

“THIS STRANGE INSTITUTION  
CALLED LITERATURE”

AN INTERVIEW WITH JACQUES DERRIDA

• The original interview, of which this is an edited transcript, took place in Laguna Beach over two days in April 1989. The translation is by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby.

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*D.A.* You said to your thesis jury in 1980 that “my most constant interest, coming even before my philosophical interest I should say, if this is possible, has been directed towards literature, towards that writing which is called literary.” And you have published a number of texts which present readings of literary texts, about which we shall soon be talking. Yet a large part of your work has been concerned with writing that would be more likely to be called philosophical. Could you expand upon that statement concerning your primary interest in literature, and say something about its relation to your extensive work on philosophical texts?

*J.D.* What can a “primary interest” be? I would never dare to say that my primary interest went toward literature rather than toward

philosophy. Anamnesis would be risky here, because I'd like to escape my own stereotypes. To do that, we'd have to determine what got called "literature" and "philosophy" during my adolescence, at a time when, in France at least, the two were meeting through works which were then dominant. Existentialism, Sartre, Camus were present everywhere and the memory of surrealism was still alive. And if these writings practiced a fairly new kind of contact between philosophy and literature, they were prepared for this by a national tradition and by certain models given a solid legitimacy by the teaching in schools. What's more, the examples I have just given seem very different from each other.

No doubt I hesitated between philosophy and literature, giving up neither, perhaps seeking obscurely a place from which the history of this frontier could be thought or even displaced—in writing itself and not only by historical or theoretical reflection. And since what interests me today is not strictly called either literature or philosophy, I'm amused by the idea that my adolescent desire—let's call it that—should have directed me toward something in writing which was neither the one nor the other. What was it?

"Autobiography" is perhaps the least inadequate name, because it remains for me the most enigmatic, the most open, even today. At this moment, here, I'm trying, in a way that would commonly be called "autobiographical," to remember what happened when the desire to write came to me, in a way that was as obscure as it was compulsive, both powerless and authoritarian. Well, what happened then was just like an autobiographical desire. At the "narcissistic" moment of "adolescent" identification (a difficult identification which was often attached, in my youthful notebooks, to the Gidian theme of Proteus), this was above all the desire to inscribe merely a memory or two. I say "only," though I already felt it as an impossible and endless task. Deep down, there was something like a lyrical movement toward confidences or confessions. Still today there remains in me an obsessive desire to save in uninterrupted inscription, in the form of a memory, what happens—or *fails to happen*. What I should be tempted to denounce as a lure—i.e., totalization or gathering up—isn't this what keeps me going? The idea of an internal polylogue, everything that later, in what

I hope was a slightly more refined way, was able to lead me to Rousseau (about whom I had been passionate ever since childhood) or to Joyce, was first of all the adolescent dream of keeping a trace of all the voices which were traversing me—or were *almost doing so*—and which was to be so precious, unique, both specular and speculative. I've just said "fails to happen" and "almost doing so" so as to mark the fact that what *happens*—in other words, the unique event whose trace one would like to keep alive—is also the very desire that what does not happen should happen, and is thus a "story" in which the event already crosses within itself the archive of the "real" and the archive of "fiction." Already we'd have trouble not spotting but separating out historical narrative, literary fiction, and philosophical reflexion.

So there was a movement of nostalgic, mournful lyricism to reserve, perhaps encode, in short to render both *accessible and inaccessible*. And deep down this is still my most naive desire. I don't dream of either a literary work, or a philosophical work, but that everything that occurs, happens to me or fails to, should be as it were *sealed* (placed in reserve, hidden so as to be kept, and this in its very signature, really like a signature, in the very form of the seal, with all the paradoxes that traverse the structure of a seal). The discursive forms we have available to us, the resources in terms of objectivizing archivation, are so much poorer than what happens (or fails to happen, whence the excesses of hyper-totalization). This desire for *everything + n*—naturally I can analyze it, "deconstruct" it, criticize it, but it is an experience I love, that I know and recognize. In the moment of narcissistic adolescence and "autobiographical" dream I'm referring to now ("Who am I? Who is me? What's happening?," etc.), the first texts I got interested in had that in them: Rousseau, Gide, or Nietzsche—texts which were neither simply literary, nor philosophical, but confessions, the *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire*, the *Confessions*, Gide's *Journal*, *La porte étroite*, *Les nourritures terrestres*, *L'immoraliste*, and at the same time Nietzsche, the philosopher who speaks in the first person while all the time multiplying proper names, masks and signatures. As soon as things become a little sedimented, the fact of not giving anything up, not even the things one deprives oneself of,

through an interminable "internal" polylogue (supposing that a polylogue can still be "internal") is also not giving up the "culture" which carries these voices. At which point the encyclopedic temptation becomes inseparable from the autobiographical. And philosophical discourse is often only an economic or strategic formalization of this avidity.

All the same, this motif of *totality* circulates here in a singular way between literature and philosophy. In the naive adolescent notebooks or diaries I'm referring to from memory, the obsession with the *proteiform* motivates the interest for literature to the extent that literature seemed to me, in a confused way, to be the institution which allows one to *say everything*,<sup>1</sup> in *every way*. The space of literature is not only that of an instituted *fiction* but also a *fictive institution* which in principle allows one to say everything. To say everything is no doubt to gather, by translating, all figures into one another, to totalize by formalizing, but to say everything is also to break out of [*franchir*] prohibitions. To *affranchise oneself* [*s'affranchir*]<sup>1</sup>—in every field where law can lay down the law. The law of literature tends, in principle, to defy or lift the law. It therefore allows one to think the essence of the law in the experience of this "everything to say." It is an institution which tends to overflow the institution.

For a serious answer to your question, an analysis of my time at school would also be necessary, and of the family in which I was born, of its relation or non-relation with books, etc. In any case, at the moment when I was beginning to discover this strange institution called literature, the question "What is literature?" imposed itself upon me in its most naive form. Only a little later, this was to be the title of one of the first texts by Sartre I think I read after *La nausée* (which had made a strong impression on me, no doubt provoking some mimetic movements in me; briefly, here was a literary fiction grounded on a philosophical "emotion," the feeling of existence as excess, "being-superfluous," the very beyond of meaning giving rise to writing). Bewilderment, then, faced with this institution or type of object which allows

1. TN *Tout dire*, both to "say everything," with a sense of exhausting a totality, and to "say anything," i.e., to speak without constraints on what one may say.

one to say everything. What is it? What "remains" when desire has just inscribed something which "remains" there, like an object at the disposal of others, one that can be repeated? What does "remaining" mean? This question subsequently took on forms which were perhaps a little more elaborated, but ever since the beginning of adolescence, when I was keeping these notebooks, I was absolutely bewildered at the possibility of consigning things to paper. The philosophical becoming of these questions goes by way of the content of the texts of the culture I was entering—when one reads Rousseau or Nietzsche, one has a certain access to philosophy—just as much as through naive or marveling bewilderment at remains as a written thing.

Subsequently, philosophical training, the profession, the position of teacher were also a detour to come back to this question: "What is writing in general?" and, in the space of writing in general, to this other question which is more and other than a simple particular case: "What is literature?"; literature as historical institution with its conventions, rules, etc., but also this institution of fiction which gives *in principle* the power to say everything, to break free of the rules, to displace them, and thereby to institute, to invent and even to suspect the traditional difference between nature and institution, nature and conventional law, nature and history. Here we should ask juridical and political questions. The institution of literature in the West, in its relatively modern form, is linked to an authorization to say everything, and doubtless too to the coming about of the modern idea of democracy. Not that it depends on a democracy in place, but it seems inseparable to me from what calls forth a democracy, in the most open (and doubtless itself to come) sense of democracy.

D.A. Could you elaborate on your view of literature as "this strange institution which allows one to say everything"?

J.D. Let's make this clear. What we call literature (not belles-lettres or poetry) implies that license is given to the writer to say everything he wants to or everything he can, while remaining shielded, safe from all censorship, be it religious or political. When Khomeini called for the murder of Rushdie, it happened that I put my signature to a text—

without approving all its formulations to the letter — which said that literature has a “critical function.” I am not sure that “critical function” is the right word. First of all, it would limit literature by fixing a mission for it, a single mission. This would be to finalize literature, to assign it a meaning, a program and a regulating ideal, whereas it could also have other essential functions, or even have no function, no usefulness outside itself. And by the same token it can help to think or delimit what “meaning,” “regulating ideal,” “program,” “function,” and “critical” might mean. But above all, the reference to a critical function of literature belongs to a language which makes no sense outside what in the West links politics, censorship, and the lifting of censorship to the origin and institution of literature. In the end, the critico-political function of literature, in the West, remains very ambiguous. The freedom to say everything is a very powerful political weapon, but one which might immediately let itself be neutralized as a fiction. This revolutionary power can become very conservative. The writer can just as well be held to be irresponsible. He can, I’d even say that he must sometimes demand a certain irresponsibility, at least as regards ideological powers, of a Zhdanovian type for example, which try to call him back to extremely determinate responsibilities before socio-political or ideological bodies. This duty of irresponsibility, of refusing to reply for one’s thought or writing to constituted powers, is perhaps the highest form of responsibility. To whom, to what? [That’s the whole question of the future or the event promised by or to such an experience, what I was just calling the democracy to come. Not the democracy of tomorrow, not a future democracy which will be present tomorrow but one whose concept is linked to the to-come [*à-venir*, cf. *avenir*, future], to the experience of a promise engaged, that is always an endless promise.]

As an adolescent, I no doubt had the feeling that I was living in conditions where it was both difficult and therefore necessary, urgent, to say things that were not allowed, in any case to be interested in those situations in which writers say things which are not allowed. For me, Algeria in the forties (Vichy, official anti-semitism, the Allied landing at the end of 1942, the terrible colonial repression of Algerian resistance in 1945 at the time of the first serious outbursts heralding

the Algerian war) was not only or primarily my family situation, but it is true that my interest in literature, diaries, journals in general, also signified a typical, stereotypical revolt against the family. My passion for Nietzsche, Rousseau, and also Gide, whom I read a lot at that time, meant among other things: “Families, I hate you.” I thought of literature as the end of the family, and of the society it represented, even if that family was also, on the other hand, persecuted. Racism was everywhere in Algeria at that time, it was running wild in all directions. Being Jewish and a victim of anti-semitism didn’t spare one the anti-Arab racism I felt everywhere around me, in manifest or latent form. Literature, or a certain promise of “being able to say everything,” was in any case the outline of what was calling me or signaling to me in the situation I was living in at that time, familial and social. But it was no doubt much more complicated and overdetermined than thinking and saying it in a few words makes it now. At the same time, I believe that very rapidly literature was also the experience of a dissatisfaction or a lack, an impatience. If the philosophical question seemed at least as necessary to me, this is perhaps because I had a presentiment that there could sometimes be an innocence or irresponsibility, or even an impotence, in literature. Not only can one say everything in literature without there being any consequences, I thought, no doubt naively, but at bottom the writer as such does not ask the question of the essence of literature. Perhaps against the backdrop of an impotence or inhibition faced with a literary writing I desired but always placed higher up than and further away from myself, I quickly got interested in either a form of literature which bore a question about literature, or else a philosophical type of activity which interrogated the relationship between speech and writing. Philosophy also seemed more political, let’s say, more capable of posing politically the question of literature with the political seriousness and consequentiality it requires.

I was interested by the possibility of fiction, by fictionality, but I must confess that deep down I have probably never drawn great enjoyment from fiction, from reading novels, for example, beyond the pleasure taken in analyzing the play of writing, or else certain naive movements of identification. I like a certain practice of fiction, the intrusion of an effective simulacrum or of disorder into philosophical writing,

for example, but telling or inventing stories is something that deep down (or rather on the surface!) does not interest me particularly. I'm well aware that this involves an immense forbidden desire, an irrepressible need—but one forbidden, inhibited, repressed—to tell stories, to hear stories told, to invent (language and in language), but one which would refuse to show itself so long as it has not cleared a space or organized a dwelling-place suited to the animal which is still curled up in its hole half asleep.

D.A. You have just made a distinction between "literature" and "belles-lettres" or "poetry"; and it is a distinction that comes up elsewhere in your work (in "Before the Law," for instance). Could you be more precise about the difference that is being assumed here?

J.D. The two possibilities are not entirely distinct. I'm referring here to the historical possibility for poetry, epic, lyric or other, not only to remain oral, but not to give rise to what has been called literature. The name "literature" is a very recent invention. Previously, writing was not indispensable for poetry or belles-lettres, nor authorial property, nor individual signatures. This is an enormous problem, difficult to get into here. The set of laws or conventions which fixed what we call literature in modernity was not indispensable for poetic works to circulate. Greek or Latin poetry, non-European discursive works, do not, it seems to me, strictly speaking belong to literature. One can say that without reducing at all the respect or the admiration they are due. If the institutional or socio-political space of literary production as such is a recent thing, it does not simply surround works, it affects them in their very structure. I'm not prepared to improvise anything very serious about this—but I do remember having used some seminars at Yale (around 1979–80) to look at the appearance of this word "literature" and the changes which accompanied it. The principle (I stress that it's a *principle*) of "being able to say everything," the socio-juridico-politico guarantee granted "in principle" to literature, is something which did not mean much, or not that, in Graeco-Latin culture and *a fortiori* in a non-Western culture. Which does not mean that the

West has ever respected this principle: but at least here or there it has set it up as a principle.

Having said that, even if a phenomenon called "literature" appeared historically in Europe, at such and such a date, this does not mean that one can identify the literary object in a rigorous way. It doesn't mean that there is an essence of literature. It even means the opposite.

D.A. Turning to the literary texts you have written on, it is notable that they form a more homogeneous group than the philosophical texts (still using these categories in a highly conventional way): mostly twentieth-century, and mostly modernist, or at least nontraditional (many would say "difficult") in their use of language and literary conventions: Blanchot, Ponge, Celan, Joyce, Artaud, Jabès, Kafka. What has led you to make this choice? Was it a necessary choice in terms of the trajectory of your work?

J.D. In what way would the literary texts I write *about, with, toward, for* (what should one say? this is a serious question), *in the name of, in honor of, against*, perhaps too, *on the way toward*—in what way do they form, as you put it, a more homogeneous group? On the one hand, I almost always write in response to solicitations or provocations. These have more often concerned contemporaries, whether it be Mallarmé, Joyce or Celan, Bataille, Artaud, or Blanchot. But this explanation remains unsatisfactory (there were Rousseau and Flaubert too), the more so as my response to such expectations is not always docile. These "twentieth-century modernist, or at least nontraditional texts" all have in common that they are inscribed in a *critical* experience of literature. They bear within themselves, or we could also say in their literary act they put to work, a question, the same one, but each time singular and put to work otherwise: "What is literature?" or "Where does literature come from?" "What should we do with literature?" These texts operate a sort of turning back, they *are* themselves a sort of turning back on the literary institution. Not that they are only reflexive, specular or speculative, not that they suspend reference to something else, as is so often suggested by stupid and uninformed rumor. And the force of their event depends on the fact that a thinking

about their own possibility (both general and singular) is put to work in them in a *singular* work. Given what I was saying just now, I'm brought more easily toward texts which are very sensitive to this crisis of the literary institution (which is more than, and other than, a crisis), to what is called "the end of literature," from Mallarmé to Blanchot, beyond the "absolute poem" that "there is not" ("das es nicht gibt"—Celan). But given the paradoxical structure of this thing called literature, its beginning is its end. It began with a certain relation to its own institutionality, i.e., its fragility, its absence of specificity, its absence of object. The question of its origin was immediately the question of its end. Its history is *constructed* like the ruin of a monument which basically never existed. It is the history of a ruin, the narrative of a memory which produces the event to be told and which will never have been present. Nothing could be more "historical," but this history can only be thought by changing things, in particular this thesis or hypothesis of the present—which means several other things as well, doesn't it? There is nothing more "revolutionary" than this history, but the "revolution" will also have to be changed. Which is perhaps what is happening...

Those texts were all texts which in their various ways were no longer simply, or no longer only, literary. But as to the disquieting questions about literature, they do not only pose them, they do not only give them a theoretical, philosophical, or sociological form, as is the case with Sartre, for example. Their questioning is also linked to the act of a literary performativity and a critical performativity (or even a performativity in crisis). And in them are brought together the two youthful worries or desires I was talking about a moment ago: to write so as to put into play or to keep the singularity of the date (what does not return, what is not repeated, promised experience of memory as promise, experience of ruin or ashes); and at the same time, through the same gesture, to question, analyze, transform this strange contradiction, this institutionless institution.

What is fascinating is perhaps the event of a singularity powerful enough to formalize the questions and theoretical laws concerning it. No doubt we shall have to come back to this word *power*. The "power" that language is capable of, the power that *there is*, as language or as

writing, is that a singular mark should also be repeatable, iterable, as mark. It then begins to differ from itself sufficiently to become exemplary and thus involve a certain generality. This economy of exemplary iterability is of itself formalizing. It also formalizes or condenses history. A text by Joyce is simultaneously the condensation of a scarcely delimitable history. But this condensation of history, of language, of the encyclopedia, remains here indissociable from an *absolutely* singular event, an *absolutely* singular signature, and therefore also of a date, of a language, of an autobiographical inscription. In a minimal autobiographical trait can be gathered the greatest potentiality of historical, theoretical, linguistic, philosophical culture—that's really what interests me. I am not the only one to be interested by this economic power. I try to understand its laws but also to mark in what regard the formalization of these laws can never be closed or completed. Precisely because the trait, date, or signature—in short, the irreplaceable and untranslatable singularity of the unique—is iterable as such, it both does and does not form part of the marked set. To insist on this paradox is not an antiscientific gesture—quite the contrary. To resist this paradox in the name of so-called reason or of a logic of common sense is the very figure of a supposed enlightenment as the form of modern obscurantism.

All of which ought to lead us, among other things, to think about "context" in general in a different way. The "economy" of literature *sometimes* seems to me more powerful than that of other types of discourse: such as, for example, historical or philosophical discourse. *Sometimes*: it depends on singularities and contexts. Literature would be potentially more potent.

D.A. In *Of Grammatology* you observe that "with the exception of a point of advance or a point of resistance which has only very lately been recognized as such, literary writing has, almost always and almost everywhere, in accordance with very different fashions and across very different periods, lent itself to that *transcendent* reading, that search for the signified which we here put in question" (160, translation modified). That phrase "lent itself" [*s'est prêtée d'elle-même à*] suggests that although this mass of literature may invite such a transcendent

reading, it does not *oblige* it. Do you see possibilities for re-reading everything that goes under the name of literature in ways which would counter or subvert this dominant tradition? Or would this only be possible for *some* literary texts, as is suggested by your reference in *Positions* to "a certain 'literary' practice" which was able, prior to modernism, to operate against the dominant model of literature?

J.D. You say "lent itself." Does not every text, every discourse, of whatever type—literary, philosophical and scientific, journalistic, conversational—lend itself, every time, to this reading? Depending on the types of discourse I've just named—but there would be others—the form of this lending itself is different. It would have to be analyzed in a way specific to each case. Conversely, in none of these cases is one simply obliged to go in for this reading. Literature has no pure originality in this regard. A philosophical, or journalistic, or scientific discourse, can be read in "nontranscendent" fashion. "Transcend" here means going beyond interest for the signifier, the form, the language (note that I do not say "text") in the direction of the meaning or referent (this is Sartre's rather simple but convenient definition of prose). One can do a nontranscendent reading of any text whatever. Moreover, there is no text which is literary *in itself*. Literarity is not a natural essence, an intrinsic property of the text. It is the correlative of an intentional relation to the text, an intentional relation which integrates in itself, as a component or an intentional layer, the more or less implicit consciousness of rules which are conventional or institutional—social, in any case. Of course, this does not mean that literarity is merely projective or subjective—in the sense of the empirical subjectivity or caprice of each reader. The literary character of the text is inscribed on the side of the intentional object, in its *noematic structure*, one could say, and not only on the subjective side of the *noetic act*. There are "in" the text features which call for the literary reading and recall the convention, institution, or history of literature. This *noematic structure* is included (as "nonreal," in Husserl's terms) in subjectivity, but a subjectivity which is non-empirical and linked to an intersubjective and transcendental community. I believe this phenomenological-type language to be necessary, even if at a certain point it must yield

to what, in the situation of writing or reading, and in particular literary writing or reading, puts phenomenology in crisis as well as the very concept of institution or convention (but this would take us too far). Without suspending the transcendent reading, but by changing one's attitude with regard to the text, one can always reinscribe in a literary space any statement—a newspaper article, a scientific theorem, a snatch of conversation. There is therefore a literary *functioning* and a literary *intentionality*, an experience rather than an essence of literature (natural or ahistorical). The essence of literature, if we hold to this word essence, is produced as a set of objective rules in an original history of the "acts" of inscription and reading.

But it is not enough to suspend the transcendent reading to be dealing with literature, to read a text as a literary text. One can interest oneself in the functioning of language, in all sorts of structures of inscription, suspend not reference (that's impossible) but the *thetic* relation to meaning or referent, without for all that constituting the object as a literary object. Whence the difficulty of grasping what makes for the specificity of literary intentionality. In any case, a text cannot by itself avoid lending itself to a "transcendent" reading. A literature which forbade that transcendence would annul itself. This moment of "transcendence" is irrepressible, but it can be complicated or folded; and it is in this play of foldings that is inscribed the difference between literatures, between the literary and the non-literary, between the different textual types or moments of non-literary texts. Rather than periodize hastily, rather than say, for example, that a modern literature resists more this transcendent reading, one must cross typology with history. There are types of text, moments in a text, which resist this transcendent reading more than others, and this is true not only for literature in the modern sense. In preliterary poetry or epic (in the *Odyssey* as much as in *Ulysses*), this reference and this irreducible intentionality can also suspend "thetic" and naive belief in meaning or referent.

Even if they always do so unequally and differently, poetry and literature have as a common feature that they suspend the "thetic" naivety of the transcendent reading. This also accounts for the philosophical force of these experiences, a force of provocation to think

phenomenality, meaning, object, even being as such, a force which is at least potential, a philosophical *dynamis*— which can, however, be developed only in response, in the experience of reading, because it is not hidden in the text like a substance. Poetry and literature provide or facilitate “phenomenological” access to what makes of a thesis a *thesis as such*. Before having a philosophical content, before being or bearing such and such a “thesis,” literary experience, writing or reading, is a “philosophical” experience which is neutralized or neutralizing insofar as it allows one to think the thesis; it is a nonthetic experience of the thesis, of belief, of position, of naivety, of what Husserl called the “natural attitude.” The phenomenological conversion of the gaze, the “transcendental reduction” he recommended is perhaps the very condition (I do not say the natural condition) of literature. But it is true that, taking this proposition to its limit, I’d be tempted to say (as I have said elsewhere) that the phenomenological language in which I’m presenting these things ends up being dislodged from its certainties (self-presence of absolute transcendental consciousness or of the indubitable *cogito*, etc.), and dislodged precisely by the extreme experience of literature, or even quite simply of fiction and language.

You also ask, “Do you see possibilities for re-reading everything that goes under the name of literature in ways that would counter or subvert this dominant tradition? Or would this only be possible for *some* literary texts . . . ?”

Another “economistic” reply: one can always inscribe in literature something which was not originally destined to be literary, given the conventional and intentional space which institutes and thus constitutes the text. Convention and intentionality can change; they always induce a certain historical instability. But if one can re-read everything as literature, some textual events lend themselves to this better than others, their potentialities are richer and denser. Whence the economic point of view. This wealth itself does not give rise to an absolute evaluation—absolutely stabilized, objective, and natural. Whence the difficulty of theorizing this economy. Even given that some texts appear to have a greater potential for formalization, literary works *and* works which say a lot about literature and therefore about themselves, works whose performativity, in some sense, appears the greatest possible in

the smallest possible space, this can give rise only to evaluations inscribed in a context, to positioned readings which are themselves formalizing and performative. Potentiality is not hidden in the text like an intrinsic property.

D.A. For certain literary theorists and critics who associate themselves with deconstruction, a text is “literary” or “poetic” when it resists a transcendental reading of the sort we have been discussing...

J.D. I believe no text resists it absolutely. Absolute resistance to such a reading would purely and simply destroy the trace of the text. I’d say rather that a text is poetico-literary when, through a sort of original negotiation, without annulling either meaning or reference, it does something with this resistance, something that we’d have a lot of trouble defining for the reasons I was mentioning earlier. For such a definition would require not only that we take into account multiple, subtle and stratified conventional and intentional modifications, but also at a certain point the questioning of the values of intention and convention which, with the textuality of the text in general and literature in particular, are put to the test of their limits. If every literary text plays and negotiates the suspension of referential naivety, of *thetic* referentiality (not reference or the intentional relation in general), each text does so differently, singularly. If there is no essence of literature—i.e., self-identity of the literary thing—if what is announced or promised as literature never gives itself as such, that means, among other things, that a literature that talked only about literature or a work that was purely self-referential would immediately be annulled. You’ll say that that’s maybe what’s happening. In which case it is this experience of the nothing-ing of nothing that interests our desire under the name of literature. Experience of Being, nothing less, nothing more, on the edge of metaphysics, literature perhaps stands on the edge of everything, almost beyond everything, including itself. It’s the most interesting thing in the world, maybe more interesting than the world, and this is why, if it has no definition, what is heralded and refused under the name of literature cannot be identified with any other discourse. It will never be scientific, philosophical, conversational.



But if it did not open onto all these discourses, if it did not open onto any of those discourses, it would not be literature either. There is no literature without a *suspended* relation to meaning and reference. *Suspended* means *suspense*, but also *dependence*, condition, conditionality. In its suspended condition, literature can only exceed itself. No doubt all language refers to something other than itself or to language as something other. One must not play around with this difficulty. What is the specific difference of literary language in this respect? Does its originality consist in stopping, arresting attention on this excess of language over language? In exhibiting, re-marking, giving to be re-marked this excess of language as literature, i.e., an institution which cannot identify itself because it is always in relationship, the relationship with the nonliterary? No: for it shows nothing without dissimulating *what* it shows and *that* it shows it. You'll say that that too is true of all language and that we're reproducing here a statement whose generality can be read, for example, in texts of Heidegger's which do not concern literature but the very being of language in its relation with truth. It is true that Heidegger puts thought and poetry *in parallel* (one beside the other). By the same token, we still *have trouble* defining the question of literature, dissociating it from the question of truth, from the essence of language, from essence itself. Literature "is" the place or experience of this "trouble" we also have with the essence of language, with truth and with essence, the language of essence in general. If the question of literature obsesses us, and especially this century, or even this half-century since the war, and obsesses us in its Sartrian form ("What is literature?") or the more "formalist" but just as essentialist form of "literarity," this is perhaps not because we expect an answer of the type "S is P," "the essence of literature is this or that," but rather because in this century the experience of literature crosses all the "deconstructive" seisms shaking the authority and the pertinence of the question "What is . . . ?" and all the associated regimes of essence or truth. In any case, to come back to your first question, it is in this "place" so difficult to situate that my interest in literature crosses my interest in philosophy or metaphysics—and can finally come to rest neither with the one nor the other.

D.A. Could you be more explicit about the ways in which you see the Western tradition of literature and of reading literature as dominated by metaphysical assumptions? You refer in *Positions* to "the necessity of formal and syntactic work" to counter such misconstruings of literature as "thematism, sociology, historicism, psychologism," but you also warn against a formal reduction of the work. Is it necessary to make a distinction between literature and literary criticism here? Have any kinds of criticism or commentary escaped such reductions in your view?

J.D.: "Metaphysical assumptions" can inhabit literature or reading (you say "reading literature") in a number of ways which should be very carefully distinguished. They aren't faults, errors, sins or accidents that could be avoided. Across so many very necessary programs—language, grammar, culture in general—the recurrence of such "assumptions" is so structural that it couldn't be a question of eliminating them. In the content of literary texts, there are always philosophical theses. The semantics and the thematics of a literary text carry, "assume"—in the English or in the French sense of the word—some metaphysics. This content itself can be stratified, it occurs via themes, voices, forms, different genres. But, to pick up again the deliberately equivocal expression I just used, literature's *being-suspended* neutralizes the "assumption" which it carries; it has this capacity, even if the consciousness of the writer, interpreter or reader (and everyone plays all these roles in some way) can never render this capacity completely effective and present. First of all, because this capacity is double, equivocal, contradictory, *hanging on* and *hanging between*, *dependent* and *independent*, an "assumption" both assumed and suspended. The terribly equivocal word *fiction* (which is sometimes misused as though it were coextensive with literature) says something about this situation. Not all literature is of the genre or the type of "fiction," but there is fictionality in all literature. We should find a word other than "fiction." And it is through this fictionality that we try to thematize the "essence" or the "truth" of "language."

Although I did not always, or in every respect, agree with him on

this point, Paul de Man was not wrong in suggesting that ultimately all literary rhetoric in general is of itself deconstructive, practicing what you might call a sort of irony, an irony of detachment with regard to metaphysical belief or thesis, even when it apparently puts it forward. No doubt this should be made more complex, "irony" is perhaps not the best category to designate this "suspension," this *epoché*, but there is here, certainly, something irreducible in poetic or literary experience. Without being ahistorical, far from it, this trait, or rather *retrait*, would far exceed the periodizations of "literary history," or of the history of poetry or belles-lettres, from Homer to Joyce, before Homer and after Joyce.

Inside this immense space, many distinctions remain necessary. Some texts called "literary" "question" (let us not say "critique" or "deconstruct") philosophy in a sharper, or more thematic, or better informed way than others. Sometimes this questioning occurs more effectively via the actual practice of writing, the staging, the composition, the treatment of language, rhetoric, than via speculative arguments. Sometimes theoretical arguments as such, even if they are in the form of critique, are less "destabilizing," or let's just say less alarming, for "metaphysical assumptions" than one or other "way of writing." A work laden with obvious and canonical "metaphysical" theses can, in the operation of its writing, have more powerful "deconstructive" effects than a text proclaiming itself radically revolutionary without in any way affecting the norms or modes of traditional writing. For instance, some works which are highly "phallogocentric" in their semantics, their intended meaning, even their theses, can produce paradoxical effects, paradoxically antiphalllogocentric through the audacity of a writing which in fact disturbs the order or the logic of phallogocentrism or touches on limits where things are reversed: in that case the fragility, the precariousness, even the ruin of order is more apparent. I am thinking here as much of the example of Joyce as of that of Ponge. The same thing goes from a political point of view. The experience, the passion of language and writing (I'm speaking here just as much of body, desire, ordeal), can cut across discourses which are thematically "reactionary" or "conservative" and confer upon them a power of provocation, transgression or destabilization greater than that of so-

called "revolutionary" texts (whether of the right or of the left) which advance peacefully in neo-academic or neoclassical forms. Here too I'm thinking of a large number of works of this century whose political message and themes would be legitimately situated "on the right" and whose work of writing and thought can no longer be so easily classified, either in itself or in its effects.

Our task is perhaps to wonder why it is that so many of this century's strong works and systems of thought have been the site of philosophical, ideological, political "messages" that are at times conservative (Joyce), at times brutally and diabolically murderous, racist, anti-semitic (Pound, Céline), at times equivocal and unstable (Artaud, Bataille). The histories of Blanchot or Heidegger, that of Paul de Man too, are even more complicated, more heterogeneous in themselves and so different from each other that this mere association might risk encouraging into confusion some of those who are multiplying ineptitudes on this matter. The list, alas, would be a long one. In the matter of equivocation, heterogeneity or instability, analysis by definition escapes all closure and all exhaustive formalization.

What goes for "literary production" also goes for "the reading of literature." The performativity we have just been talking about calls for the same responsibility on the part of the readers. A reader is not a consumer, a spectator, a visitor, not even a "receiver." So we find once more the same paradoxes and the same stratifications. A critique presenting itself with "deconstructionist" proclamations, theses or theorems can practice, if I may put it this way, the most conventional of readings. And reciprocally. And between the two extremes, right inside each reading, signed by one and the same person, a certain inequality and even a certain heterogeneity remains irreducible.

Your question also refers to "the necessity of formal and syntactic work," as opposed to "thematism," "sociologism," "historicism," "psychologism," but also to the warning against formalist reduction. If I have thought it necessary to make apparently contradictory gestures in this matter, it is because this series of oppositions (form/content, syntax/semantics or thematics) seems to me, as I have often noted, especially in "The Double Session," incapable of getting the measure of what happens in the event and in the signature of a text. It is always

this series of oppositions which governs the debates with the socio-psycho-historicist reductions of literature, by alternating the two types of hegemony.

This leads me to the last part of your question: "Is it necessary to make a distinction between literature and literary criticism here?" I'm not sure. What has just been said can have to do with both of them. I don't feel at ease either with a rigorous distinction between "literature" and "literary criticism" or with a confusion of the two. What would the rigorous limit between them be? "Good" literary criticism, the only worthwhile kind, implies an act, a literary signature or counter-signature, an inventive experience of language, *in* language, an inscription of the act of reading in the field of the text that is read. This text never lets itself be completely "objectified." Yet I would not say that we can mix everything up and give up the distinctions between all these types of "literary" or "critical" production (for there is also a "critical" instance at work *in* what is called the literary work). So it is necessary to determine or delimit another space where we justify relevant distinctions between certain forms of literature and certain forms of... I don't know what name to give it, that's the problem, we must invent one for those "critical" inventions which belong to literature while deforming its limits. At any rate I wouldn't distinguish between "literature" and "literary criticism," but I wouldn't assimilate all forms of writing or reading. These new distinctions ought to give up on the purity and linearity of frontiers. They should have a form that is both rigorous and capable of taking account of the essential possibility of contamination between all these oppositions, those we encountered above and, here, the one between literature and criticism or reading or literary interpretation.

D.A.: To pursue this question a little further, would you say that the tradition of literary criticism has shown itself to be as governed by metaphysical presuppositions as philosophy, and more so than the literary texts it treats of?

J.D.: To give too sweeping a reply, I would say yes. Simply, a work of literary criticism is not, any more than a philosophical discourse,

simply "governed by metaphysical assumptions." Nothing is ever homogeneous. Even among the philosophers associated with the most canonical tradition, the possibilities of rupture are always waiting to be effected. It can always be shown (I have tried to do so, for example, in relation to the *chōra* of the *Timaeus*)<sup>2</sup> that the most radically deconstructive motifs are at work "in" what is called the Platonic, Cartesian, Kantian text. A text is never totally governed by "metaphysical assumptions." So the same will be true for literary criticism. In "each case" (and the identification of the "case," of singularity, of the signature or corpus is already a problem) there is a domination, a dominant, of the metaphysical model, and then there are counter-forces which threaten or undermine this authority. These forces of "ruin" are not negative, they participate in the productive or instituting force of the very thing they seem to be tormenting. There are hierarchies, there are relations of force: as much in literary criticism, moreover, as in philosophy. They aren't the same ones. The fact that literary criticism is dealing with texts declared "literary," and of which we were saying just now that they suspend the metaphysical thesis, must have effects on criticism. It is difficult to speak *in general* of "literary criticism." As such, in other words as an institution, installed at the same time as the modern European universities, from the beginning of the nineteenth century, thereabouts, I think it must have tended, precisely because it wanted to be theoretical, to be more philosophical than literature itself. From this point of view, it is perhaps more metaphysical than the literary texts it speaks about. But it would be necessary to look at this for each case. In general literary criticism is very philosophical in its form, even if the professionals in the matter haven't been trained as philosophers, or if they declare their suspicion of philosophy. Literary criticism is perhaps structurally philosophical. What I am saying here is not necessarily a compliment — for those very reasons that we are talking about.

D.A.: Do you also see the demonstration of literature's historical solidarity with the metaphysical tradition as an important task to be

2. EN Jacques Derrida, "Chōra."

undertaken by literary critics? Would you in any way wish to question—in a critical sense—the enjoyment which most readers have obtained, and still obtain, from literature of this kind, and from the criticism that promotes it? Is literature, understood and taught in this way, as logocentric and metaphysical, complicit with a particular ethics and politics, historically and at present?

J.D. Let me first quote your question: “Do you also see the demonstration of literature’s historical solidarity with the metaphysical tradition as an important task to be undertaken by literary critics?” By “demonstration” you are perhaps hinting at deconstruction: demonstration of a link which must be, if not denounced, at least questioned, deconstituted, and displaced. In any case, I think we should demonstrate this solidarity, or at any rate become aware of the link between literature, a history of literature, and the metaphysical tradition—even if this link is complicated for the reasons given just now.

Contrary to what some people believe or have an interest in making believe, I consider myself very much a historian, very historicist—from this point of view. We must constantly recall this historical solidarity and the way in which it is put together. Deconstruction calls for a highly “historian’s” attitude (*Of Grammatology*, for example, is a history book through and through), even if we should also be suspicious of the metaphysical concept of history. It is everywhere.

So this “historical solidarity” of literature and the history or tradition of metaphysics must be constantly recalled, even if the differences, the distances must be pointed out, as we were just doing. Having said that, this task, “an important task” as you correctly say, is not only for literary critics, it’s also a task for the writer; not necessarily a duty, in the moral or political sense, but in my opinion a task inherent in the experience of reading or writing. “There must be” this historicity, which doesn’t mean that all reading or all writing is historicized, “historian’s,” still less “historicist.” We shall no doubt come back to this problem later on.

There is a sort of paradoxical historicity in the experience of writing. The writer can be ignorant or naive in relation to the historical tradition which bears him or her, or which s/he transforms, invents, displaces.

But I wonder whether, even in the absence of historical awareness or knowledge s/he doesn’t “treat” history in the course of an experience which is more significant, more alive, more *necessary* in a word, than that of some professional “historians” naively concerned to “objectify” the content of a science.

Even if that isn’t a moral or political duty (but it can also become one), this experience of writing is “subject” to an imperative: to give space for singular events, to invent something new in the form of acts of writing which no longer consist in a theoretical knowledge, in new constative statements, to give oneself to a poético-literary performativity at least analogous to that of promises, orders, or acts of constitution or legislation which do not only change language, or which, in changing language, change more than language. It is always more interesting than to repeat. In order for this singular performativity to be effective, for something new to be produced, historical competence is not indispensable in a certain form (that of a certain academic kind of knowledge, for example, on the subject of literary history), but it increases the chances. In his or her experience of writing as such, if not in a research activity, a writer cannot not be concerned, interested, anxious about the past, that of literature, history, or philosophy, of culture in general. S/he cannot not take account of it in some way and not consider her- or himself a responsible heir, inscribed in a genealogy, whatever the ruptures or denials on this subject may be. And the sharper the rupture is, the more vital the genealogical responsibility. Account cannot not be taken, whether one wish it or not, of the past. Once again, this historicity or this historical responsibility is not necessarily linked to awareness, knowledge, or even the themes of history. What I have just suggested is as valid for Joyce, that immense allegory of historical memory, as for Faulkner, who doesn’t write in such a way that he gathers together at every sentence, and in several languages at once, the whole of Western culture.

Perhaps this should be linked to your question on “enjoyment”? I don’t know if this word can be translated by *plaisir* or *jouissance* (that word which is so difficult to translate into English). The experience of “deconstruction,” of “deconstructive” questioning, reading, or writing, in no way threatens or casts suspicion on “enjoyment.” I believe

rather the opposite. Every time there is "*jouissance*" (but the "there is" of this event is in itself extremely enigmatic), there is "deconstruction." Effective deconstruction. Deconstruction perhaps has the effect, if not the mission, of liberating forbidden *jouissance*. That's what has to be taken on board. It is perhaps this *jouissance* which most irritates the all-out adversaries of "deconstruction." Who, moreover, blame those they call the "deconstructionists" for depriving them of their habitual delectation in the reading of the great works or the rich treasures of tradition, and simultaneously for being too playful, for taking too much pleasure, for saying what they like for their own pleasure, etc. An interesting and symptomatic contradiction. These masters of "kettle logic" understand in some obscure way that the "deconstructionists," to use that ridiculous vocabulary, are not those who most deprive themselves of pleasure. Which is sometimes hard to put up with.

Of course the question of pleasure, of the pleasure principle and its beyond, is not simple, above all in literature, and we cannot deal with it here. But if I may be a bit abrupt and aphoristic, collapsing the separate psychoanalytic stages and referring back to what I try to demonstrate about it in *The Post Card*, let's say that there is no efficient deconstruction without the greatest possible pleasure. It's possible—in a provisional way and for convenience, to save time—to present these paradoxes in terms of repression and the lifting of repression. In these terms, literature would lift repression: to a certain extent at least, in its own way, never totally, and according to rule-governed scenarios, but always in the process of modifying their rules in what we call the history of literature. This lifting or simulacrum of a lifting of repression, a simulacrum which is never neutral and without efficacy, perhaps hangs on this being-suspended, this *epoché* of the thesis or "metaphysical assumption" which we were talking about just now. That can procure a subtle and intense pleasure. It can be produced without literature, "in life," in life without literature, but literature is also "in life" in its way, in "real life," as people calmly say who think they can distinguish between the "real life" and the other one. Pleasure is linked to the game which is played at this limit, to what is suspended at this limit. It is also linked to all the paradoxes of the simulacrum and even of mimesis. For if "deconstruction," to use this word again for

shorthand, can dismantle a certain interpretation of mimesis—what I have called a mimetologism, a mimesis reduced to imitation—the "logic" of *mimēsthai* is undeconstructible or rather deconstructible as deconstruction "itself." Which is at once identification and disidentification, experience of the double, thought about iterability, etc. Like literature, like pleasure, like so many other things. The pleasure taken in mimesis is not necessarily naive. The things in play in mimesis are very cunning. And even if there is some naïveté, and irreducible naïveté, to deconstruct does not consist in denouncing or dissolving naïveté, in the hope of escaping from it completely: it would rather be a *certain* way of resigning oneself to it and taking account of it.

So: no deconstruction without pleasure and no pleasure without deconstruction. "It is necessary," if one wants to or can, to resign oneself to it or take it from there. But I give up on proceeding further while improvising. We lack the time or the space.

D.A.: The kind of historical re-reading I referred to in my previous question is perhaps most advanced in some feminist criticism, which takes as its goal the demonstration of the phallogocentric assumptions of literary texts over a long period, as well as of commentaries on those texts. Does this work overlap with your own? To what extent does "literature" name the possibility of texts' being read in ways that put phallogocentrism—along with logocentrism—in question?

J.D.: Another very difficult question. It's true, isn't it, that "feminist" literary criticism, as such, as an identifiable institutional phenomenon, is contemporary with the appearance of what is called deconstruction in the modern sense? The latter deconstructs first of all and essentially what announces itself in the figure of what I have proposed to call phallogocentrism, to underline a certain indissociability between phallogocentrism and logocentrism. It was after the war—and even well after a period whose dates and limit could be marked by Simone de Beauvoir—that "feminist criticism" was developed as such. Not before the sixties, and even, if I'm not mistaken, as far as the most visible and organized demonstrations are concerned, not before the end of the sixties. To appear at the same time as the theme of deconstruction, as

deconstruction of phallogocentrism, does not necessarily or always mean to depend on it, but at least to belong to the same configuration and participate in the same movement, the same motivation. Starting from that, the strategies can of course be different, be opposed here and there, and inequalities can appear.

But let's go back, if you don't mind, for a little detour, to what we were saying on the subject of literature in general: a place at once institutional and wild, an institutional place in which it is in principle permissible to put in question, at any rate to suspend, the whole institution. A counter-institutional institution can be both subversive and conservative. It can be conservative in that it is institutional, but it can also be conservative in that it is anti-institutional, in that it is "anarchist," and to the extent that a certain kind of anarchism can be conservative. Following this logic, if we come back to the question of what is called "feminist" literature or criticism, we risk finding the same paradoxes: sometimes the texts which are most phallogocentric or phallogocentric in their themes (in a certain way no text completely escapes this rubric) can also be, in some cases, the most deconstructive. And their authors can be, in statutory terms, men or women. There are sometimes more deconstructive resources—when you want or at least are able to make something of them in reading—and there is no text before and outside reading—in some texts by Joyce or Ponge, who are often phallogocentric or phallogocentric in appearance, than in some texts which, thematically, are theatrically "feminist" or "anti-phallogocentric," be they signed by the names of men or women.

Because of the literary dimension, what "phallogocentric" texts display is immediately suspended. When someone stages a hyperbolically phallogocentric discourse or mode of behavior, s/he does not subscribe to it by signing the work, s/he describes and, describing it as such, s/he exposes it, displays it. Whatever the assumed attitude of the author on the matter, the *effect* can be paradoxical and sometimes "deconstructive." But we shouldn't talk generally, there are no rules here such that each singular work would be merely a case or example of them, a sample. The logic of the work, especially in literature, is a "logic" of the signature, a paradoxology of the singular mark, and thus of the exceptional and the counter-example.

Texts like those by Nietzsche, Joyce, Ponge, Bataille, Artaud, violently phallogocentric in so many ways, produce deconstructive effects, and precisely against phallogocentrism, whose logic is always ready to reverse itself or subvert itself. Inversely, if I can put it that way, who will calmly believe that George Sand, George Eliot, or immensely great modern writers like Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein, or Hélène Cixous, write texts that are simply non- or anti-phallogocentric? Here I demand that one look, and closely, each time. There must be refinements, both around the concept or the law of "phallogocentrism" and in the possible plurality of readings of works that remain singular. At the moment we are in a slightly "crude" and heavy-handed phase of the question. In polemical argument, there is too much confidence in the assumed sexual identities of the signatories, in the very concept of sexual identity, things are dealt with too generally, as if a text were this or that, in a homogeneous way, for this or that, without taking account of what it is in the status or the very structure of a literary work—I would rather say in the paradoxes of its *economy*—which ought to discourage these simplistic notions.

Whether it is phallogocentric or not (and that is not so easy to decide), the more "powerful" a text is (but power is not a masculine attribute here and it is often the most disarming feebleness), the more it is written, the more it shakes up its own limits or lets them be thought, as well as the limits of phallogocentrism, of all authority and all "centrism," all hegemony in general. Taking account of these paradoxes, some of the most violent, most "reactionary," most odious or diabolical texts keep, in my view, an interest which I will never give up, in particular a political interest from which no intimidation, no dogmatism, no simplification should turn us away.

D.A.: Would you say, then, that a literary text which puts in question logocentrism does the same with regard to phallogocentrism, and does so in the same act and in the same measure?

J.D.: If I could answer in a word, I would say yes. If I had the time to formulate sentences, I would develop this suggestion: although phallogocentrism and logocentrism are indissociable, the stresses can lie

more here or there according to the case; the force and the trajectory of the mediations can be different. There are texts which are more immediately logocentric than phallogocentric, and vice versa. Some texts signed by women can be thematically anti-phallogocentric and powerfully logocentric. Here the distinctions should be refined. But in the last instance, a radical dissociation between the two motifs cannot be made in all rigor. Phallogocentrism is one single thing, even if it is an articulated thing which calls for different strategies. This is what is at issue in some debates, real or virtual, with militant feminists who do not understand that without a demanding reading of what articulates logocentrism and phallogocentrism, in other words without a consequential deconstruction, feminist discourse risks reproducing very crudely the very thing which it purports to be criticizing.

*D.A.:* Let me move on to some specific authors and texts. In an interview you once mentioned Samuel Beckett along with other writers whose texts "make the limits of our language tremble." As far as I'm aware, you've never written on Beckett: is this a future project, or are there reasons why you have observed this silence?

*J.D.:* Very rapidly. This is an author to whom I feel very close, or to whom I would like to feel myself very close; but also too close. Precisely because of this proximity, it is too hard for me, too easy and too hard. I have perhaps avoided him a bit because of this identification. Too hard also because he writes—in my language, in a language which is his up to a point, mine up to a point (for both of us it is a "differently" foreign language)—texts which are both too close to me and too distant for me even to be able to "respond" to them. How could I write in French in the wake of or "with" someone who does operations on this language which seem to me so strong and so necessary, but which must remain idiomatic? How could I write, sign, countersign performatively texts which "respond" to Beckett? How could I avoid the platitude of a supposed academic metalanguage? It is very hard. You will perhaps say to me that for other foreign authors like Kafka, Celan, or Joyce, I attempted it. Yes, at least attempted. Let's not speak of the result. I had a kind of excuse or alibi: I write in French, from time to time I quote

the German or the English, and the two writings, the "performative signatures," are not only incommensurable in general, that goes without saying, but above all without a "common language," at least in the ordinary sense of the term. Given that Beckett writes in a particular French, it would be necessary, in order to "respond" to his oeuvre, to attempt writing performances that are impossible for me (apart from a few stammering [and thus oral] tries in some seminars devoted to Beckett in the last few years). I was able to risk linguistic compromises with Artaud, who also has his way of loving and violating, of loving violating a certain French language of its language. But in Artaud (who is paradoxically more distant, more foreign for me than Beckett) there are texts which have permitted me writing transactions. Whatever one thinks of their success or failure, I have given myself up to them and published them. That wasn't possible for me with Beckett, whom I will thus have "avoided" as though I had always already read him and understood him too well.

*D.A.:* Is there a sense in which Beckett's writing is already so "deconstructive," or "self-deconstructive," that there is not much left to do?

*J.D.:* No doubt that's true. A certain nihilism is both interior to metaphysics (the final fulfillment of metaphysics, Heidegger would say) and then, already, beyond. With Beckett in particular, the two possibilities are in the greatest possible proximity and competition. He is nihilist and he is not nihilist. Above all, this question should not be treated as a philosophical problem outside or above the texts. When I found myself, with students, reading some Beckett texts, I would take three lines, I would spend two hours on them, then I would give up because it would not have been possible, or honest, or even interesting, to extract a few "significant" lines from a Beckett text. The composition, the rhetoric, the construction and the rhythm of his works, even the ones that seem the most "decomposed," that's what "remains" finally the most "interesting," that's the work, that's the signature, this remainder which remains when the thematics is exhausted (and also exhausted, by others, for a long time now, in other modes).

With Joyce, I was able to pretend to isolate two words (*He war* or

yes, yes); with Celan, one foreign word (*Shibboleth*); with Blanchot, one word and two homonyms (*pas*).<sup>3</sup> But I will never claim to have “read” or proposed a general reading of these works. I wrote a text, which in the face of the event of another’s text, as it comes to me at a particular, quite singular, moment, tries to “respond” or to “counter-sign,” in an idiom which turns out to be mine. But an idiom is never pure, its iterability opens it up to others. If my own “economy” could provoke other singular readings, I would be delighted. That it should produce “effects of generality” here or there, of relative generality, by exceeding singularity, is inscribed in the iterable structure of any language, but in order to talk about that seriously, it would be necessary to re-elaborate a whole “logic” of singularity, of the example, the counter-example, iterability, etc. That is what I try to do in another mode elsewhere, and often in the course of the readings I have just mentioned. They are all offered, simultaneously, as reflections on the signature, the proper name, singularity. All this to explain that I have given up on writing in the direction of Beckett—for the moment.

D.A.: “Aphorism Countertime” is an unusual text for you in that it presents a reading of a sixteenth-century work, *Romeo and Juliet*. Does a literary work as historically and culturally distant as this one pose any problems for your reading of it? And was your choice of this play largely by chance, as a result of an invitation, or do you feel that of Shakespeare’s works this one merits special attention in terms of your interests and goals?

J.D.: As you have noticed, I did not read *Romeo and Juliet* as a sixteenth-century text, I was incapable of it. The title was, after all, “countertime.” And also the aphorism, which means that I did not even claim to read the work itself as an ensemble. Not that I am only interested in modern texts, but I did not have the necessary competence to read this play “in its period.” I should also remind you of the reasons, which are also the opportunities, for which I write these kinds of text. Spontaneously, I would never have had the audacity to write

3. EN See “Two Words for Joyce,” “Ulysses Gramophone,” *Shibboleth*, and *Parages*.

on *Romeo and Juliet* or anything at all of Shakespeare’s. My respect for an oeuvre which is one of the “greatest” in the world for me is too intimidated, and I consider myself too incompetent. In this case, I was asked for a short, oblique text to accompany a production. In this sketch of a reading of *Romeo and Juliet*, I privileged the motifs of the contretemps and anachrony, which I was interested in anyway, and precisely in this place where they intersect with the question of the proper name. I would like all the same to say something about the historical problem, since you ask me: “Does a literary work as historically and culturally distant as this one pose any problem for your reading of it?”

Yes, lots of problems, and serious problems, of which I think I am reasonably aware. It would be necessary to reconstitute in the most informed and intelligible way, if necessary against the usual history of the historians, the historical element in a play like this—not just the historicity of its composition by Shakespeare, its inscription in a chain of works, etc. (I did at least indicate this dimension in my text and put the problem of structure that this raises), but also what is historical in the play itself: it’s an enormous task, and one I think totally necessary. That doesn’t mean that any reading which lets itself off this history—and up to a point that’s the case with my modest reading in this little text (it’s a tiny little text)—is thereby irrelevant. This brings us back to the question of the structure of a text in relation to history. Here the example of Shakespeare is magnificent: Who demonstrates better that texts fully conditioned by their history, loaded with history, and on historical themes, offer themselves so well for reading in historical contexts very distant from their time and place of origin, not only in the European twentieth century, but also in lending themselves to Japanese or Chinese productions and transpositions?

This has to do with the structure of a text, with what I will call, to cut corners, its iterability, which both puts down roots in the unity of a context and immediately opens this non-saturable context onto a recontextualization. All this is historical through and through. The iterability of the trace (unicity, identification, and alteration in repetition) is the condition of historicity—as too is the structure of anachrony and contretemps which I talk about in relation to *Romeo and Juliet*:



from this point of view my brief essay is not only "historical" in one or other of its dimensions, it is an essay on the very historicity of history, on the element in which "subjects" of history, just as much as the historians, whether or not they are "historicist," operate. To say that marks or texts are originally iterable is to say that without a simple origin, and so without a pure originarity, they divide and repeat themselves immediately. They thus become capable of being rooted out at the very place of their roots. Transplantable into a different context, they continue to have meaning and effectiveness.

Not that the text is thereby dehistoricized, but historicity is made of iterability. There is no history without iterability, and this iterability is also what lets the traces continue to function in the absence of the general context or some elements of the context. I give a somewhat better explanation of this in "Signature Event Context" and in "Limited Inc a b c . . ." Even if *Romeo and Juliet's* historical context, even if its "external" borders or its internal social landscape are not altogether the ones in which I read it, the play can be read nowadays. We have available contextual elements of great stability (not natural, universal and immutable but fairly stable, and thus also destabilizable) which, through linguistic competence, through the experience of the proper name, of family structures which are still analogous ones, etc., allow reading, transformation, transposition, etc. There is a possible play, with regulated gaps and interpretative transformations. But this play would not be possible without the iterability which both repeats the same and—by repetition itself—introduces into it what we call in French the *jeu* ["play," "give,"], not simply in the sense of the ludic, but also in the sense of that which, by the spacing between the pieces of an apparatus, allows for movement and articulation—which is to say for history, for better or for worse. This play is sometimes what allows the machine to function normally, but sometimes the same word designates an articulation that is too loose, without rigor, the cause of an anomaly or a pathological malfunctioning. The question is always one of an economic evaluation: what makes the "best play"? How far does "good" play, which makes things work, risk giving rise to "bad" play which compromises working well? Why, in wanting at all costs

to avoid play, because it could be bad, do we also risk depriving ourselves of "good" play, which is as much as to say of everything, at least of a minimal functioning or so-called "normal" functioning, in particular of writing, reading, history, etc.?

This is why, for all it is oblique, partial, modest, a reading like the one I attempt of *Romeo and Juliet* is perhaps not simply irrelevant or incompetent. Of course, I didn't reconstitute *all* the history. But who can claim to do that? And I said a couple of things about this "historico-anachronistic" situation in speaking of the singularity of the play and in the play by Shakespeare, of his proper name and proper names. I am certainly not claiming to make of this brief incursion an example or a model. It's something I felt like signing and even dating at a past moment in December, that year, at Verona (as it says at the end of the text). I wanted to remember this and say that I am very aware of this history of contretemps, of history as contretemps, of these laws which greatly exceed the case of *Romeo and Juliet*, since it is inscribed right on the structure of the name and the iterable mark. No one is obliged to be interested in what interests me. But if that did come about, then we would have to ask what is happening, on what conditions, etc. Which I often do, not always. I wanted to say that *Romeo and Juliet* is not the only example but that it's a very good example. Its singularity should not escape us even if, like any singularity, it is a singularity among others. And what only goes for one work, one proper name, evidently goes for any work, in other words for any singularity and any proper name. What is tragically and happily universal here is absolute singularity. How could one speak or write, otherwise? What would one have to say, otherwise? And all to say nothing, in fact? Nothing which absolutely touches on absolute singularity without straightaway missing it, while also never missing it? That's what I suggest in this little text and in a few others, especially *Shibboleth*, *Feu la cendre*, or "Che cos'è la poesia?" This tragedy, I mean this destiny without a strictly assignable destination, is also the tragedy of competence, relevance, truth, etc. There are many, but there has to be this play of iterability in the singularity of the idiom. And this play threatens what it makes possible. The threat cannot be separated from the

chance, or the condition of possibility from what limits possibility. There is no pure singularity which affirms itself as such without instantly dividing itself, and so exiling itself.

You also asked me, "And was your choice of this play largely by chance, as a result of an invitation?" Yes, I did respond to an invitation which could have not come about. But I wouldn't have responded to it if the story of *Romeo and Juliet*—as for everyone—hadn't meant something to me which I wanted to talk about. And to "countersign" in a way. But there was the element of chance, of course, always the intersection of an old story, a timeless program, and apparent randomness. If the actor-producer Daniel Mesguich had not put the play on at that point (but why did he?), if he hadn't been interested in what I write (but why?—this opens up another chain of causality), he wouldn't have asked anything of me and I would never have written this text. That would have been no great loss. Especially since a certain content, a certain logic of this text is also to be found in some other texts of mine, in a form that is both similar and different. It's always the effect of the same a-logical "logic" of the singular and iterable mark. As to the question "Do you feel that of Shakespeare's works this one merits special attention in terms of your interests and goals?" No doubt this play lends itself in an "exemplary" way to what I wanted to say, to what I thought it necessary to think about the proper name, history, the *contretemps*, etc. But I tried to talk about all that specifically in relation to a text whose nontransposable singularity I respect. On the same "subject" I would write something completely different if I had to reply (responsibly, that's the point) to a different provocation or countersign a different singular work, signing but with a signature which countersigns and tries to respond in another way to the signature of the other (as I tried to do for the signatures and proper names of Blanchot, Genet, Artaud, Ponge, etc., but also for texts where the proper name was not linked in the same way to the patronym). My law, the one to which I try to devote myself or to respond, is *the text of the other*, its very singularity, its idiom, its appeal which precedes me. But I can only respond to it in a responsible way (and this goes for the law in general, ethics in particular) if I put in play, and in guarantee [*en gage*], my singularity, by signing, with another signature; for the

countersignature signs by confirming the signature of the other, but also by signing in an absolutely new and inaugural way, both at once, like each time I confirm my own signature by signing once more: each time in the same way and each time differently, one more time, at another date.

Having said this, I would very much like to read and write in the space or heritage of Shakespeare, in relation to whom I have infinite admiration and gratitude; I would like to become (alas, it's pretty late) a "Shakespeare expert"; I know that everything is in Shakespeare: everything and the rest, so everything or nearly. But after all, everything is also in Celan, and in the same way, although differently, and in Plato or in Joyce, in the Bible, in Vico or in Kafka, not to mention those still living, everywhere, well, almost everywhere...

D.A.: One of the traditional claims of literary criticism is that it heightens or reveals the uniqueness, the singularity, of the text upon which it comments. Is traditional literary criticism capable of achieving this aim? To what extent is this a part of your aim in writing on literary texts? Is it possible to talk of the uniqueness of a text apart from this or that historical act of reading it?

J.D.: My response will once again be double and divided, apparently contradictory. But that has to do with what is called the experience of singularity. *On the one hand*, yes, I subscribe to the "traditional claims" and in this regard I share the most classical of concerns or desires: a work is always singular and is of interest only from this point of view. And that is why I like the word *oeuvre*, traditional as it is, which keeps this connotation (the English word *work* doesn't perhaps do this in the same way, generally). A work takes place just once, and far from going against history, this uniqueness of the institution, which is in no way natural and will never be replaced, seems to me historical through and through. It must be referred to as a proper name and whatever irreplaceable reference a proper name bears within it. Attention to history, context, and genre is necessitated, and not contradicted, by this singularity, by the date and the signature of the work: not the date and signature which might be inscribed on the *external* border of

the work or *around* it, but the ones which constitute or institute the very body of the work, on the edge *between* the "inside" and the "outside." This edge, the place of reference, is both unique and divisible, whence the difficulty I was indicating. For *on the other hand*, while there is always *singularization*, absolute singularity is never given as a fact, an object or existing thing [*étant*] in itself, it is announced in a paradoxical experience. An absolute, absolutely pure singularity, if there were one, would not even show up, or at least would not be available for reading. To become readable, it has to be *divided*, to *participate* and *belong*. Then it is divided and takes *its part* in the genre, the type, the context, meaning, the conceptual generality of meaning, etc. It loses itself to offer itself. Singularity is never one-off [*ponctuelle*], never closed like a point or a fist [*poing*]. It is a mark [*trait*], a differential mark, and different from itself: different *with itself*. Singularity differs from itself, it is deferred [*se diffère*] so as to be what it is and to be repeated in its very singularity. There would be no reading of the work — nor any writing to start with — without this iterability. Here, it seems to me, are the paradoxical consequences to which the logic of the "traditional claims" should lead. To pick up the terms of your question, I would say that the "best" reading would consist in *giving oneself up to* the most idiomatic aspects of the work while also *taking account* of the historical context, of what is *shared* (in the sense of both participation and division, of continuity and the cut of separation), of what belongs to genre and type according to that clause or enclave of non-belonging which I analyzed in "The Law of Genre." And any work is singular in that it speaks singularly of both singularity and generality. Of iterability and the law of iterability.

This is what we were saying in relation to Kafka's "Before the Law," that text which, while it speaks in a general, powerful, formalizing and economical way of the generality of the law, remains absolutely unique among all the texts which speak of the same thing. What happens is always some *contamination*. The uniqueness of the event is this coming about of a singular relation between the unique and its repetition, its iterability. The event comes about, or promises itself initially, only by thus compromising itself by the singular contamination of the singular

and what shares it. It comes about as impurity — and impurity here is chance.

Singularity "shared" in this way does not keep itself to the writing aspect, but also to the reading aspect and to what comes to sign, by countersigning, in reading. There is as it were a duel of singularities, a duel of writing and reading, in the course of which a countersignature comes both to confirm, repeat and respect the signature of the other, of the "original" work, and to *lead it off* elsewhere, so running the risk of *betraying* it, having to betray it in a certain way so as to respect it, through the invention of another signature just as singular. Thus redefined, the concept of countersignature gathers up the whole paradox: you have to give yourself over singularly to singularity, but singularity then does have to share itself out and so compromise itself, *promise to compromise itself*. In reality, I don't even think it is a matter of a *duel* here, in the way I just said a bit hastily: this experience always implies more than two signatures. No reading (and writing is also already a countersigning reading, looking at it from the work's side) would be, how can I put it, "new," "inaugural," "performative," without this multiplicity or proliferation of countersignatures. All these words, which usually tend to efface the axioms I am reminding us of here, need quotation marks (a countersignature cannot be simply, absolutely "new," "inaugural" or "performative" since it includes an element of "unproductive" repetition and of pre-convention, even if this is only the possibility of language use and the system of language [*du langage et de la langue*]).

Let's take any example at all. Although this play is taken up in a chain of other ones, *Romeo and Juliet* (which I mention in "Aphorism Countertime"), the *Romeo and Juliet* which bears Shakespeare's signature, takes place only once. This singularity is worked, in fact constituted, by the possibility of its own repetition (readings, indefinite number of productions, references, be they reproductive, citational, or transformative, to the work held to be original which, in its ideality, takes place just one single, first and last time). Reading must *give itself up* [*se rendre*] to this uniqueness, take it on board, keep it in mind, *take account* of it [*en rendre compte*]. But for that, for this "rendering"

[*rendre*], you have to sign in your turn, write something else which *responds or corresponds* in an equally singular, which is to say irreducible, irreplaceable, “new” way: neither imitation, nor reproduction, nor metalanguage. This countersigning response, this countersignature which is responsible (for itself and for the other), says “yes” to the work, and again “yes, this work was there before me, without me, I testify,” even if it begins by calling for the co-respondent countersignature; and even, then, if it turns out to have implied it from the very beginning, so as to presuppose the possibility of its birth, at the moment of giving a name. The countersignature of the other text is held under the law of the first, of its absolute pastness. But this absolute pastness was already the demand for the countersigning reading. The first only inaugurates from after, and as the expectation of, the second countersignature. What we have here is an incalculable scene, because we can’t count 1, 2, 3, or the first before the second, a scene which never reveals itself, by definition, and whose phenomenality can only disappear, but a “scene” which must have programmed the “traditional claims” of all “literary criticism.” It has doubtless produced the history of its theorems and its schools.

D.A.: On the subject of a “deconstructive literary criticism,” Rodolphe Gasché has written as follows: “Derrida has, by reading literary writing itself, exhibited precisely those structures of textuality and ‘literature’ with which literary criticism is to enter into exchange. Still, the kind of infrastructures which underlie this exchange have not yet been developed as such” (*The Tain of the Mirror*, 269). Is “literature”—which Gasché is here distinguishing from what is commonly called literature—constituted by an infrastructure specific to it, that is, one which is clearly distinguishable from, for instance, *différance*, the arche-trace, supplementarity? Could you say anything—this is a massive topic which we can only broach here—about this possible specificity of “literature”?

J.D.: The word *infrastructure* troubles me a bit, even though I did once use it myself for pedagogical and analogical purposes, at the time of *Of Grammatology*, in a very specific rhetorical and demonstrative

context, and even though I understand what justifies the strategic use of it proposed by Gasché (and I talked to him about it). In an analysis of “literary” writing, you do of course have to take account of the most “general” structures (I don’t dare say “fundamental,” “originary,” “transcendental,” “ontological,” or “infra-structural,” and I think it has to be avoided) of textuality in general. You were reminding us of them: *différance*, arche-trace, supplement, and everything I called “quasi-transcendental” in *Glas*. They are implicated in every literary text, but not all texts are literary—Gasché is right to remind us of this. Once you have situated the structure of textuality in general, you have to determine its becoming-literature, if I can put it like that, and then distinguish between fiction in general (not all fiction is literature, all literature is not strictly of the order of fiction), poetry and belles-lettres, the literature which has been called that for only a few centuries, etc. Also—and this is just what we’re talking about here—you have to discern exactly the historically determined phenomenon of social conventions and the institutions which give rise, give its place, to literature. Gasché is right to point out that this historico-institutional structure is not a general “infrastructure” of the text. It is not the same level as what I won’t call an infrastructure but rather the limitless generality of *différance*, the trace, the supplement, etc. Having said this, it is perhaps at this point that there could be a discussion with Gasché beyond the strategic choice of terminology: although literature is not the text in general, although not all arche-writing is “literary,” I wonder whether literature is simply an example, one effect or region among others, of some general textuality. And I wonder if you can simply apply the classic question to it: what, on the basis of this general textuality, makes the specificity of literature, literariness?

I ask this question for two reasons. First of all, it is quite possible that literary writing in the modern period is more than one example among others, rather a privileged guiding thread for access to the general structure of textuality, to what Gasché calls the infrastructure. What literature “does” with language holds a revealing power which is certainly not unique, which it can share up to a point with law, for example with juridical language, but which in a given historical situation (precisely our own, and this is one more reason for feeling

concerned, provoked, summoned by "the question of literature") teaches us more, and even the "essential," about writing in general, about the philosophical or scientific (for example linguistic) limits of the interpretation of writing. In short, this is one of the main reasons for my interest in literature and I am convinced that this motivates the interest of so many theorists of literature in deconstructive endeavors when these privilege writing.

Secondly, even if we should be relentlessly analyzing those historico-institutional matters, the politics and sociology of literature, this is not one institution among others or like the others. We have glimpsed more than once in the course of this conversation the paradoxical trait: it is an institution which consists in transgressing and transforming, thus in producing its constitutional law; or to put it better, in producing discursive forms, "works" and "events" in which the very possibility of a fundamental constitution is at least "fictionally" contested, threatened, deconstructed, presented in its very precariousness. Hence, while literature shares a certain power and a certain destiny with "jurisdiction," with the juridico-political production of institutional foundations, the constitutions of States, fundamental legislation, and even the theological-judicial performatives which occur at the origin of the law, at a certain point it can also exceed them, interrogate them, "fictionalize" them: with nothing, or almost nothing, in view, of course, and by producing events whose "reality" or duration is never assured, but which by that very fact are more thought-provoking, if that still means something.

D.A.: In "The Double Session" you use the formulation "there is no—or hardly any, ever so little—literature" (223). Could you elaborate on this comment?

J.D.: I don't remember the context in which I thought I could say—playing a bit, but believing in the necessity of the provocation—"there is ever so little literature." That certainly didn't mean that there are few texts I consider to be authentically literary, for example the ones I have been led to privilege, wrongly or rightly (those of Mallarmé or Joyce, Blanchot or Celan, Ponge or Genet). No—for the reasons we

have just mentioned, I would rather emphasize that the existence of something like a *literary reality in itself* will always remain problematic. The literary event is perhaps more of an event (because less natural) than any other, but by the same token it becomes very "improbable," hard to verify. No *internal* criterion can guarantee the essential "literariness" of a text. There is no assured essence or existence of literature. If you proceed to analyze all the elements of a literary work, you will never come across literature itself, only some traits which it shares or borrows, which you can find elsewhere too, in other texts, be it a matter of the language, the meanings or the referents ("subjective" or "objective"). And even the convention which allows a community to come to an agreement about the literary status of this or that phenomenon remains precarious, unstable and always subject to revision. The "so little literature" was pointing in the direction of this convention, and so toward this fiction on the subject of an unfindable fiction inside a text, rather than toward a very small ideal library. But if it is not almost everything, it is anything but nothing—or, if it is nothing, it's a nothing which *counts*, which in my view counts a lot.

D.A.: You have expressed in the past a desire to write a text even less categorizable by generic conventions than *Glas* and *The Post Card*. If you were to succeed in this aim, what would be the relation of the text you wrote to existing traditions and institutions? Would it not only be neither philosophy nor literature, but not even a mutual contamination of philosophy and literature? Who would be able to read it?

J.D.: Still now, and more desperately than ever, I dream of a writing that would be neither philosophy nor literature, nor even contaminated by one or the other, while still keeping—I have no desire to abandon this—the memory of literature and philosophy. I am certainly not the only one to have this dream, the dream of a new institution to be precise, of an institution without precedent, without pre-institution. You will say, and quite rightly, that this is the dream of every literary work. Every literary work "betrays" the dream of a new institution of

literature. It betrays it first by revealing it: each work is unique and is a new institution unto itself. But it also betrays it in causing it to fail: insofar as it is unique, it appears in an institutional field designed so that it cuts itself up and abducts itself there: *Ulysses* arrives like one novel among others that you place on your bookshelf and inscribe in a genealogy. It has its ancestry and its descendants. But Joyce dreamt of a special institution for his oeuvre, inaugurated by it like a new order. And hasn't he achieved this, to some extent? When I spoke about this as I did in "Ulysses Gramophone," I did indeed have to understand and share his dream too: not only share it in making it mine, in recognizing mine in it, but that I share it in *belonging to the dream* of Joyce, in *taking a part* in it, in walking around in *his* space. Aren't we, today, people or characters in part constituted (as readers, writers, critics, teachers) *in* and *through* Joyce's dream? Aren't we Joyce's dream, his dream readers, the ones he dreamed of and whom we dream of being in our turn?

As to the question "Who would be able to read it?," there is no pre-given response. By definition the reader does not exist. Not before the work and as its straightforward "receiver." The dream we were talking about concerns what it is in the work which produces its reader, a reader who doesn't yet exist, whose competence cannot be identified, a reader who would be "formed," "trained," instructed, constructed, even engendered, let's say *invented* by the work. Invented, which is to say both found by chance and produced by research. The work then becomes an institution forming its own readers, giving them a competence which they did not possess before: a university, a seminar, a colloquium, a curriculum, a *course*. If we trusted the current distinction between competence and performance, we would say that the work's performance produces or institutes, forms or invents, a new competence for the reader or the addressee who thereby becomes a countersignatory. It teaches him or her, *if s/he is willing*, to countersign. What is interesting here is thus the invention of the addressee capable of countersigning and saying "yes" in a committed and lucid way. But this "yes" is also an inaugural performance, and we recover the structure of iterability which would prevent us, at this point, from distinguishing rigorously between performance and competence, as between producer

and receiver. As much as that between the addressee and the signatory or the writer and the reader. This is the space in which *The Post Card* is involved. It did so in a certain fashion, at the same time general and singular. Other ways are certainly possible—and yes, I would also like to involve myself in them.