Indeterminancy, Irreducibility and Authority in Modern Literary Theory

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More than a decade ago in *Beyond Formalism* Geoffrey Hartman warned Anglo-American criticism of the pitfalls of prostrating itself before formalist textual analysis: "The domination of textual Exegesis is great: she is our Whore of Babylon, sitting robed in Academic black on the great dragon of Criticism, and dispensing a repetitive and soporific balm from her pedantic cup."[1] If literary studies in North America survived this Dunciad of a residual New Criticism, the seventies offered them little respite and no solace. The new threat, as Hartman puts it in *Criticism in the Wilderness*, seems even more ominous, a kind of Jacobean science fiction onslaught from across the Atlantic: "The 1970's have seen an invasion of mind-snatchers from the Continent" (p. 9).[2] And there can be no doubt that the renewed interest in theory and theorizing, the profusion of introductions to structuralism and deconstruction, of translations, testify to the substance of Hartman's observation. In *Criticism in the Wilderness* he hints that if North American criticism has crossed its red sea of formalism, it has yet to discover its own identity, to develop the confidence of its own (unborrowed) set of premises and critical practice.

It is precisely here that the initial project of *Beyond Formalism* is immobilized. In spite of its Dunciad invocation *Beyond Formalism* did not posit a critical displacement, a radical reversal, of the methodology and organizing categories American New Criticism had developed. Instead, it took its place among the intertexts of conciliation — Coleridge introducing German Idealism

to English criticism, Mill on Bentham and Coleridge, T. H. Green on Hegel — suggesting that Cleanth Brooks may not be enough of a formalist and that the phenomenological criticism of Georges Poulet may be "more formalistic than he thinks, and that where he is less so his work may fail to situate the writer."[3] The enterprise of literary criticism, then, was not so much to move *beyond* formalism, but to move *through* it, incorporating its close reading of the text with the exploration of its dense multiple realities foregrounded by Geneva School phenomenological criticism.

Such a reconciliation was to be facilitated by the general tendency of both American formalism and phenomenological criticism to stress 'wholeness' as an organizing concept. Thus, Hartman could argue that the premature false universality which he discovers in Poulet's criticism ("substituting a perplexity of representation for one of being")[4] could be tempered by the close analysis, the detailed textual 'whole,' formalism offered. The rapprochment envisaged between formalist and phenomenological criticism was one in which the narrow textual analyses of American critics would be enriched by the effort to grasp the synthetic intent of European philosophical criticism. In turn, the so-called abstraction of the Continental critics would rediscover textual specificity through its engagement with American formalism.

But it was not to be. With the exception of a few seminal works (think, for instance, of J. Hillis Miller's *The Disappearance of God* or *Poets of Reality*) the influence of Poulet's Geneva School phenomenology has remained on the periphery of North American literary studies. The pressuring European influence in the decade of the seventies has come instead from Parisian structuralism, and, its post-structuralist variant, deconstruction. And through them, ironically, North American criticism, according to Hartman, continues to find itself in an impasse. Today the dilemma is not so much the inability to move beyond textual exegesis but the difficulty of defining a critical stance, a self-identity for North American criticism, amid the multiplying interplay of signifiers, referents, Derridean puns and competing codes.

In the very act of stumbling into the wilderness, however, criticism is endowed with an extraordinary resilience. It is released from the rigidity of New Criticism's textual readings, of Leavis' ethical touchstone, or of Frye's quest for a science of interpretation. In Hartman's words:

> One thing we have learned: whatever style of critical inquiry may be evolving today, criticism cannot be identified as a branch of science or as a branch of fiction. Science is strongest when it pursues a fixed paradigm or point of reference, however subtly modified, however self-transformed. Fiction is strongest as prophetic discourse, as prophecy, after the event — an event constituted or reconstituted by it, and haunted by the idea of traumatic causation ("A sudden blow," "A shudder in the loins"). But contemporary criticism aims at a hermeneutics of indeterminacy. It proposes a type of analysis that has renounced the ambition to master or demystify its subject (text, psyche) by technocratic, predictive, or authoritarian formulas. (pp. 40-41)

Criticism is emancipated from the strictures imposed by directing itself merely towards elucidating what is contained within the text. It becomes a creative act in itself. Just as Barthes has polemicized for a disruptive rereading which would prevent the "meaning" in the text from simplified appropriation into the reader's consciousness,[5] so Hartman wishes to underscore in literary criticism a creative dimension which would release it from the restraints of a self-imposed methodology. It is in this free development that literary criticism encounters the conditions and first outline of its future prospective form.

Previous critical reflections can no longer be seen to function as "parts" of a mechanical aggregate which eventually attains "truth" or an absolute explication of the essential meaning of the text. Certainly, existing critical commentary is seen to be incomplete, but it is this very discontinuous quality which allows the metacritic to install himself within its rifts and fractures so that he begins to see anew not only the critic and his perception but also the text and author. This is precisely the typical intellectual procedure at work in Hartman's discussion of Walter Benjamin. According to Hartman, Benjamin's study of Baudelaire exists under two indissoluble and complementary aspects: a secular phase and a religious phase. Neither is complete in

itself; each makes references ("quotes" is his word) to the other, but without achieving totality. Yet it is within the interplay of the two phases that the critic has access to Benjamin's critical practice: "What remains of this foundering motion is, nevertheless, powerful and symptomatic: the project, even in its dejected form, illustrates the relation between language and life" (p. 74).

Further, what is revealed in the metacommentary on Benjamin's *Baudelaire* is not only the configurations of the original critic's discourse, but the poet. On these terms the fissures in Benjamin's writings yield a revitalized vision of Baudelaire who can now be evaluated through the refraction of Benjamin's own commentary. At this point critical examination of Benjamin's thought becomes an exercise in the retrieval of Baudelaire's texts: "How strange, then, that Benjamin did not use this sonnet to illustrate . . . "; "Benjamin could have pointed out . . . " (p. 69). Or, to put it another way, Hartman on Benjamin on Baudelaire becomes Hartman on Baudelaire. Such an enabling device ought not to suggest that criticism is merely to supply the metacritic's conduit back to the text. Metacritic, critic and poet are engaged in a complex interplay where each stimulates (one is tempted to use Hartman's "quotes") the discourse of the other.

Exactly here, in the insistence that criticism must embrace reciprocity and indeterminacy, must refuse the temptation to close off such interplay, lies its "critical" dimension. According to Hartman, literature breaks loose from any critical endeavour to interpret it through an imposed system or grid: "art slanders an established order, good or bad, by not conforming. Its very existence is often a resistance, it gives the lie to every attempt to impose a truth . . . " (p. 98). Any pressure from criticism to make the text surrender up its meaning to a rigid schematism is bound to fail for the text will reply with stubborn indeterminacy. Criticism must welcome indeterminacy, however scandalous it may seem: "There is no absolute knowledge but rather a textual infinite, an interminable web of texts or interpretations; and the fact that we discern periods or sentences or genres or individual outlines or unities of various kinds is somewhat like computing time. We can insist that time has a beginning and an end; or, more modestly, the Romanticism, for example, began circa 1770

and ended circa 1830; but this is a silly if provoking mimicry of providential or historical determinism" (p. 202). Faced with the stringency of an *apriori* periodization which seeks to confine it Romanticism draws our attention to its fitful existence outside those boundaries: a Baudelaire? a Rilke? a Yeats?

In his insistence on indeterminacy, on inter-textuality, on what we might call the disintegration of traditional categories of literary analysis — genre, periodization, even the text itself — Hartman reverses the conceptual priorities of conventional literary and cultural theory. The tradition in criticism from Matthew Arnold to I. A. Richards to Northrop Frye had always, in various forms, stressed culture's wholeness and unity. From Arnold's initial formulation in *Culture and Anarchy*, through Richards' "storehouses of recorded values" through Leavis' *Great Tradition* to Frye's autonomous literary universe, culture was perceived as something to be apprehended in its wholeness, as an entity which had defined itself apart from the contingency of lived experience. Indeed, it was in the very separation of culture from society that it could preserve its ethical impetus: no matter how fragmented, how atomized lived experience was perceived to be, the realm of culture preserved a vision of unity and indivisibility where human possibilities could find their realization. So Frye can insist that "the goal of ethical criticism is transvaluation, the ability to look at contemporary social values with the detachment of one who is able to compare them in some degree with the infinite vision of possibilities presented by the culture."[6] Within such an interpretive model the critic — often the ideal reader — functions as a mediation between the region of culture, or its immediate representative, the text, and a debased and fallen reality. Put most simply, culture interrogates the fragmentation of lived experience with its vision of wholeness.

This critical perspective, so deeply held by the Anglo-American tradition, was turned on its head by post-structuralist and deconstructivist polemics. The text, they argued, resists the artificiality of closure, inscribing within itself the very fractures and fissures which make unity impossible. Thus conceived, the text can no longer be an *apriori* transparent to the mind of the reader. On the contrary, its indeterminacy precludes any act of

simplified appropriation by the reader's consciousness, precipitating instead a plurality of "readings." Here deconstruction shifts the canon of overall co-ordinates which foreground literary texts: Shelley, displaced to the periphery by Leavis' critique of Romanticism and Brooks' preference for the well-wrought image patterns of Keats, regains a central position as a poet of desire.

The project of *Criticism in the Wilderness* is to bring together the continental and Anglo-American traditions: Benjamin and Derrida stand face to face with Leavis and Frye. The confrontation is one in which Hartman sees each released from the confines of its peculiar tradition into a speculative interplay of critical creativity:

> [criticism's] speculative instruments are now exercising their own textual powers rather than performing, explaining, or reifying existing texts. What is happening is neither an inflation of criticism at the expense of creative writing nor a promiscuous intermingling of both. It is, rather, a creative testing and illumination of *limits*: the limits of what Hegel called "absolute knowledge" and Dewey the "quest for certainty." (pp. 201-02)

The juxtaposition of Hegel and Dewey points to a central difficulty of such an eclectic approach, or "critical pluralism."[7] To be sure, the thought of Dewey and Hegel may be seen, in the most general sense, as forms of idealism. What is absent, however, is a notion of a critical consciousness loyal to the *specifica differentia* of the two systems. Criticism must found itself on a concept of truth which calls into question such unexamined eclecticism. To amalgamate syncretically what may be specific and unique ideas, concepts, systems of thought is ultimately to discredit each one. The result is to centre on superficial resemblances between forms of thought, liquidating in the process the particular differences within each.

The point I am making can be focused by looking at the relationship of *Criticism in the Wilderness* to Frye's thought. Indeed, Hartman's project appears deeply inscribed with Frygean motifs: the romance quest, the wandering in the wilderness, the desire for epiphany. And, both critics evoke Matthew Arnold again and again. Yet it is exactly here, in the density of Arnold's thought that their divergences appear. For Frye, the privileged

moment of the Arnoldian text is its vision of possibilities: in the final chapter of *The Anatomy of Criticism*, literature finds its *raison d'être* in its ability to image a world which would be "free, classless and urbane." For Hartman, however, Arnold is significant, not in his evocation of a promised land, but in his recognition of the circuitous journey:

> . . . Arnold ends "The Function of Criticism" by foreseeing a new epoch of creativity that the movement of modern criticism will usher in. "There is the promised land, toward which criticism can only beckon. That promised land will not be ours to enter, and we shall die in the wilderness: but to have desired to enter it, to have saluted it from afar, is already perhaps the best distinction among contemporaries." To which one can only reply: Ah, Wilderness. It is precisely that purely functional notion of criticism, or that great divide between criticism and creation, which is now in dispute. (p. 204)

Whereas Frye, like Arnold, would underscore the shaping of future possibilities, Hartman reinvents the wilderness, now seen not as a place of discontent, but as a journey of creation.

The comparison goes still further. On the one side, Frye's orientation towards the end, the *telos*, of literary criticism codifies criticism as a science of literary studies. On the other, Hartman's insistence on the creative dimension of criticism inscribes indeterminacy into the division between literature and literary studies. Thus, merely to invoke in a rhetorical gesture the points of convergence between Frye and Hartman, without analyzing the uniqueness of each project would represent a premature generalization and, more crucially, would occlude the specific differences between the two critics.

Still, there is a moment of truth in Hartman's insistence on indeterminacy, on interplay, on the refusal to define the boundaries between literature and criticism. If, in Leavis' *Great Tradition* or Frye's universe of archetypes, the act of writing is an act of *vol* (theft of the tradition, theft of the mythological archetype), in *Criticism in the Wilderness* Hartman reminds us that *vol* also means flight, the desire to soar, to break through the network of grids which competing interpretive systems impose on criticism. In the refusal of authoritarian systematizing,

in its embracing of indeterminacy, criticism becomes an act of vol-ition, a process of desire.

There is perhaps no critical perspective which has been accused more of imposing a rigid determinism on the text than psychoanalytic criticism. Traditionally, psychoanalytic investigations of literary texts have taken two directions: to "analyze" the author, locating in his subjective neuroses the peculiarities of the text or to apply the insights of psychoanalysis to the text itself, using Freudian codes (Oedipal conflict, repression, phallic symbols) to interpret it. In either of these approaches psychoanalytic criticism appropriates to itself a privileged interpretive position, subordinating and censoring — one is tempted to say "repressing" — the plenitude of the text. Yet psychoanalysis itself has recently been subjected to a series of critiques which parallel the developments in post-structuralist literary criticism.

The first of these interrogations comes from the work of writers such as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari.[8] Psychoanalysis, they argue, far from constituting a process of emancipation for the human subject, is instead a process of enthrallment. The multiplicity of human experience is rewritten in terms of "family" history: within psychoanalysis, the entirety of an individual's history is interpreted through the authority of the Oedipal moment. Thus Deleuze and Guattari polemicize for a liberation of the human subject into the "flux and flows" of what they call schizo-analysis. And, like the post-structuralists, they focus on texts which break down the authoritarianism of a dominating narrative perspective: Joyce, the *nouveau roman*, Faulkner.

A second reinterpretation of Freud has developed in the writings of Jacques Lacan. With its basis in structuralist linguistics Lacanian psychoanalysis has a direct relation to literary criticism. For Lacan language is a field where the human subject not only lives out his or her own repression, but also discovers a project of emancipation: "I identify myself in Language, but only by losing myself in it like an object."[9] *The Fictional Father* is a collection of essays, edited by Robert Con Davis, which explores Lacanian readings of the text.

According to Lacanian criticism, literature represents an aspect of the "imaginary" to be distinguished from the "symbolic."

While the symbolic corresponds to the arbitrary relationship of signifier and referent in language, the imaginary retains elements of free association and play. Yet the imaginary is never merely a realm of the fictional or the illusory. Instead, it takes its reference from that stage in which the infant perceives its reflection in the mirror and grasps its identity as a unity. The moment of the imaginary, according to Lacan, facilitates the development of an Ego Ideal. Yet this sense of wholeness far from stable:

> . . . this unity in the Imaginary is always threatened by absence (of the mother, of objects) and by difference (the absence or presence of the penis). Language is a way of repressing or controlling this difference and absence by putting it on the plane of representations. For Lacan, the fact of difference is in the Real, conceived as a stage of the subject rather than as an external reality, and its representation/repression/control takes place in the Symbolic.[10]

These formulations have particular implications for literary texts. It is within the text that the desire to reconstitute the Imaginary plays out its struggle with the pressuring, repressing and dominating force of the Symbolic system of language. Put into Hartman's terms, this moment would parallel the text's resistance to any one-dimensional grid (the Symbolic) and its stubborn insistence on multiple indeterminacy (the Imaginary). The application of Lacanian psychoanalysis to literary analysis in the essays which make up *The Fictional Father* redirects criticism away from any concentration on repression in the author's consciousness back to the text.

Thus, Regis Durand's analysis of Melville, " 'The Captive King': The Absent Father in Melville's Text," sees the failure of Redburn's guidebook as a failure of parental authority to provide new knowledge and discovery, and, ultimately "a discreet but powerful subversion of fictional convention" (p. 54). The critical cutting edge of the subversive moment, however, cannot be sustained and the domination of the Symbolic asserts its power: "Narrative discourse then takes over firmly (the discourse one could accurately call *dominant*, because it dominates in several ways: psychically, inasmuch as it represses, it is repression itself; ideologically, inasmuch as it provides the norm, the

expected, acceptable form . . .)" (p. 54). The fractures and rifts in Melville's writings interrogate the notion of paternity, of an essential origin, while the conventions of the narrative code attempt to reimpose a controlling order: "Such are Melville's hieroglyphics: traces of countless little acts of creation, of cleavings and fractures. What all this amounts to is the impossibility of a single origin and the challenge to the very idea of paternity" (p. 59).

The struggle of the text, then, is to constitute itself anew, to squeeze out its own identity from the controlling authority and domination of narrative codes and literary conventions. Yet because the text can never exist as something radically unique, cannot come into being without those codes (and conventions), without its "fictional father," it inscribes within itself the traces of this struggle. As Robert Con Davis quotes approvingly from Donald Barthelme: "the father is a motherfucker" (p. 178).

In one important sense, the analyses in *The Fictional Father* reverse Hartman's emphasis in *Criticism in the Wilderness*. According to Davis, the interaction within the text among repressive codes and the desire to escape from authority is a conflict from which the text can never emerge unmarred: "all narratives must in some sense fail" (p. 187). For Hartman, on the other hand, the indeterminacy within the text, which in turn is rewritten into the project of literary criticism, guarantees and preserves a playfulness, an escape from authority (the authority of one critical system, of one interpretive ploy).

The critic at the centre of these debates is Jacques Derrida. *Positions*, a series of interviews with Derrida about his central works — *Grammatology, Writing and Difference* — provides not only a commentary on his own thought, but also suggests the direction of his current work. A seminal implication of the deconstructivist critique of substantialist thought, essentialist origins and a privileged system of interpretation has been its tendency toward radical relativism. If all readings are misreadings, then the critic is caught in a debilitating paralysis. In *Positions*, Derrida speaks to this dilemma:

> In effect, we must avoid having the indispensable critique of a certain relationship to the signified or the referent, to sense or

> meaning, remain fixed in a suspension, that is, a pure and simple suppression, of meaning or reference. . . . What we need is to determine *otherwise*, according to a differential system, the *effects* of ideality, of signification, of meaning, and of reference. (p. 66)

Derrida's stress here is not so much on the infinite interplay of signifiers, but on the definition of the precise contours in which that interplay takes place. While the critic must still refuse the authoritarianism of defining a privileged interpretive code, his focus is turned toward what resists the pluralistic interplay of signifiers, what, in Derrida's words, makes up the "fringe of irreducibility" (p. 67).

There can be no doubt that Derrida does not intend a return to the structured ambiguities of New Criticism. Yet the renewed emphasis on irreducibility suggests a reappraisal of infinite indeterminacy. Criticism turns its gaze not on the unity of the text, nor on its (uncensored) playfulness, but rather on the interaction of the two, on the ways in which the text inscribes within itself the conflicting demands of desire and control.

The extent to which the new theorizing represents a moment of emancipation for the critic is clear. Gone is the authoritarian domination of a particular interpretation: a new dimension of playfulness, of punning, has opened up. Yet a disturbing question remains: is there a pedagogical efficacy to the new theories? Hartman ends *Criticism in the Wilderness* with an impassioned plea for a new interdisciplinary emphasis, for the emancipatory engagement of the arts with those professional disciplines still enthralled within the hierarchical systems of their own particular grid. Derrida is more cautious, but he too envisages a radical interrogation of those intellectual systems that ground themselves in authoritarian hierarchies:

> What is produced in the current trembling is a re-evaluation of the relationship between the general text and what was believed to be, in the form of reality (history, politics, economics, sexuality, etc.), the simple, referable exterior of language or writing, the belief that this exterior could operate from the simple position of cause or accident. What are apparently simply "regional" effects of this trembling, therefore, at the same time have a non-regional opening, destroying their own limits and tending

> to articulate themselves with the general scene, but in new modes, without any pretention to mastery. (p. 91)

It would be precisely in this "non-regional" opening up that criticism would recapture its cutting edge, so long discarded as an affective fallacy. Such a utopian vision would reinvent Shelley's project of desire: the critic deconstructs not only texts, but also worlds.

NOTES

[1] Geoffrey Hartman, *Beyond Formalism* (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1970), p. 56.

[2] Geoffrey Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness* (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1980), pp. xii, 323, $18.00. Also considered in this essay are Robert Con Davis, ed., *The Fictional Father: Lacanian Readings of the Text* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), pp. xvi, 206, $15.00, and Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. viii, 114, $11.95. Subsequent references to these books will be made in parentheses in the text.

[3] Hartman, *Beyond Formalism*, p. 42.

[4] *Ibid*, p. 55.

[5] See his *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), pp. 15-16.

[6] Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1973), p. 348.

[7] See Terry Eagleton, "The Idealism of American Criticism," *New Left Review* 127 (1981), pp. 53-65.

[8] See their *Anti-Oedipus*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen Lane (New York: Viking, 1971).

[9] Jacques Lacan, *The Language of the Self*, trans. A. Wilden (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U.P., 1968), p. 63.

[10] J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis* (London: Hogarth Press, 1973), p. 210.