the systems and semiotic processes which make them possible.

Criticism informed by these principles may take many guises. A semiotics of literature would attempt to describe in systematic fashion the modes of significance of literary discourse and the interpretive operations embodied in the institution of literature. Alternatively, Fredric Jameson proposes to work towards a dialectical criticism which would not attempt to resolve difficulties but would take as its object of enquiry a work's resistance to interpretation. In defining the nature of a work's opacity one would attempt to discover its historical grounds: 'Thus our thought no longer takes official problems at face value but walks behind the screen to assess the very origin of the subject-object relationship in the first place.'¹¹ The product or result of dialectical criticism is not an interpretation of the work but a broader historical account of why interpretation should be necessary and what is signified by the need for particular types of interpretation.

Jameson's enterprise would lead, he says, 'to a dialectical rhetoric in which the various mental operations are understood not absolutely, but as moments and figures, tropes, syntactical paradigms of our relationship to the real itself, as, altering irrevocably in time, it nonetheless obeys a logic that like the logic of a language can never be fully distinguished from its object.'¹² A Marxist criticism conceived in this spirit would demonstrate that the relationship between a literary work and a social and

historical reality is one not of reflected content but of a play of forms. Social reality includes paradigms of organization, figures of intelligibility; and the interplay between a literary work and its historical ground lies in the way its formal devices exploit, transform, and supplement a culture's ways of producing meaning.

Another version of this historical project is the *Rezeptionsästhetik* proposed by Hans Robert Jauss. Emphasizing that the meaning of a work depends upon the horizon of expectations against which it is received and which poses the questions to which the work comes to function as an answer, Jauss has inaugurated the vast and complex enterprise of describing these horizons, which are of course the product of the discourses of a culture. *Rezeptionsästhetik* is not a way of interpreting works but an attempt to understand their changing intelligibility by identifying the codes and interpretive assumptions that give them meaning for different audiences at different periods.¹³

These two examples suggest that one source of energy for criticism in the coming years may be the reinvention of literary history. The historical perspective enables one to recognize the transience of any interpretation, which will always be succeeded by other interpretations, and to take as object of reflection the series of interpretive acts by which traditions are constituted and meaning produced. This new historical orientation seems the common factor in the work of three otherwise very different critics, Geoffrey Hartman, Harold Bloom, and Paul de Man. Drawing sustenance from a historically conceived romantic poetry rather than from an ahistorical Metaphysical or Modernist verse, invoking as the stimulus of repeated quest and failure the impossible calling of high Romanticism, they treat literature and reading as a repeated historical error or deformation. 'History,' writes Hartman, 'is the wake of a mobile mind falling in and out of love with the things it detaches by its attachment.'¹⁴ This becomes the temporal scheme of Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence*: each poet must slay his poetic

¹¹Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, Princeton University Press, 1971, p. 341. [Au.]

¹²Ibid., p. 374. [Au.]

¹³See Hans Robert Jauss, *Literaturgeschichte als Provokation*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1970, and in English, 'Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory,' *New Directions in Literary History*, ed. Ralph Cohen, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974, pp. 11–41. [Au.] See Jauss. [Eds.]

¹⁴Geoffrey Hartman, 'History-writing as Answerable Style,' in *ibid.*, p. 100. [Au.]

father; he must displace his precursors by a revisionary misreading which creates the historical space in which his own poetry takes place. The hidden order of literary history is based on a negative and dialectical principle, which also orders the relationship between reader and text: the reader, like the new poet, is a latecomer bound to misconstrue the text so as to serve the meanings required by his own moment in literary history. That the greatest insights are produced in the process of necessary and determinate misreadings is the claim of another theorist of deformation, Paul de Man, for whom interpretation is always in fact covert literary history and inevitable error, since it takes for granted historical categorizations and obscures its own historical status.¹⁵

These critics certainly do not oppose interpretation; indeed, they publicly indulge in it, but by defining it as necessary error they lead us to enquire about its nature and status and thus to consider central questions about the nature of literary language. The effect of their writings has been to broaden the possibilities of literary investigation, but since they do not question the assumption that interpretation is the purpose of criticism they are immediately assimilated to the project of interpretation, at the cost of some confusion.

Consider the case of Harold Bloom. He proposes a theory of how poems come into being. Few critics would claim that an account of a poem's genesis is an account of its meaning, but since we assume that the task of critics is to interpret poems, we leap to the conclusion that when Bloom writes about a poem he is telling us its meaning. Even when he warns us that poems do not have meanings at all or that 'the meaning of a poem can only be a poem, but *another poem, a poem not itself*,'¹⁶ we ignore his statement and take what he says about a poem and its intertextual, tropological genesis as an interpretation, even though it is not another poem—after which we are affronted that his 'interpretation' should be so extravagant, so different from what the poem appears to say. The assumption that critics *must* interpret is so powerful that we will not allow Bloom's writing to be anything else, and one

suspects that Bloom himself is influenced by this assumption, against the explicit claims of his own theory.

Or consider *deconstruction*. Although Derrida's writings all involve close engagement with various texts, they seldom involve interpretations as traditionally conceived. There is no deference to the integrity of the text, no search for a unifying purpose that would assign each part its appropriate role. Derrida characteristically concentrates on elements which others find marginal, seeking not to elucidate what a text says but to reveal an uncanny logic that operates in and across texts, whatever they say. His treatment of Rousseau in *Of Grammatology* is part of an investigation of the place of writing in Western discussions of language, a disclosure of the process which has preserved an idealized model of speech by attributing certain problematical features of language to writing and then setting writing aside as secondary and derivative. Derrida notes that terms Rousseau uses to describe writing, the noun *supplément* and the verb *suppléer*, appear in discussions of other phenomena such as education and masturbation, and in following up these references in fictional, autobiographical, and expository texts, he describes what he calls the 'logic of supplementarity,' a general operation which we can now see at work as a source of energy in a wide variety of texts.¹⁷ Is this an interpretation of Rousseau? It omits most of the contents of every text it mentions and fails to identify a thematic unity or a distinctive meaning for any of Rousseau's writings. Derrida is working, rather, to describe a general process through which texts undo the philosophical system to which they adhere by revealing its rhetorical nature.

But when deconstruction comes to America a shift takes place, subtly inaugurated in Paul de Man's critique of Derrida in *Blindness and Insight*. De Man argues that Rousseau's text already carries out the deconstructive operations which Derrida claims to perform on it, so that Derrida is in fact elucidating Rousseau, though he pretends to be doing something else because it makes, as de Man

¹⁵ Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1971, p. 165. [Au.]

¹⁶ Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1973, p. 70. [Au.]

¹⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976, part II, ch. 2. For further discussion, see Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Literary Theory in the 1970s*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press/London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, forthcoming. [Au.]

puts it, a better story.¹⁸ This displacement has since been transformed into a central methodological principle by J. Hillis Miller, who argues not just that a text already contains the operation of self-deconstruction, in which two contradictory principles or lines of argument confront one another, but that this undecidability 'is always thematized in the text itself in the form of metalinguistic statements.'¹⁹ In other words, the text does not just contain or perform a self-deconstruction but is *about* self-deconstruction, so that a deconstructive reading is an interpretation of the text, an analysis of what it says or means. 'Great works of literature,' Miller insists, 'have anticipated explicitly any deconstruction the critic can achieve,' so that energetic deference and interpretive elucidation are the appropriate critical stances. Thus is deconstruction tamed by the critical assumption and made into a version of interpretation.

In the hands of its best practitioners, such as Paul de Man and Barbara Johnson, deconstruction is an interpretive mode of unusual power and subtlety.²⁰ In other hands there is always the danger that it will become a process of interpretation which seeks to identify particular themes, making undecidability, or the problem of writing, or the relationship between performative and constative, privileged themes of literary works. It seems to me that just because it easily becomes a method of interpretation, deconstruction has succeeded in America in a way that Marxism and structuralism have not. Marxism is committed to the immense and difficult project of working out the complicated processes of mediation between base and superstructure. When en-

¹⁸ Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight*, ch. 7, pp. 102-41. [Au.]

¹⁹ J. Hillis Miller, 'Deconstructing the Deconstructors,' *Diacritics*, 5:2 (Summer 1975) pp. 30-1. [Au.]

²⁰ See Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1979; and Barbara Johnson, *Défigurations du langage poétique*, Paris, Flammarion, 1979. [Au.]

listed to interpret a particular work it is bound to seem, as we say, 'vulgar.' Structuralism is also committed to large-scale projects, such as elaborating a grammar of plot structure or the possible relations between story and discourse, and has thus seemed irrelevant except in so far as its concepts and categories can be 'applied' in the activity of interpretation. The possibility of pursuing these larger projects depends on our ability to resist the assumption that interpretation is the task of criticism.

Of course, in one sense all projects involve interpretation: selecting facts that require explanation is already an act of interpretation, as is positing descriptive categories and organizing them into theories. But this is no reason to take as the only valid form of critical writing the highly specialized exercise of developing for one work after another an interpretation sufficiently grounded in tradition to seem valid and sufficiently new to be worth proposing. This exercise has a strategic place in the production of literary tradition, but that does not mean that it should dominate literary studies. Readers will continue to read and interpret literary works, and interpretation will continue in the classroom, since it is through interpretation that teachers attempt to transmit cultural values, but critics should explore ways of moving beyond interpretation. E. D. Hirsch, for many years a leading champion of interpretation, has reached the conclusion that criticism should no longer devote itself to the goal of producing ever more interpretations: 'A far better solution to the problem of academic publishing would be to abandon the idea that has dominated scholarly writing for the past forty years: that interpretation is the only truly legitimate activity for a professor of literature. There are other things to do, to think about, to write about.'²¹

²¹ E. D. Hirsch, 'Carnal Knowledge,' *New York Review of Books*, 26:10 (14 June 1979) p. 20. [Au.]