

Deconstruction: The Revolt against Gentility

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In American universities, radicalism has never died but often changed shape, oscillating between political, artistic and psychological ways of achieving change. Today the streets may be quiet but journals, university presses, and lectures bristle with defiance. Especially in literary criticism—if we listen to such critics as Harold Bloom, Geoffrey Hartman, and Jacques Derrida—the struggle for freedom and selfhood continues, at great risk to the participants. While I do not take this liberationist rhetoric at face value, I do not think we should dismiss it. Contemporary critics are addressing genuine problems, albeit in confused and self-destructive ways.

Bloom, Hartman, and Derrida—the writers who will be my focus here—direct most of their anger at the university, specifically at what they see as its repressive, meretricious emphasis on objectivity. “One of my most instructive memories,” Bloom recalls,

will be always of a small meeting of distinguished professors, which had gathered to consider the qualifications of an individual whom they might ask to join their enterprise. Before meditating upon this person’s merits, they spontaneously performed a little ritual of faith. One by one, in turn, they confessed their belief in the real presence of the literary text. It had an existence independent of their devotion to it. It had priority over them, would be there after they were gone, and above all it had a meaning or meanings quite apart from their interpretative activity. The literary text was *there*. Where? Why, in editions, definitive editions, upon which responsible commentaries might be written. Responsible commentaries. For “responsible,” substitute what word you will, whatever anxious word might match the social pieties and professional civilities that inform the spirituality of such occasions.¹

¹ Harold Bloom, “The Breaking of Form,” in Harold Bloom, et al., *Deconstruction and Criticism* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1979), p. 8.

Bloom pictures the insecure professors reassuring each other of their correctness and excluding dangerous outsiders in the name of arbitrary norms. ("He goes too far." "Her analysis isn't as complete as his.") He sees himself as one of those outsiders, a rebel who has angered his "distinguished" colleagues by unmasking their expertise. In interpretation, he maintains, "there is always and only bias, inclination, pre-judgment, swerve." The "professional civilities" of academic criticism disguise a power struggle among more or less "strong" misreadings.

Like Bloom, Hartman chafes under "academic" criteria of objectivity and proof. Recently another critic objected to an article of Hartman's on the grounds that it violates "rules of evidence and argumentation" and consequently multiplies "needless, arbitrary, or self-indulgent complexities"; transgresses "the bounds of evidence and common sense"; and wallows in "obstructive, opaque, and esoteric jargon." Hartman replied by impugning his adversary's norms of literary discussion.

[His] call for law, order, and proper argument has its own questionable assumptions that, to my mind, depress literary studies today. . . . What if the game of criticism has changed, or the rules of the game are being questioned? Even if that were not so, do we want critics to be certified by a Normal School? . . . Not our subjectivity is to be feared but our overreaction to it, those pseudo-objective criteria which imprison both the work and ourselves.²

With characteristic ambivalence, Hartman does not so much want to abandon these criteria as to supplement them. As a teacher he admits that interpretation has a "service function" that he does not want to destroy. "Teaching, criticizing and presenting the great texts of our culture are essential tasks"—even though criticism confined to these chores and the illusory standards of correctness they imply becomes uninteresting. So do the critics themselves, especially the "academy-grown variety," who end up victims of a psychology of "deepening dependence" before the texts and professional hierarchies they serve.

It is not an exaggeration to say that the critic has become a retainer to those in our society who want not the difficult reality but merely the illusion of literacy: if he practices in an English department, he carves and trims and patches and binds the prose of future leaders destined to build or destroy the economy; and if he becomes a journalist or reviewer he flatters, cajoles and admonishes the authors of books whose profits keep the publishers happy and his own job relatively secure. . . . The criticism that restricts itself to the elucidation of particular texts, and

² Exchange between Hartman and Spencer Hall in *PMLA* 94 (January 1979): 139-41.

defines what is literary in the narrowest formal terms, is indeed a trade, and does not leave the area of specialization it enriches. . . . [The critic] accepts too readily his subordinate function. He denies that he has a "psychology" worth considering, or, to put it differently, he represses his own artistic impulses.³

Hartman apparently expects only drudgery from criticism that prostrates itself before educational purposes. The "advent of mass education," which seems irreversible, has made the "pedagogic and socializing function" of criticism "immeasurably increased and burdensome." Teachers, moreover, comply with their own "humiliation"; "because of classroom pressures and an administrative structure that treats them as a business," they support the "journalistic leveling of their function to one thing: direct saleable communication." Things are bad but Hartman is hopeful. Although the "basement" of literary study may be forever "service-ridden," critics are still "free to fall upwards" by renouncing in their writing the constraints that shackle them when they grade papers, attend tenure meetings, and teach. Criticism today is "particularly vital" because it is doing just that. Without repudiating its service function, it is reclaiming "its freelance, creative powers" and becoming art.⁴

Derrida is less cautious. Like Hartman, he scorns readers who hold him accountable to "academic" norms. Thus he mocks a "feminist leader" who calls one of his hypotheses "mad": "she used the most academic criteriology against me, demanded 'proof,' and so on."⁵ But he goes further than Hartman and derives the conventions of literary study from the rules that govern and repress society as a whole. The demand for truth in texts, for example, becomes the fiat of doctors, policemen, and judges as well as professors who want nothing but the facts. These authorities

demand an *author*, an I capable of organizing a narrative sequence, of remembering and telling the truth: "exactly what happened," "recounting facts that he remembers," in other words saying "I" (I am the same as the one to whom these things happened, and so on, and thereby assuring the unity or identity of narratee or reader, and so on). Such is the demand for the story, for narrative, the demand that society, the

3 Geoffrey Hartman, "The Psychology of the Critic," *Salmagundi* 43 (winter 1979): 130-31, 132.

4 Geoffrey Hartman, "Literary Criticism and Its Discontents," *Critical Inquiry* 3 (winter 1976): 211, and "The Recognition Scene of Criticism," *Critical Inquiry* 4 (winter 1977): 410-11.

5 Bloom, *Deconstruction and Criticism*, pp. 166-67.

law that governs literary and artistic works, medicine, the police, and so forth, claim to constitute.⁶

This demand for truth—for authors who take responsibility for what they say—finds reinforcement in other fictions: copyright laws, strictures against plagiarism, contracts, and, more generally, the institution of private ownership. Reading for truth becomes an exemplary act of economic and technological mastery; when we claim to know what a text says, we possess it, consume it, even rape it.

Some critics of Derrida have objected that communication takes place even though the conventions that control our interpretations are arbitrary.⁷ But Derrida's target is the illegitimacy of these conventions, not their workability. These rules work, but only because when they are about to break down—when a student, say, snaps at a teacher “That’s just your opinion,” or a defendant tells a judge, “Who’s to say what’s larceny?”—the police are always waiting in the wings. Administrators, department chairmen, employers—and troops—are always already prepared to force the rebel into line because “conventions are by essence violable and precarious, *in themselves* and by the fictionality that constitutes them, even before there has been any overt transgression. . . .”⁸ Force takes over where reason fails, as in interpretation it must.

For Derrida, the indeterminacy of all statements threatens every institution that pretends to make sense of texts. When he exposes the arbitrariness of our interpretations, we presumably clutch all the more anxiously at the conventions he calls into question. We insist that we are right, bypassing what Derrida calls the “political-institutional problem” of the university:

It [the university], like all teaching in its traditional form, and perhaps all teaching whatever, has as its ideal, with exhaustive translatability, the effacement of language [*la langue*]. The deconstruction of a pedagogical institution and all that it implies. What this institution cannot bear is for anyone to tamper with [*toucher à*; also “touch,” “change,” “concern itself with”] language, meaning *both* the *national* language *and*, paradoxically, an ideal of translatability that neutralizes this na-

6 Ibid., p. 98.

7 See Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979); Charles Altieri, “Presence and Reference in a Literary Text: The Example of Williams’ ‘This Is Just to Say,’” *Critical Inquiry* 5 (spring 1979): 489–510; and my “Rehabilitating Reference: Charles Altieri’s ‘Presence and Reference in a Literary Text,’” *Critical Inquiry* 6 (winter 1979): 343–45.

8 Jacques Derrida, “Limited Inc abc. . . .,” *Glyph 2* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), p. 250. Examples are mine.

tional language. Nationalism and universalism. What this institution cannot bear is a transformation that leaves intact neither of these two complementary poles. It can bear more readily the most apparently revolutionary ideological sorts of "content" if only that content does not touch the borders of language and of all the juridico-political contracts that it guarantees. It is this "intolerable" something that concerns me here.⁹

Deconstructing the fiction that writing is a transparent, passive medium—and doing so "not merely in a theoretical manner"—should be the aim of anyone who "does not want the police to be omnipotent."¹⁰

American readers have been so receptive to Derrida's work in part because it stirs their democratic sympathies. Few people want the police to be omnipotent. The radicalism of the sixties prepared us for Derrida's association of freedom with mobility or endless possibility, as well as for his attack on hierarchies and on arbitrary, invidious distinctions between right and wrong, sane and insane. His program of releasing interpretation from the constraints of logic, authorial intent, the text, and the dictates of authorities meshes with ideas we have all heard before: that students have a right to their own language; that expertise is a dangerous, undemocratic charade; that standards are elitist; that correcting someone smacks of ridicule, arrogance, even tyranny; that claiming truth for one's values means imposing them. The political appeal of Derrida's work lies in its familiarity, not its novelty. He keeps alive themes that no longer animate political movements. To intellectuals disillusioned with politics, he offers what seems, at first glance, hope. The power we have lost in Congress we can recapture in our prose.

But despite deconstruction, American society goes on much the same—not because our institutions can accommodate dangerous ideas but because the ideas of Derrida, Bloom, and Hartman are not dangerous.¹¹ For all their resentment,

9 Derrida, *Deconstruction and Criticism*, pp. 93–95.

10 Derrida, "Limited Inc.," p. 251.

11 Paraphrase of a remark by Christopher Lasch in "Recovering Reality," *Salmagundi* 42 (summer–fall 1978): 44: "Those positions that seem most radical—most uncompromising in their opposition to bourgeois cultural hegemony—often turn out today to render the most effective reinforcement to the status quo. . . . [T]he problem goes deeper than our society's well-known capacity to absorb dangerous ideas. The ideas associated with the politics of 'cultural revolution' have in fact ceased to be dangerous." I want to thank Christopher Lasch and Morris Eaves for their comments on an earlier version of this essay.

these writers are products of the academic profession they oppose. In order to explain the appeal of deconstruction more fully, we need to consider the equivocal status of literary study in modern society. Since the eighteenth century, poets, novelists, and literary critics have generally seen themselves as professionals motivated by high ideals: dedicated, in Matthew Arnold's phrase, to discovering and propagating the best that is known and thought in the world; bound by common values and truths; and uniquely equipped to judge each other's work. From the outside, however, writers and literary scholars have appeared in a less flattering light: as entertainers using inflated rhetoric to camouflage their own ambitions; as cantankerous egotists forever involved in pointless internecine disputes and petty jealousies; and as more or less successful businessmen trying like everyone else to make their way in the market and making suspiciously grandiose claims for their "services." Or so writers have thought. In some ways the popular contempt for literature and literary studies is itself a product of the literary imagination. Intellectuals tend to attribute more anti-intellectualism to the public than actually exists, perhaps because this makes it easier for them to bear disappointment and neglect. As a result, it is often hard to know whether it is the public or the intellectual community itself that regards intellectual work as a higher form of commerce—the pursuit of the main chance by other means.

In their response to public neglect (as they see it), most writers have wavered between two positions. The first regards literature as a body of closely guarded professional secrets. The second echoes public cynicism by treating literature precisely as its enemies see it—as an exercise in self-promotion and salesmanship, utilizing all the skills of commodity exchange. Deconstructionism, as we shall see, mixes both of these responses, which originate in the same underlying conditions. These are the conditions that relegate art to a marginal place in industrial societies. The undemocratic, mechanical, and specialized character of industrial work has made aesthetic experience seem at best a palliative (the music the dentist plays or the paintings that brighten the office) or at worst a frill (the symphony ticket that only the rich can afford). While conservatives have falsely attributed the marginal status of art to an excess of democracy, progressives have hoped that expanding leisure, education, and income would make the arts widely accessible through inexpensive paperbacks and recordings. Even where literacy and the standard of living have improved, however, the dehumanizing conditions of work remain. The arts still seem impractical—except for the artists, critics, publishers, and museum directors who make a living off them—because work requires other skills, like the mindless acceptance of routine instead of creativity, or specialization instead of self-expression. In times of prosperity—like the 1950s and 1960s in America—we have had more leisure and money for the arts, but their weekend status has remained the same.

In part, the New Criticism of the forties and fifties embodied the first type

of response to the trivialization of art in modern society—the effort to protect it against encroachments from other disciplines and even from undergraduates, who were advised that literature is difficult, obscure, and inaccessible except to those with professional training. In opposition to the New Criticism, radical critics in the sixties revived the notion that literature is merely another “bourgeois” profession, as Richard Ohmann put it, piously vowing service to human values but actually existing for the sake of its own practitioners. Deconstruction represents a more sophisticated version of the same argument. But its attack on academic gentility and literary professionalism still misses the point.

Bloom, Hartman, and Derrida mirror the profession they criticize because they misinterpret the recent changes it has undergone. Developments in the profession itself have already knocked down—or failed to support—the targets these writers attack. A “service function” does not weigh down criticism, as Hartman maintains; the apparent purposelessness of criticism encourages it to float free. Inflation and declining enrollments have lessened the demand for teachers, especially in the humanities. A depressed job market has weakened the only clear aim literature courses have been able to offer—to prepare students (mostly English majors) for a niche in the academic profession. Generally anxious about finding work, students in literature courses are accordingly not “future leaders destined to build or destroy the economy,” or if they are, it is not because they are taking English courses. A profession unsure of its larger objectives, moreover, welcomes, or at least endures, the elliptical writing that Hartman says it discourages. Few people expect “direct saleable communication” from critics; few people even take criticism seriously. In a demoralized profession—and in a society that denies vocational value to the liberal arts—Hartman himself may ironically be the last to believe that “teaching, criticizing and presenting the great texts” are still considered “essential tasks.” He attributes to interpretation a status it does not enjoy so that he can call for seemingly radical reforms that undermine the allegedly authoritarian imposition of critical fiat. But as his own work suggests, fear of sounding reactionary is more common among academic intellectuals than a commitment to interpretive clarity.

Derrida, like Hartman, rips apart paper chains when he assaults “criteria of readability.” These criteria have never been “very firmly established” among critics. In a system so uncritically given over to literary production, moreover, assailing these criteria may not be an “intolerable” effrontery, as Derrida thinks, but a precondition for further growth. As Gerald Graff observes,

Where quantitative “production” of scholarship and criticism is a chief measure of professional achievement, narrow canons of proof, evidence, logical consistency, and clarity of expression have to go. To insist on them imposes a drag upon progress. Indeed, to apply strict can-

ons of objectivity and evidence in academic publishing today would be comparable to the American economy's returning to the gold standard: the effect would be the immediate collapse of the system. . . . The recent discovery that every text can be reinterpreted as a commentary on its own textual problematics or as a self-consuming artifact ensures that the production of new readings will not cease even though explication of many authors and works seems to have reached the point of saturation.¹²

The principle that all texts are open to endless reinterpretation does not abolish publications but rather multiplies them—each text always allowing even more to be written “about” it. Derrida further accelerates production by erasing the distinctions between literary and extraliterary works, subsuming everything in words under “writing.” Instead of transcending his specialty, he sanctions its imperialist expansion, which fashionable “interdisciplinary” courses like Literature and Business or Literature and Philosophy have already begun by annexing adjoining disciplines to the curriculum without disturbing, or rethinking, what we already have.

My point about the production of criticism is less extreme than it may first appear. I am not arguing that deconstructionists deliberately seek to broaden the possibilities of critical production, or that paving the way for new readings is all that deconstruction achieves, or even that academic criticism needs deconstruction in order to grow. Releasing interpretation from the controls of proof and objectivity does not so much increase the supply of the product as acquiesce in its aimless growth, which is already going on full force without deconstruction.

Despite Bloom's worry (or boast) that he offends “against civility, against the social conventions of literary scholarship and criticism,” he, too, reflects the circumstances that he “risks” challenging. Instead of remedying the absence of public discussion, Bloom assigns interpretation private goals when he suggests that authors misread each other in order to appear to have something distinctive to say. Lack of respect for other authors is reborn as creativity and “strength”; ambition, self-validation, and personal power eclipse more generous reasons for writing. Interpretation becomes in theory what it sometimes is in fact: a means of individual advancement, of salvaging a place for oneself at someone else's expense. In the absence of other ends, personal ambition seems to explain what critics do and tempts them to see even poetry itself as an arena of self-interested com-

¹² Gerald Graff, *Literature Against Itself* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 97. In “Institutional Control of Interpretation,” *Salmagundi* 43 (winter 1979): 85, Frank Kermode similarly observes that “the institution [of literary study] does not resist, rather encourages change; but it monitors change with very sophisticated machinery.” In a time of uncertainty, however, we monitor change less confidently: hence our susceptibility to fashion.

bat that legitimizes their own competition. Discussions about literature come to be seen as another expression of the same principles of merchandising and promotion that govern the free market in consumer goods.

In criticizing Bloom, Hartman, and Derrida, I am not defending the status quo. But while their disenchantment with academic criticism is entirely justified, I quarrel with their judgment of what is wrong. It is easy to understand their impatience with the "rules of evidence and argumentation," as Hartman calls them. In the modern university, "objectivity" implies emulation of the specialized, ostensibly impartial stance of the technician, just as "evidence" means what we can count, weigh, or measure. But it is not objectivity and "proper argument," after all, that are degrading literary studies today, but specialization, narrowness, and irresponsibility. Hartman trivializes his own case when he suggests that it cannot even be supported with evidence. Instead of opposing the dominant outlook, he agrees that value judgments cannot be objective—even his own.¹³

The departmental meeting satirized by Bloom, in which professors cling together and expel outsiders in the name of illusory norms, is not a fiction. But when Bloom asserts that "there is always and only bias, inclination," he sabotages his own protest. He leaves us no choice except the choice between more or less successful impositions of power. The professors he derides are more concerned about their own careers than with the complex truth, but instead of remedying their arbitrariness, Bloom's epistemology makes it inevitable. The other side of his bitterness is futility.

Derrida rightly mocks the objectivity of many rules and detects the brute force beneath their reasonable facade. When he leaps from the arbitrariness of some conventions to the illegitimacy of them all, however, he too neutralizes his own complaint. No longer directed at a specific kind of politics, his argument discredits "all ethical-political statements," even those that aim at changing the conditions that he deplors. Derrida states his opposition in terms that make acting on it impossible. Angry but helpless, he settles for irony and self-deprecation (putting words like "truth" and "reality" in quotation marks to show that he does not take them seriously, or mocking the scholarly conventions, like footnotes,

¹³ In practice, to be sure, Hartman is less enamored of subjectivity than he is in theory. At one point he complains that Hall "is not all that objective" when he quotes *Beyond Formalism*, one of Hartman's most influential books, out of context. Maybe Hartman is being ironic here, playfully faulting Hall for violating his own rules. But elsewhere he blames Hall's critique for not trying "to understand the perspective and critical styles it attacks"—an accusation that would seem to value the detachment that Hartman questions. The same writer who "problematizes" objectivity also attaches great weight to achieving it—when he thinks that someone else misunderstands his work.

that he nonetheless needs). His furious rhetoric culminates in snickering at what he feels powerless to refuse or change.

When no one seems to be listening, it is tempting to conclude that debate is impossible. When the decisions that govern our lives defy logic, fairness, and popular consent, it seems as if only force matters. But such responses perpetuate the conditions they rightly deplore. Giving up on reason or justice does not represent resistance or liberation but lack of imagination and fear—fear that chance, force, self-interest, and anxiety preside over the human condition, not over a state of affairs that we can change. Writers like Bloom, Hartman, and Derrida protect themselves against failure by ensuring it.