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Introduction

What has made literary or critical theory more than another fashion in the discipline of literary study is the fact that the possibility of theory in general has repeatedly been at stake. Nevertheless, much modern literary criticism and literary history, even a lot of what passes as 'new historicism', remains implicitly committed to positivistic assumptions that there is some easily accessible literary *object* to be described, classified, related to general cultural processes, etc. These positivist assumptions of literary history overlook one major question – what sort of object is a literary text?

In fact, the mode of being of the literary is, in itself, a virtual repudiation of positivism. It does not take 'deconstruction' to tell us this. That the literary text is not *an object* is one of the arguments of Roman Ingarden's classic *The Literary Work of Art* of 1931.¹ A similar conclusion is to be found in chapter 12 of René Wellek's and Austin Warren's *Theory of Literature* (1949).² This chapter, written by Wellek and heavily indebted to Ingarden, demolishes various accounts of the literary text as any sort of empirical or psychological entity. It is not (a) an artefact like a piece of sculpture, that is, the physical page(s) or book, (b) the real sounds uttered by someone performing the text, (c) the psychological experience of hearing or reading it, (d) the experience of the author in creating it, (e) nor, finally, is it the totality of readers' experiences or even quite what all of them have in common (which would be merely a lowest common denominator).

Wellek concludes that a text is only a matter of 'norms' which serve as 'a potential cause of experiences' (p. 150). This,

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however, is less an answer to the question than an acknowledgement of the empty space left by the various failures of the positivist approach. For Maurice Blanchot, 'The only positivity of the literary space is the strangeness of its approach. It does not exist, but its persistence... is uneliminable.'³

The mode of being of the literary work of art – this phrase announces a question that remains badly addressed. This is in spite of the considerable industry devoted to literary theory and questions of the nature of interpretation. The phrase announces, perhaps more succinctly than many others, what is at issue in those various texts of Jacques Derrida which remain the focus of many debates in the literary field. Indeed the question of the mode of being of 'literature' attains such force in Derrida's work that it challenges received notions of ontology and being itself. It becomes a question which renders everything it touches questionable. Hence in the question 'What is literature' the 'is' itself becomes part of what is at stake.

'What *is* literature' cannot automatically be subsumed within the philosophical question *par excellence*, 'what is?' – this is the claim. If this is so, however, then clearly what Derrida calls the 'literary' or *littérature* cannot be too easily assimilated to what is normally meant by the term, even if this is where one has to start. 'Literature' can no longer be understood as a 'what' of any familiar kind either. All three words of the question ('what is literature?') implicate themselves as at stake in its asking in an almost paralysing way.

Martin Heidegger's question of being is alone in granting to something 'literary' a force analogous to the claims for 'literature' made by Derrida. Indeed, it has recently been recognised that Derrida's project is unintelligible unless its continual questioning proximity to Heidegger's is borne in mind.⁴ However, the precaution already stated in relation to Derrida applies no less to Heidegger. What he terms *Dichtung* ('poetising') is not to be confused with what one already understands by 'poetry' or 'fiction'. Both Derrida's *littérature* and Heidegger's *Dichtung* attempt a leap outside what these terms have come to designate in the past few centuries.

Nevertheless, it is with the mode of being of the literary as

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more commonly understood that this study begins. Only such a beginning can provide a threshold to understanding the more radical notions of Heidegger and Derrida.

Why did the 'literary' become such an active field of debate, even outside of the strictly literary departments of universities? In the English-speaking world the philosophy of science remains the most prominent area of this overflow of the literary, especially in relation to the variously holistic and relativistic positions adopted by such diverse philosophers as Thomas Kuhn, Paul Feyerabend and Richard Rorty.⁵ Here the 'literary' was meant only in the sense of fictional language, language that has suspended its claim to refer directly to any existing state of affairs. This became of importance in proportion to the degree that thought had undermined a naive representationalist view of language as unproblematically describing reality. The 'literary' emerged in the fractures left by the failures of the positivist and reductionist programmes.

The holism/relativism that led to the blurring of distinctions between literal and figurative, fictional and non-fiction etc., can be schematised to the following two basic tenets. The first is that of the *indetermination* of *data*. Contrary to inductivism (the attempt to deduce general laws from unproblematic and merely observed 'facts') it was argued that the apparently descriptive terms of an 'observation' statement are as 'fallible as the theories they presuppose and therefore do not constitute a secure basis on which to build scientific laws and theories'.⁶ This is because 'observation' statements are not neutral but can only be made *in* the language of some theory. The meaning of basic concepts is not *derived* from experience but (already) from some theoretical framework, through which alone the selective observation of any discrete thing or characteristic becomes possible. Common sense and ordinary language, on this view, have no privilege. They constitute, as it were, only an imprecise and open-ended mode of theory, not an unproblematic picture of 'things as they are'.

Because one can no longer say that meaning is quite derived from observation it becomes clear that the same data could be 'explained' equally well *in a number of theories*, which may even

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be incompatible. 'Observational findings can be reinterpreted, and can perhaps even be made to lend support to a point of view that was originally inconsistent with them' (Feyerabend).⁷ Observation no longer seemed to provide a secure basis on which to decide between one interpretation of phenomena and another. Correspondingly, the existence of any straightforwardly representational language became problematic. Theories acquired a certain 'literary' tinge. 'Meta-language' is impossible.

A second tenet of the dominant holism/relativism was the *diacritical* nature of meaning. No *datum* is meaningful *in itself*; this meaning is defined by its relation to the totality of the theory. The 'meaning of every term we use depends upon the theoretical context in which it occurs' (Feyerabend).⁸ The word 'force' in one theory is thus not, strictly speaking, the same as the word 'force' in another. Theories and interpretations seemed thus incommensurable, not only with the supposed 'facts' (the first tenet), but also with each other. Finally one could no longer say quite what the theories were 'about'. The 'about' became redundant as the notion of truth as the correspondence of language or concept to the world collapsed, leaving only the notion of truth according to a *pragmatic* or coherence model (what 'holds together').

The quotations given above all stem from discussions in the philosophy of science. However, many controversies in literary theory followed similar lines. Indeed, philosophers such as Richard Rorty have long been assimilated to the debate and a contentious school of new pragmatist critics grew up largely working around the journal *Critical Inquiry*. Questions such as the following still define many debates: Are interpretations of texts validated by appeal to some pre-given sense 'in the text' or are they (like 'theories' for Feyerabend and others) only readings of something that no longer has an objective nature in itself? 'Objective identity' is pitted against the play of language or societal construction.⁹ Problems about the nature of the object in the theory of science come to seem equally, even especially, to apply to the 'literary object'.

Much literary criticism styling itself deconstructive remains

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stuck in the impasses of this particular argument – the negation of positivism and its derivative notions of representation. J. Hillis Miller's reading of Wallace Stevens' 'The Red Fern' is a striking instance of this impasse. It works through narrowly positivist assumptions about language and does little more than invert them.¹⁰ Miller's reading follows from his acceptance of a definition of 'literal' language as the 'the match of the word with the perception of the things'. Miller relates this notion to Stevens' poem, which exploits a red fern as an image for daylight and the sun. He then argues (a) that 'sun' is not 'literal' because the sun cannot be directly observed and, (b) that Stevens' figure of the red fern is also 'strictly speaking' nonsense, because the image of day as a plant 'does not make sense as the description of any empirical phenomenon' (p. 157). On these grounds, Miller claims that the poem enacts 'the unsettling freedom of language from perception' (p. 156)! It affirms, he concludes, the necessity of recognising that 'literal' reality (the sun, for instance) is only expressible in a series of verbal substitutions. This argument, manifestly absurd in *précis*, is merely the inverted image of positivistic assumptions of extraordinary naivety. Even the logical positivists (who would at least allow for the use of scientific instruments in viewing the sun!) did not employ so narrow a concept of meaningful reference.

Another view of Derrida's work which may be challenged is that it concerns 'literature' as an unassimilable mode of language because it breaks down the distinction between text and criticism. Jonathan Culler gives a lucid example of this kind of argument in his introduction to *Identity of the Literary Text* (pp. 3–15), contrasting this new work with the previous orthodoxy. The latter, so-called 'new criticism', stemmed from a combination of the desire to establish criticism as an exact and independent discipline with many positions on the nature of the literary work of art taken over from Romantic aesthetics. In Culler's words, the new critics valued a poetic work as a 'unified whole, autonomous and self-conscious' (p. 11). The conception of the object of study as an *artefact* in this manner entailed an exclusion of all considerations deemed extra-literary, extra-

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aesthetic etc. According to Culler, the notion of a poem (say) as ideally an autonomous object leads to a valorisation of a certain reflexivity or 'self-consciousness' as the ground of the poem's identity. A peculiar blend of empiricism and formalism is the result. Culler writes, echoing the genesis of new-critical concerns in Romanticism and German Idealism, 'moments of self-referentiality are often regarded as key moments in establishing the identity of a literary text, just as self-knowledge and self-consciousness have been central to conceptions of personal identity' (p. 11).

It is this constitutive reflexivity that Culler questions. He argues that 'these moments of self-consciousness or referentiality', whose existence he doubts no more than did the new critics, do not establish the text's identity in terms of self-containedness and self-consciousness. Rather, they disrupt completely those same notions.

The poem analysed is John Donne's 'Canonization', chosen because of its virtually paradigm status for new criticism. In *The Well-Wrought Urn*¹¹ Cleanth Brooks argues that Donne's poem is 'a major achievement of the poetic imagination that also describes the sort of imaginative achievement it is'. The poem thus *enacts* what it describes as a 'self-contained fusion of being and doing' (p. 11). Donne celebrates himself and his mistress in 'Canonization', describing the 'pretty room' to be built in verse as a home for their love, the 'well-wrought urn' that will preserve their ashes. This 'urn' (an image for the poem itself) will become an object of adoration for lovers in posterity, as Donne and his love become models of what love itself should be:

Wee can dye by it, if not live by love,
 And if unfit for tombes and hearse
 Our legend bee, it will be fit for verse;
 And if no peece of Chronicle wee prove,
 We'll build in sonnets pretty roomes;
 As well a well-wrought urne becomes
 The greatest ashes, as half-acre tombes,
 And by these hymes, all shall prove
 Us *Canoniz'd* for love; (p. 12)

For Brooks the poem, as it unfolds, becomes the very 'pretty room' it describes – 'The poem itself is the well-wrought urn

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which can hold the lover's ashes' (p. 13). Thus Brooks establishes that reflexivity which he takes as constituting the text's 'identity'.

How does Culler complicate Brooks' reading? Reflexivity is extended, as it were, by the interposition of a second mirror. We read:

if the poem itself is the well-wrought urn, then one of the principal features of this urn is that it portrays people responding to the urn. If the urn or hymn is the poem itself, then the predicted response to the hymn is a response to the representation of a response to the hymn. (p. 13)

The text can be read as embodying a structure of potentially endless reflection/repetition in which it encompasses any response to it as already part of what it is about. The distinction between the poem 'itself' and the response to it becomes now an unstable one. Indeed, Culler argues, Brooks responds much as the poem already represents. He canonises the 'Canonization' using a phrase from the poem as the title of his own book. The poem becomes a paradigm of what a poem should be according to new-critical criteria. Moreover, in Culler's reading the fact that the poem incorporates an interpretation of itself skews the reflexivity valued by Brooks into a structure of 'transference' whereby the text comes to encompass already all those who would interpret it, overflowing the limits that critics might desire to assign to it:

If the urn is also the combination of urn and response to the urn, then this structure of self-reference created a situation in which responses such as Brooks's are part of the urn in question... The critic who claims to stand outside the text and analyse it seems hopelessly entangled with it, caught up in a repetition that can be described as discovering structures in the text that (unbeknownst to him) repeat his own relation to the text, or as repeating in his interpretation a relation already figured in the text. (p. 14)

It should be clear from this account that Culler's instance of a deconstructive reading is only beginning to address the question of the identity of the literary text. It is not a 'deconstruction' of reflexivity at all. On the contrary, reflexivity is generalised into a structure whereby the poem (in a parody of the Hegelian

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system)¹² includes within itself its own readings! Furthermore, the notion of a poem as self-representing no more questions a text's identity and autonomy than one mirror is broken by having another placed in front of it. This was already clear in the fact that, far from questioning the existence of these 'moments' of textual self-consciousness, as a reader of Derrida might expect, Culler argues merely that they have a *different implication* from that assumed by the new critics. Finally, this kind of reading is reductive insofar as it concentrates on only one *stratum* of the text, *reference*, to the exclusion of all the others.

It is not difficult to see, however, that a strategy of generalising this supposed reflexivity can lead critics to a position in which they can feel happy to repeat some of the radical claims of Derrida's books. Thus one *could* claim, on the basis of reading *any* text as containing within it an allegory of its own reading (hardly a difficult thing to do), all the following:

- (a) that, representing itself within itself, the text disrupts the opposition of part and whole, the part being 'larger' than the whole, etc.;
- (b) that, by including its interpretation within itself, the text disrupts the opposition of inside and outside, its outside already being internal and vice versa, thus (one might claim) the text overflows normal boundaries;
- (c) that, by including its interpreters as already interpreted the text subverts all attempts at critical mastery, incorporating a kind of ineluctable blindspot at the very place where one thinks to grasp it – *and so on*.

At this point it may prove salutary to cite a few rather strong sentences from an interview with Derrida.¹³ The citation serves to dissociate what he calls 'deconstruction' with arguments that run along such lines as that we are inescapably defined by our own 'interpretation schemas' and that any attempt to get outside them to some 'objective reference' is necessarily foredoomed etc.:

Every week I receive critical commentaries and studies on deconstruction which operate on the assumption that what they call 'post-structuralism' amounts to saying that there is nothing beyond

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language, that we are submerged in words – and other stupidities of that sort. (p. 123)

On the contrary, Derrida valorises language, not as a play of diacritical marks, but as the site of something totally *other*, by which is meant something analagous to the annunciation or 'arrival' of being itself. Without attempting a less portentous definition at this point (the aim of the rest of this study), the following quotation from Derrida's interview with Kearney should at least serve to stake out the context of the questions being posed and to dissociate them from too hasty a correlation with debates in literary theory and elsewhere. Deconstruction does not claim that language is *not* referential: it searches 'for the "other" and for that in language that is the "other" of language':

Certainly, deconstruction tries to show that the question of reference is much more complex and problematic than traditional theories supposed. It even asks whether our term 'reference' is entirely adequate for designating the 'other'. The other, which is beyond language and which summons language, is perhaps not a 'referent' in the normal sense... But to distance oneself thus from the habitual structure of reference... does not amount to saying that there is *nothing* beyond language. (Kearney, *Dialogues*, pp. 123–4)

This is so obviously different from notions of deconstruction embodied in, say, Miller's reading of Stevens or from anything in Jonathan Culler's *On Deconstruction* or from the pragmatist position that it becomes difficult to start analysing quite where the divergencies lie. One broad difference is that the concerns of deconstructive literary critics (like those of the philosophers of science they resemble) are broadly *epistemological* – the concern is the problem of language's claims to true representation *or* the *aporias* of interpretation – whereas Derrida's concerns, broadly speaking, are ontological. One hesitates to counterpose such sweeping terms as 'epistemology' and 'ontology' in a context where their relation must ultimately be at issue. Nevertheless 'the mode of being' of the literary is a phrase which encapsulates the concern of Derrida's work on Mallarmé and others as accurately as may be done at this provisional stage.

Both Miller and Culler remain tied to positivist assumptions

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that can be seen to have been surpassed in chapter 12 of *A Theory of Literature*. For Miller, the literary is tied to the positivist order of 'literal' facts insofar as it is defined entirely in terms of its relation to that realm (namely, its not fitting its contours). For Culler, the literary is an *object*, albeit of a peculiar sort, an object whose supposed self-reference enables a weird ascription to it of characteristics usually reserved to subjective consciousness (namely, the anticipation of its readers).

Derrida's work does not, I contend, admit of description in terms of the epistemological issues raised by Miller and Culler. Rather, it is more accurate to assert, in this respect, that the 'text', as Derrida intends it, is no sort of *object* at all, and to recognise the provenance of Derrida's 'readings' in Heideggerian attacks on traditional philosophy for its focusing of issues relating to *facts* in the world while passing over the issue of the world as such. Deconstruction, in Derrida's interview with Kearney, is not a form of scepticism either, but 'an openness towards the other' (p. 124).

What of this 'other'? The notion has its provenance in several aspects of the so-called 'end of idealism', the demise of the postulate, constitutive of philosophy in its traditional sense, that the real is knowable, that is, essentially rational.¹⁴ 'To say that the real is essentially knowable is to say that it is nothing but essence or meaning. Idealism reduces being to "meaning"' (Garry Madison, p. 248). Accordingly the task of philosophy is conceived as the elucidation of the correlation (already postulated in the very notion of knowledge) between human understanding and being. The 'other', provisionally speaking, is what knowledge must concern itself with once the disjunction between being and knowing is acknowledged. The stress on alterity underlines that what is to be 'known' no longer falls within the scope of the received understanding of knowledge.

Arguably an ancient counter-tradition (from the Pre-Socratics to Nietzsche) has always contested the claims of idealism. In the present context, however, Heidegger provides the vocabulary within which Derrida's 'other' can be sketched.

For Heidegger, both understanding and being have to be conceived in terms of a finitude and contingency that 'meta-