This new discipline will displace the departments of English or relegate them to the status departments of classics presently hold. This would in fact be a return to the situation in late nineteenth-century America, when all colleges and universities had substantial staffs in composition and rhetoric. The discipline of the study of vernacular literature was just establishing itself. Thus the presence in American universities of large and strong departments of literary history and literary criticism may be a relatively short-lived phenomenon, lasting less than a century. The alternative would be for them to make changes which would allow them to survive in a new cultural situation.

Changes in literary study, however, as in other disciplines, usually take place with glacial slowness. Such study is strongly institutionalized in secondary school curricula; in college and university departments of English, French, German, comparative literature, and so on; in textbooks and editions; in curricula inscribed in catalogues as though fixed for the ages; and in graduate programs turning out new Ph.D.’s, far too many of them for the available positions. These new Ph.D.’s tend to be trained to teach only literature and to teach it only in certain ways; their training in the teaching of composition is often minimal. The greatest institutionalized resistance to change is in the more or less fixed presuppositions, prejudices, and feelings of those who teach literature and write about it.

This institutional continuity in the study of literature of course has great advantages. It would be impossible for each teacher to make up the whole discipline anew each time he confronted a text or a class. Even the most innovative scholar, teacher, or critic depends on the presence of a relatively stable and conservative academic organization in order to get on with his own work. Much time these days is in fact wasted in the humanities on the endless concoction of new courses and new curricula. There are problems, however, if the institution no longer responds fully to the demands made on it by society, in one direction, nor fits the actual state of the discipline involved, in the other, which, I believe, is to a considerable degree the case at present. Nevertheless, in spite of the inertia of its institutional embodiments, the study of literature in America is at this moment changing with unusual rapidity.

One change is being imposed from outside the discipline, from the direction of society. By society here I mean the context within which literary study in America dwells, which it serves and is served by: parents, school boards, trustees, regents, legislatures, the “media.” We teachers of literature have fewer students already and will apparently have still fewer as the years go by, both in individual courses and as majors in the various departments of literature. Those fewer are steadily
less well prepared both in literature itself and in what are called “basic language skills.” They cannot write well. They cannot read well either. The reading of works of literature appears to be playing every day a less and less important role in our culture generally. The complex social function performed in Elizabethan and Jacobean England by going to the theater and in Victorian England by the reading of novels is performed these days by other activities, mostly, so it seems, by watching television. The reading of a novel, poem, or play, or even the watching of a play, is likely to become an increasingly artificial, marginal, or archaic activity. It is beginning to seem more and more odd, to some people, to be asked to take seriously the literature of a small island on the edge of Europe, a small island, moreover, which has ceased to be a major world power. It might be more important to learn Russian or Chinese or Arabic. At the same time, American society has begun to recognize that we are to a considerable degree a multilingual people, not only because many of us have Spanish or some other tongue as a first language, but because we speak and write many different forms of English besides the idiolect and grapholect of standard English. For better or worse, much “standard English as a second language” must be taught, even to college students.

As College Board scores go down from year to year, our society is demanding in a louder and louder chorus that schools and colleges do something soon about the fact that our young people cannot read and cannot write. This demand, at the college and university level, is being made on professors who have been trained to teach the details of literary history and the intricacies of meaning in works by Shakespeare or Milton, Keats or Woolf. Even before they found themselves asked to teach more and more composition, many departments of English had been demoralized by declining enrollments and had begun to set their Shakespeareans and medievalists to teach classes in modern fiction, in film, or in continental novels in translation, just as the department of classics in one large state university justifies its existence at the undergraduate level by a lecture course on “mythology.” A large proportion of the courses offered by the department of English in one good liberal arts college I visited recently included at least one work by J. L. Borges. This department is for all practical purposes a department of foreign literature in translation, and the departments of Spanish, French, and German at the same college are small and ineffective.

In the area of expository writing a large industry is being mobilized to create a new discipline. This mobilization includes distinguished literary theorists and historians like E. D. Hirsch, Wayne Booth, and Stanley Fish, who began as literary critics, not as experts on the teaching of composition. At the same time, more and more bright young people are already making careers in composition, seeking training in rhetoric, in linguistics, and in educational psychology rather than narrowly in traditional literary history and criticism. This is all to the good, but it will obviously weaken further the traditional activities of the study of literature as such.

At the same time, from the other direction, there have been unusually rapid changes within the discipline of literary study proper. Thirty years ago the field of literary study in America was more or less completely dominated by the method of intrinsic reading called the “New Criticism” and by a positivistic literary history committed to gathering facts and establishing texts. The latter mode was associated with the method of scientific research. It descended from such nineteenth-century metaphorical assimilations of literary study to scientific method as that of Hippolyte Taine, as well as from the long European tradition of philology and textual criticism originally coming from the study of Greek and Latin literature and from biblical hermeneutics. The archetypal criticism of Northrop Frye was in 1948 just appearing as the first strong alternative to the New Criticism. There was a somewhat marginal presence of the great German philological tradition in the form of refugee scholars like Erich Auerbach and Leo Spitzer. Some news of continental formalism—Russian, Czech, and Polish—was seeping through in the influential book by René Wellek and Austin Warren called The Theory of Literature. In spite of the latter book, however, literary study in America was still insular. It was a more or less self-enclosed Anglo-American tradition confident that it could go on going it alone.

Today the situation is greatly changed. No serious student of literature can fail to think of it as an international enterprise. It is just as important for the student of Chaucer, of Shakespeare, or of Dickens to know about continental criticism and to read such an international journal as PTL, which is edited at the Institute for Poetics and Semiotics in Tel Aviv, as it is for him to know the tradition of secondary works on these authors in English or to read The Publications of the Modern Language Association.

Moreover, the range of viable alternatives in literary methodology has become bafflingly large. These alternatives can, so it seems, hardly be reconciled in some grand synthesis. Il faut choisir. Along with the still powerful New Criticism, archetypal criticism, and positivistic literary history, there is a more or less fully elaborated phenomenological or hermeneutic criticism, a “criticism of consciousness” as it is sometimes called. A new semiotic formalism inspired by linguistics has been
developed. There is a structuralist criticism deriving from structural linguistics and structural anthropology. A powerful new form of psychoanalytic criticism, mostly imported from France, has become influential. A revived Marxist and sociological criticism is beginning to take strong hold in America. Another new kind of criticism focuses on reader response and on what is called in Germany Rezeptionsgeschichte. There is, finally, a form of literary study which concentrates on the rhetoric of literary texts, taking rhetoric in the sense of the investigation of the role of figurative language in literature. This method is sometimes called "deconstruction," which as a name at least has the advantage of distinguishing it firmly from any form of "structuralism." It is associated with the name of Jacques Derrida in France and with certain critics at my own university, Yale, as well as, increasingly, with younger critics at other universities in the United States. It has distinguished native grandfathers or at least great-uncles in Kenneth Burke and William Empson. All these new forms are international in scope. The master works in each are as likely to have been written in Russian, German, French, or Italian as in English. This means that the delays and inadequacies of translation have made particular difficulties for literary study recently in America. Few students and young teachers here can read even one foreign language fluently, much less the whole necessary panoply.

This is not the place to attempt a description of each of these modes. It takes a whole semester of an elaborately taught course at my university to provide even a relatively superficial introduction to them for undergraduates. My aim here is to suggest that literary study in America now is in an unusually fluid or unstable condition. It is likely to change much more rapidly than usual, as much from forces within itself as from the pressures from without sketched earlier. This makes it somewhat unpredictable; only a remarkably insensitive or secluded person would be complacent at ease. It is in fact an exciting field to work in at the moment, though it is also no wonder so many members of my profession feel on edge, edgy.

In spite of the bewildering array of possibilities in literary methodology, the methods available may, for the purposes to which I want to turn now, be reduced to two distinctly different sorts. One kind includes all those methods whose presuppositions are in one way or another what I would call "metaphysical." The other kind includes those methods which hypothesize that in literature, for reasons which are intrinsic to language itself, metaphysical presuppositions are, necessarily, both affirmed and subverted. By "metaphysical" I mean the system of assumptions coming down from Plato and Aristotle which has unified our culture. This system includes the notions of beginning, continuity, and end, of causality, of dialectical process, of organic unity, and of ground, in short of logos in all its many senses. A metaphysical method of literary study assumes that literature is in one way or another referential, in one way or another grounded in something outside language. This something may be physical objects, or "society," or the economic realities of labor, valuation, and exchange. It may be consciousness, the Cogito, or the unconscious, or absolute spirit, or God. An antimetaphysical or "deconstructive" form of literary study attempts to show that in a given work of literature, in a different way in each case, metaphysical assumptions are both present and at the same time undermined by the text itself. They are undermined by some figurative play within the text which forbids it to be read as an "organic unity" organized around some version of the logos. The play of tropes leaves an inassimilable residue or remnant of meaning, an unearned increment, so to speak, making a movement of sense beyond any unifying boundaries. The following out of the implications of the play of tropes leads to a suspension of fully rationalizable meaning in the experience of an aporia or boggling of the mind. This boggling sets up an oscillation in meaning. Dialectical opposites capable of synthesis may break down into contradictory elements which are differences among the same.

This distinction between two kinds of criticism must not be understood, as it sometimes is, to be a historical one; or rather, it challenges a certain historical patterning. What I have been saying must be understood as putting in question the familiar historical scheme which presupposes that there was once an age of faith or of metaphysics which was followed by the skepticism, disintegration, or fragmentation of modern times. The argument, rather, is that the literary and philosophical texts of any period of Western culture contain, in a different way each time, both what I am calling metaphysics and the putting in question of metaphysics. The test of this hypothesis is the interpretation of the texts themselves. It is here that the battle should be fought. What does this given poem or passage mean? In principle, and in fact, a Greek tragedy, an episode in Ovid, in Dante, or in The Faerie Queene would be as good a testing ground for this as any Romantic or post-romantic poem, though I have chosen a well-known text from English Romanticism as my example.

The relation of metaphysics and the deconstruction of metaphysics finds a parable in the strange relation of kinship among apparent opposites in Wordsworth's "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal." Here is the poem:
A slumber did my spirit seal;
I had no human fears:
She seemed a thing that could not feel
The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees;
Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,
With rocks, and stones, and trees.

This beautiful, moving, and apparently simple poem was written at Goslar in Germany in the late fall or early winter of 1798–1799, during Wordsworth's miserable sojourn there with his sister Dorothy. It seems at first to be organized around a systematically interrelated set of binary oppositions. These seem to be genuinely exclusive oppositions, with a distinct uncrossable boundary line between them. Such a systematic set of oppositions, as always, invites interpretation of the dialectical sort. In such an interpretation, the oppositions are related in some scheme of hierarchical subordination. This makes possible a synthesis grounded in an explanatory third term constituting the logos of the poem. This logos is the poem's source and end, its ground and meaning, its "word" or "message." This particular text, I am arguing, forbids the successful completion of such a procedure. The method does not work. Something is always left over, a plus value beyond the boundaries of each such interpretation.

A surprising number of oppositions are present in the poem. These include slumber as against waking; male as against female; sealed up as against open; seeming as against being; ignorance as against knowledge; past as against present; inside as against outside; light as against darkness in the "diurnal" course of the earth; subject or consciousness, "spirit," as against object, the natural world of stones and trees; feeling as "touch" as against feeling as emotion, "fears"; "human fears" as against—what?—perhaps inhuman fears; "thing" in its meaning of "girl," young virgin, as against "thing" in the sense of physical object; years as against days; hearing as against seeing; motion as against force; self-propulsion as against exterior compulsion; mother as against daughter or sister, or perhaps any female family member as against some woman from outside the family, that is, mother, sister, or daughter as against mistress or wife, in short, incestuous desires against legitimate sexual feelings; life as against death.

The invitation to interpret the poem in terms of oppositions is sustained in part by its syntactical and formal structure. Syntactically it is structured around words or phrases in apposition or opposition. The second line, for instance, repeats the first, and then lines three and four say it over again:

A slumber did my spirit seal;
I had no human fears:
She seemed a thing that could not feel
The touch of earthly years.

To have no human fears is the same thing as to have a sealed spirit. Both of these are defined by the speaker's false assumption that Lucy will not grow old or die. Formally the poem is organized by the opposition between the first stanza and the second. Each stanza sets one line against the next, the first two against the last two; each also sets line one against line three and line two against line four, by way of the interlaced pattern of rhymes—abab, cded. The bar or barrier or blank on the page between the two stanzas constitutes the major formal structuring principle of the poem. In the shift from past to present tense this bar opposes then to now, ignorance to knowledge, life to death. The speaker has moved across the line from innocence to knowledge through the experience of Lucy's death. The poem expresses both eloquently restrained grief for that death and the calm of mature knowledge. Before, he was innocent. His spirit was sealed from knowledge as though he were asleep, closed in on himself. His innocence took the form of an ignorance of the fact of death. Lucy seemed so much alive, such an invulnerable vital young thing, that she could not possibly be touched by time, reach old age, and die. Her seeming immortality reassured the speaker of his own, and so he did not anticipate with fear his own death. He had no human fears. To be human is to be mortal, and the most specifically human fear, it may be, is the fear of death.

Wordsworth, in fact, as we know from other texts both in poetry and in prose, had as a child, and even as a young man, a strong conviction of his immortality. The feeling that it would be impossible for him to die was associated with a strong sense of participation in a nature both enduringly material, therefore immortal, and at the same time enduringly spiritual, therefore also immortal, though in a different way. In this poem, as in so many others by Wordsworth—"The Boy of Winander," the Matthew poems, and "The Ruined Cottage," for example—the speaker confronts the fact of his own death by confronting the death of another. He speaks as a survivor standing by a grave, a corpse, or a headstone, and his poem takes the form of an epitaph.
This lightness of the maiden thing, which makes a young girl both beneath adult male knowledge and lightheartedly above it, appears in another odd passage in Heidegger, in this case in *Die Frage nach dem Ding (What Is a Thing?)*. Heidegger first recalls the story in Plato’s *Phaedo* about the “goodlooking and whimsical maid from Thrace” who laughed at Thales when he fell down a well while occupied in studying the heavens. In his study of all things in the universe, “the things in front of his very nose and feet were unseen by him.” “Therefore,” says Heidegger in commentary on Plato’s story, “the question ‘What is a thing?’ must always be rated as one which causes housemaids to laugh. And genuine housemaids must have something to laugh about (und was eine rechte Dienstmagd ist, muss doch auch etwas zum Lachen haben).” The question, “What is a thing?”, which is the question implicit in “A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal,” would be a laughable nonquestion to Lucy. She would not understand it because she is a thing. Being a thing makes her both immeasurably below and immeasurably above laughable man with his eternal questions. By dying Lucy moves from the below to the above, leaving the male poet in either case in between, excluded, unable to break the seal.

As the reader works his or her way into the poem, attempting to break its seal, however, it comes to seem odder than the account of it I have so far given. My account has been a little too logical, a little too much like Thales’ account of the universe, an analogical oversimplification. For one thing, the speaker has in fact not died. Lucy, it may be, has achieved immortality by joining herself to the perpetual substance of earth, which cannot die, as Wordsworth very forcefully says at the beginning of Book V of *The Prelude*. The speaker by not dying remains excluded from that perpetual vitality. His immortality is the bad one of a permanent empty knowledge of death and a permanent impossibility of dying. The “I” of the first stanza (“I had no human fears”) has disappeared entirely in the impersonal assertions of the second stanza. It is as though the speaker has lost his livelihood by waking to knowledge. He has become an anonymous impersonal wakefulness, perpetually aware that Lucy is dead and that he is not yet dead. This is the position of the survivor in all Wordsworth’s work.

Moreover, an obscure sexual drama is enacted in this poem. This drama is a major carrier of its allegorical significance. The identification of this drama will take the reader further inside. As we know from *The Prelude* as well as from the Lucy poems, nature for Wordsworth was strongly personified. It was, oddly, personified as both male and female, as both father and mother. The earth was the maternal face and body
he celebrates in the famous "Infant Babe" passage in the earliest version of *The Prelude*, written also in Goslar in 1798:

No outcast he, bewilder'd and depress'd;
Along his infant veins are interfus'd
The gravitation and the filial bond
Of nature, that connect him with the world.

Nature was also, however, in certain other episodes of the earliest *Prelude*, a frightening male spirit threatening to punish the poet for wrongdoing. The poem "Nutting," also written at Goslar and later incorporated into *The Prelude*, brings the two sexes of nature together in the astonishing scene of a rape of female nature which brings the terror of a reprisal from another aspect of nature, a fearsome male guardian capable of revenge.

Wordsworth's mother died when he was eight, his father when he was thirteen. His father's death and Wordsworth's irrational sense of guilt for it are the subject of another episode of the two-book *Prelude*, another of the "spots of time." His mother's death, however, is curiously elided, so that the reader might not even be sure what the poet is talking about:

For now a trouble came into my mind
From obscure causes. I was left alone. . . .

The death of Wordsworth's mother hardly seems an "obscure cause" for sorrow, and yet the poet wants to efface that death. He wants to push the source of the sorrow of solitude further back, into deeper obscurity. In the Lucy poems the possession of Lucy alive and seemingly immortal is a replacement for the lost mother. It gives him again that direct filial bond to nature he had lost with the mother's death. It perhaps does not matter greatly whether the reader thinks of Lucy as a daughter or as a mistress or as an embodiment of his feelings for his sister Dorothy. What matters is the way in which her imagined death is a reenactment of the death of the mother as described in *The Prelude*.

The reenactment of the death of the mother takes a peculiar form in "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal," however. This poem, and the Lucy poems as a group, can be defined as an attempt to have it both ways, an attempt which, necessarily, fails. Within his writing, which is what is meant here by "Wordsworth," the poet's abandonment has always already occurred. It is the condition of life and poetry once Wordsworth has been left alone, once he has become an outcast, bewildered and depressed. His only hope for reestablishing the bond that connected him to the world is to die without dying, to be dead, in his grave, and yet still alive, bound to maternal nature by way of a surrogate mother, a girl who remains herself both alive and dead, still available in life and yet already taken by Nature. Of course this is impossible, but it is out of such impossibilities that great poems are made.

Wordsworth's acting out of this fantasy is described in an extraordinary passage by Dorothy Wordsworth. This is her entry in the "Grasmere Journals" for April 29, 1802, three and a half years after the composition of "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal":

We then went to John's Grove, sat a while at first. Afterwards William lay, and I lay in the trench under the fence—he with his eyes shut and listening to the waterfalls and the Birds. There was no one waterfall—it was the sound of waters in the air—the voice of the air. William heard me breathing and rustling now and then but we both lay still, and unseen by one another. He thought that it would be as sweet thus to lie so in the grave, to hear the peaceful sounds of the earth and just to know that our dear friends were near.

"A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal" dramatizes the impossibility of fulfilling this fantasy, or rather it demonstrates that it can only be fulfilled in fantasy, that is, in a structure of words in which "thing" can mean both "person" and "object," in which one can have both stanzas at once, and can, like Lucy, be both alive and dead, or in which the poet can be both the dead-alive girl and at the same time the perpetually wakeful survivor. To have it as wordplay, however, is to have it as the impossibility of having it, to have it as permanent loss and separation, to have it as the unbridgeable gap between one meaning of the word "thing" and the other.

In "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal" this simultaneous winning and losing, winning by losing, losing by winning, is expressed in a constant slipping of entities across borders into their opposites. As a result the mind cannot carry on that orderly thinking which depends on keeping "things" firmly fixed in their conceptual pigeonholes. Lucy was a virgin "thing." She seemed untouched by earthly years, that is, untouched by nature as time, as the bringer of death, as death. The touch of earthly years is both a form of sexual appropriation which leaves the one who is possessed still virgin if she dies young, and at the same time it is the ultimate dispossession which is death. To be touched by earthly years is a way to be sexually penetrated while still remaining virgin.
J. Hillis Miller

The speaker of the poem rather than being the opposite of Lucy, male to her female, adult knowledge to her prepubertal innocence, is the displaced representative of both the penetrated and the penetrator, of both Lucy herself and of her unravishing ravisher, nature or death. The speaker was "sealed," as she was. Now he knows. He is unsealed, as she is. To know, however, as the second stanza indicates, is to speak from the impersonal position of death. It is to speak as death. Death is the penetrator who leaves his victim intact, unpierced, but at the same time wholly open, as an unburied corpse is exposed, open to the sky, like rocks and stones and trees. The speaker's movement to knowledge, as his consciousness becomes dispersed, loses its "I," is "the same thing" as Lucy's death. It finds its parable in that death.

Whatever track the reader follows through the poem he arrives at blank contradictions. These contradictions are not ironic. They are the copresence of difference within the same, as, for example, time in the poem is not different from space but is collapsed into the rolling motion of the earth, or as Lucy in her relation to the speaker blurs the difference of the sexes. Lucy is both the virgin child and the missing mother, that mother earth who gave birth to the speaker and has abandoned him. Male and female, however, come together in the earth, and so Lucy and the speaker are "the same," though the poet is also the perpetually excluded difference from Lucy, an unneeded increment, like an abandoned child. The two women, mother and girl child, have jumped over the male generation in the middle. They have erased its power of mastery, its power of logical understanding, which is the male power par excellence. In expressing this, the poem leaves its reader with no possibility of moving through or beyond or standing outside in sovereign control. The reader is caught in an unstable oscillation unsatisfying to the mind and incapable of being grounded in anything outside the activity of the poem itself.

"A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal" shimmers between affirming male mastery as the consciousness which survives the death of the two generations, mother and daughter or sister, and know, and lamenting the failure of consciousness to join itself to the dead mother, and therefore to the ground of consciousness, by way of its possession of the sister or daughter. On the one hand, he does survive; if he does not have possession or power, he has knowledge. On the other hand, thought or knowledge is not guiltless. The poet has himself somehow caused Lucy's death by thinking about it. Thinking recapitulates in reverse mirror image the action of the earthly years in touching, penetrating, possessing, killing, encompassing, turning the other into oneself and therefore being left only with a corpse, an empty sign.

Lest it be supposed that I am grounding my reading of the poem on the "psychobiographical" details of the poet's reaction to the death of his parents, let me say that it is the other way around. Wordsworth interpreted the death of his mother according to the traditional trope identifying the earth with a maternal presence. By the time we encounter her in his writing she exists as an element in that figure. His life, like his poetry, was the working out of the consequences of this fictitious trope, or rather of the whole figurative system into which it is incorporated. This incorporation exists both in Wordsworth's language and in the Western tradition generally, both before and after him. To put this as economically as possible, "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal," in the context of the other Lucy poems and of all Wordsworth's work, enacts one version of a constantly repeated occidental drama of the lost sun. Lucy's name of course means light. To possess her would be a means of rejoining the lost source of light, the father sun as logos, as head power and fount of meaning. As light she is the vacant evidence that that capital source seems once to have existed. Light is dispersed everywhere but yet may not be captured or held. It is like those heavens Thales studied. To seek to catch or understand it is to be in danger of falling into a well. The fear of the death of Lucy is the fear that the light will fail, that all links with the sun will be lost, as, in "Strange Fits of Passion," another of the Lucy poems, the setting of the moon, mediated female image of the sun, makes the poet-lover fear Lucy's death:

"Oh mercy!" to myself I cried,
"If Lucy should be dead."

The fulfillment of that fear in her actual death is the loss both of light and of the source of light. It is the loss of the logos, leaving the poet and his words groundless. The loss of Lucy is the loss of the poet's female reflex or narcissist mirror image. In the absence of the filial bond to nature, this has been the only source of his solid sense of selfhood. In one version of the Narcissus story, Narcissus' self-love is generated by the hopeless search for a beloved twin sister, who has died. For Wordsworth, "The furiously burning father fire" (Wallace Stevens' phrase) has sunk beneath the horizon, apparently never to return. In spite of the diurnal rotation of the earth that earth seems to have absorbed all the light. Even the moon, reflected and mediated source of sunlight at night, and so the emblem of Lucy, has set. The consciousness of the poet has survived all these deaths of the light to subsist as a kind of black light. His awareness is the light-no-light
which remains when the sun has sunk and Lucy has died, when both have gone into the earth.

This loss of the radiance of the logos, along with the experience of the consequences of that loss, is the drama of all Wordsworth’s poetry, in particular of “A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal.” In the absence of any firm grounding the poem necessarily takes on a structure of chiasmus. This is the perpetual reversal of properties in crisscross substitutions I have tried to identify. The senses of the poem continually cross over the borders set up by the words if they are taken to refer to fixed “things,” whether material or subjective. The words waver in their meaning. Each word in itself becomes the dwelling place of contradictory senses, as though host and parasite were together in the same house. This waverer exceeds the bounds of the distinction between literal and figurative language, since literal ground and figurative derivative change places too within the word, just as do the other opposites. This waverer within the word is matched by an analogous wavering in the syntax. That in turn is matched by the large-scale relation of going and coming between the two stanzas. Each of these waveries is another example of the disparate in the matching pair which forbids any dialectical synthesis. The tracing out of these differences within the same moves the attention away from the attempt to ground the poem in anything outside itself. It catches the reader within a movement in the text without any solid foundation in consciousness, in nature, or in spirit. As groundless, the movement is, precisely, alogical.

This explanation of Wordsworth’s little poem has led me seemingly far away from a sober description of the state of contemporary literary study. It is meant, however, to “exemplify” one mode of such interpretation. In a passage in The Will to Power Nietzsche says: “To be able to read off a text as a text without interposing an interpretation is the last-developed form of ‘inner experience’—perhaps one that is hardly possible.” If it is hardly possible, it may not even be desirable, since interpretation, as Nietzsche also elsewhere says, is an active, affirmative process, a taking possession of something for some purpose or use. In the multitudinous forms of this which make up the scene of literary study, perhaps the true fork in the road is between two modes of this taking possession, two modes of teaching literature and writing about it. One mode already knows what it is going to find. Such a mode is controlled by the presupposition of some center. The other alternative mode of reading is more open to the inexhaustible strangeness of literary texts. This enigmatic strangeness much literary study busily covers over. The strangeness of literature remains, however. It survives all attempts to hide it. It is one of the major correlatives of the human predicament, since our predicament is to remain, always, within language. The strangeness lies in the fact that language, our Western languages at least, both affirm logic and at the same time turn it on edge, as happens in “A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal.” If this is the case, the alternative mode of literary study I have tried to exemplify both can and should be incorporated into college and university curricula. This is already happening to some extent, but, as I see it, the development of programs for this, from basic courses in reading and writing up to the most advanced graduate seminars, is one task in humanistic studies today.

Postscript 1984

Reading Meyer Abrams’ “Construing and Deconstructing” and trying to remember what was going on in my mind when I was writing “On Edge,” now five years ago, I do not quite want to say what Thomas Hardy said of Tess of the d’Urbervilles: “Melius fuerat non scribere. But there it stands.” Though I would not write “On Edge” in the same way today, I am glad I wrote it, and in any case, there it stands. As with any piece of writing, the passage of time has detached it more and more from its author, who is no longer quite the same person. Perhaps he was made a somewhat different person by the act of writing it. “On Edge” must now in any case make its own way in the world, as a fatherless orphan who can only go on saying the same thing, over and over, in answer to any questions, such as those Meyer Abrams puts to it.

The situation of literary studies in the United States today, moreover, is markedly different from what it was in 1979. It is my impression that Meyer Abrams is now trying to come to terms with a fait largely accompli. A good bit at least of what I hoped for then has now occurred, namely the widespread assimilation of new rhetorical methodologies into normal practice in the study and teaching of literature in America. The frontier or edge of literary study has moved on to a different location, a new asking of questions about the relation of literature to history and to society in the light of recent rhetorical and linguistic insights. For better or for worse, the study of literature in the United States has been permanently altered by structuralist and poststructuralist methods. Not that there is not still opposition, but that opposition has gone into a new phase, I suppose predictable, but nonetheless deplorable; I mean a phase of irrational polemic, sometimes by distinguished older scholars who apparently feel so threatened by these new
directions of literary study that they are willing to abandon all traditions of scholarly accuracy and responsibility in order blindly to attack what they appear to have made no attempt to understand. Meyer Abrams by no means belongs in that category. He has read Derrida and me with great care. His essay has considerable importance as one of the most serious and detailed attempts by a scholar-critic of a different set of commitments to come to terms with so-called deconstruction. With Meyer Abrams one can differ and still talk, and all honor to him and to his essay for that.

My reply, though I am sure my claim that he has not entirely understood deconstruction will not fill him with delight, is meant nevertheless to keep the door open for further dialogue between us, and between people like him and people like me. I have attempted especially to try to answer the question of why Abrams and I, two literary scholars brought up in somewhat the same tradition and both with presumably some competence as readers, nevertheless read Derrida so differently and why we read “A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal” so differently. I find that a puzzling question. I think I have found the answer to it, an answer that lies not in the highfalutin altitudes of pure literary theory but in the lowlands of basic and instinctive orientation toward language, literary or otherwise.

Controversy and polemics in literary study rarely accomplish much. Neither side is likely to cover itself with glory, and much foolishness may be spoken. Nevertheless, the stakes are high enough in this case perhaps to justify a brief response to Abrams’ essay. Though I am of course grateful to him for the careful attention he has given to an essay of mine and to a selection of the work of Derrida, he nevertheless seems to me a striking example of the way a man can be learned, distinguished, generous and open minded, at least to a degree, and yet, in this case at least, miss major points in the texts on which he is commenting. Something could be said about more or less every line or sentence of Abrams’ essay, something, it seems to me, identified as slightly askew in his formulations and conclusions. In the interests of brevity I shall first identify several less than pervasive though by no means insignificant points of misunderstanding or errancy and then move quickly on to the fundamental misunderstanding which underlies Abrams’ whole essay.

First smaller point: I am much troubled by the remarks toward the end of Abrams’ essay about the way young people today use so-called deconstructive methods because they produce new and publishable readings and are a way of getting ahead in the academic world, getting promotion and tenure, etc. Abrams here seems to me, if I may say so, shockingly cynical. He shows an amazing lack of confidence in the intellectual integrity of the young people in our profession. Surely he knows that good work was never yet done with that kind of motivation. The only hope in literary study and teaching is to say it like it is as one sees it. Of those sentences in Abrams’ essay one can certainly say: melius fuerat non scribere.

Second point: Abrams’ discussion of Derrida, though it makes a somewhat wider sweep through his writings than many more reductive accounts of it do, is nevertheless primarily based on quite early work, especially De la grammatologie and other early essays. Though Derrida would not, I think, by any means repudiate what he wrote then, he has of course published many books and essays since. His new work should surely now form the essential context for any reading of what he wrote earlier, and the early work itself can hardly be understood in isolation from the context of the relation of Derrida’s first books to Husserl, to Heidegger, and even to Sartre or to French existentialism of that time generally. If Abrams wanted to make a more solidly based assessment of the implications of Derrida’s work for literary study, it might have been better to discuss Glas, or La carte postale, or Signéponge.

The same thing might be said in a somewhat different way of his treatment of my essay. Though, as I have said, I am grateful for the careful attention he has given my discussion of “A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal,” it seems to me a shaky use of synecdoche to make it stand for my work in general or for American deconstructive criticism in general, in its presumed deviation from Derrida. Abrams’ generalizations here are built on an excessively fragile foundation.

Final preliminary point: Abrams often talks as if he thinks it is being claimed that so-called deconstruction is a wholly new and unheard of mode of interpretation, based on new insights into language, something that has never been done before. Nothing could be further from the truth. What is being claimed, rather, is that deconstruction is only the current version of a long tradition of rhetorical study going back especially to the Greeks, though to some degree to an aspect of Greek thought that has tended to be obscured or effaced—even by the Greeks themselves, as by Plato. Good writers and good readers have always known what deconstruction knows, for example about figurative language. What Abrams calls his own “oldreading” is in fact the Johnny-come-lately. It is based on a quite recent set of assumptions about literary interpretation, assumptions narrowly circumscribed within a certain historical situation, that of nineteenth- and twentieth-century
humanism in literary study. Like so-called aestheticism, of which it is
the mirror image or twin, this humanism tends to sequester literary
texts from fundamental ontological, metaphysical, or religious questions.

Now the most important point: The major misunderstanding in
Abrams' essay might be approached by way of his title, "Construing
and Deconstructing." If these two terms are translated into their more
traditional equivalents, Abrams' title would be "Grammar and Rhetoric," that is, the names of two of the three branch-roads of the medieval
trivium, the third being logic. Abrams' error is the aboriginal one of
assuming that the grammar of a language, for example the language
of Wordsworth's little poem, is a first and fundamental level of easily
identifiable meaning to which figurative language, the deviant realm
trope, is added as a nonessential second layer open to what Abrams,
in a nice little play of double meaning of his own, calls "over-reading."
First there is under-reading, or the construing of plain grammar, and
then, if you happen to want it (though why should you?) there is over-
reading, the interpretation of figures, what is sometimes called decon-
struction. The latter is a kind of supererogatory fiddling with the text.
It is altogether dependent, to boot, on the fact that the deconstructor
has first performed, like every other reader, the under-reading of the
text, that construing of its plain sense which all competent readers
spontaneously and successfully accomplish.

The claim of the tradition to which Derrida and I belong is that
this is a false picture both of language and of the process of good
reading. The major presupposition of deconstruction and of the long
tradition to which it belongs is that figurative language goes all the
way down, so to speak. It is not something added on top of an easily
construable grammar. The language of poems, novels, philosophical
texts, or of any other genre, for example literary criticism, is not like
that honey pot with which Pooh in A. A. Milne's story fears he may
have baited the trap for heffalumps, honey on top, product of the sweet
flowers of rhetoric, and cheese at the bottom, the plain food of literal
language. Language is honey all the way to the bottom, and the bottom
is a long way down. All language is irreducibly and fundamentally
figurative, as in my play on words for bottom or ground here. All good
reading is therefore the reading of tropes at the same time as it is the
construing of syntactical and grammatical patterns. Any act of reading
must practice the two forms of interpretation together. This means that
there is no such thing as that plain under-reading which Abrams
hypothesizes. With the collapse of this hypothesis Abrams' whole argu-
ment against deconstruction, his aberrant reading of it, as well as his
proposal of an alternative pedagogy, falls to the ground. There is only

and always, from the beginning, one form or another of over-reading,
the reading of grammar and tropes together, more or less adequately.

One evidence of the nonexistence of the grammatical under-reading
Abrams imagines is the wild diversity of "first readings" of any given
text one gets from so-called competent readers. Abrams presents, almost
in spite of himself, one example of this in his brief discussion of previous
commentary on "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal." Anyone who has
followed the history of the interpretation of any major works in the
canon of Western literature, even the most apparently "simple" ones,
will have encountered other versions of this diversity. What Abrams
really means by "we under-readers who start and stop with the plain
sense everyone can agree on" is "I, Meyer Abrams, and those I can
persuade to accept my reading." The evidence against the notion of a
broad agreement on the plain construed sense of literary works is
overwhelming.

Any good reader confronted with the words of "A Slumber Did My
Spirit Seal," as Abrams cites it at the end of his essay, will be assailed
by a swarm of questions, not by any means faced with a clear, sponta-
aneously generated, construed meaning on the basis of which he can
eexecute arabesques of irresponsible or ungrounded "over-readings."
Some of these questions are "grammatical": e.g., why does the poem
say "did . . . seal" rather than use the simple past tense, "sealed"? Some
are "rhetorical" or have to do with tropes: e.g., what does it mean to
say someone's "spirit" "slumbers," what does it mean to say
that someone's "spirit" (whatever that means in this case) is "sealed"?
do's mean as an envelope, or as a bit of wax, or as a tomb, or as
someone's lips are "sealed," or what? All these enigmas are on the
same level, so to speak. Each enters into the others, is intertwined with
them, so that one cannot be "solved" without the others. Their failure
to form a hierarchy forbids the certain establishment of that plain sense
or under-reading which Abrams wants to make the basis of literary
study.

All the other conclusions of Abrams' essay are vitiated by the insub-
stantiality of his initial premise, in particular his way of reading decon-
structive texts by Derrida and by me, his questioning of my placing
of "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal" in a wide context of passages by
Wordsworth and by others, and his picture of a proper pedagogy as
beginning with construing or grammar and then going on, for very
advanced students, to deconstruction, that is to rhetoric as the under-
standing of tropes.

The whole effort of deconstructive criticism has been to demonstrate,
patiently, over and over again, with many different texts of different
sorts—poems, novels, philosophy, criticism, prefaces, and so on—the exact opposite of what Abrams wants to say, namely to demonstrate that the plainest grammatical sense is already turned aside from itself by tropes of one sort or another. Far from building his reading of Rousseau on an under-reading which everyone accepts, Derrida wants to show both that a specific reading, namely the “logocentric” one, is inevitable for any reader at any time in our culture and at the same time that such a reading always contains the traces, vestiges, or latent indications of another reading undoing the first. Deconstruction displaces or reorients that metaphysical reading by following those traces and thereby placing the logocentric reading in a different context. This new context turns the logocentric reading into something other than itself. This procedure shows that the logocentric reading is something far different from the solidly based under-reading Abrams presumes it to be, namely that it is but one strand in a complex fabric.

As for what Abrams says about my initial paraphrase of “A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal,” I am sorry to say that he has missed the point of what I was trying to do, and for a reason which may have a profound significance for the differences between us. My initial paraphrase was meant to be ironic, that is, to display its manifest inadequacy, as a way of preparing for the attempt later on to account for this inadequacy and to try to repair it. The reader was meant to recognize that there is something strangely incomplete or lacking in such an account of the poem and to expect something more as an attempt to repair that incompleteness. As someone has said, there should be a mark of punctuation for irony.

On the question of context: Abrams assumes that there is a solid context for the reading of detached texts, such as a short lyric poem like “A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal,” in the grammatical competence of any reader or speaker of the language in which it is written. Derrida knows French, therefore he can read Rousseau, just as any other Frenchman can. I know English, so what’s my problem with “A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal”? If Derrida and I are right, and we are, about the enigmas introduced into even the most apparently simple passage by its permeation or pervasion by figurative language, one of the effects of this is to make each piece of language idiosyncratic, idiomatic, the generator of an idiolect of its own. It follows from this that the presumed sufficient context in standard French or English is an illusion.

We need in such an emergency all the help we can get. One such help is other “similar” passages in the same writer or in other writers, in a widening field which, as Derrida puts it, can never be “saturated,” and which of course creates as many problems as it solves, especially by way of what is problematic about that “similarity.” In what way, exactly, do the so-called Lucy poems form a group? I agree with Abrams that this is a problem, but I do not think the problem can be solved by pretending there is no relation among them. The other “similar” passages will not “solve” the enigmas, which are in any case insoluble in the sense of being incapable of being united, made clear once and for all, but the analogues will perhaps assist the reader in catching a glimpse of what is heterogeneous, incommensurate, idiolectal, idiomatic, or even “idiotic” (in the sense of being unconstruable) in the text at hand. All this depends, of course, on the capacity to see it as, on the first and most immediate level, strange, puzzling, lacking in transparency of meaning.

Finally, on the question of pedagogy: As I have already hinted, it would follow from the pervasion of grammar by rhetoric which deconstruction patiently demonstrates, that Abrams’ model for teaching is an impossibility. He imagines that it is possible to teach novices first “to write texts that will say, precisely and accurately, what they mean, and to construe, precisely and accurately, the texts that they read.” Then possibly, at some much later stage, in advanced seminars, as an unnecessary frill, the “equilibristic art” of deconstruction might be taught. Alas, this will not work. There is no grammar without rhetoric, as teachers of composition have always known, and as they are finding out again in different ways today. Students will learn neither to write well nor to read well unless they are taught both grammar and rhetoric together from the beginning. That this makes difficulties for the devising of curricula in composition and in literature (and for the training of teachers of both) I would be the last to deny, but so have recent advances in physical and biological knowledge made great problems for the teaching of those disciplines. The difference is that the inference of tropes, including the trope of irony, in ordinary as well as in literary language has been known since Plato and the Greek rhetoricians. To say that rhetoric or the knowledge of tropes should not be taught from the beginning, along with grammatical competence, in courses in composition and reading is like saying schools should first teach that the sun moves around the earth or that lice are bred from human sweat, and then let a few advanced students know it is not so simple.

There is no help for it. If language is “perfidious,” to use Abrams’ somewhat invidious word, then students even at the most preliminary level should be told this truth, just as beginning courses in biology or physics must try to explain the latest knowledge of genetics or of particle physics. That there are special difficulties in using language to explain language, as a teacher of composition or rhetoric must do, there can be no doubt, but there is no alternative but to try. Once more I think Abrams is surprisingly condescending both to teachers of composition
and reading and to their students in suggesting that they will necessarily fail in this attempt.

I conclude by asking again why it might be that there is such a great gulf between Abrams and me in what happens when we first encounter something like those eight lines of “A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal” he cites at the end of his essay as the final challenge to deconstruction. What I have said already about his failure to identify the trope of irony in my essay may give the clue. I am reminded of the passage in George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda* describing Gwendolen’s blindness to religious experience and to economic or political knowledge:

She had no permanent consciousness of other fetters, or of more spiritual restraints, having always disliked whatever was presented to her under the name of religion, in the same way that some people dislike arithmetic and accounts: it has raised no other emotion in her, no alarm, no longing; so that the question whether she believed it had not occurred to her, any more than it had occurred to her to inquire into the conditions of colonial property and banking, on which, as she had had many opportunities of knowing, the family fortune was dependent. [Chap. 6]

Just as, so I have gradually come to believe, there are people learned, sensitive, and intelligent for whom metaphysical or religious questions are nonquestions, or people, also learned, sensitive, and intelligent, for whom social or political questions are nonquestions, so it may be that there are people who have a blind spot in the area of recognizing the strange things tropes do to a given piece of language. This may especially appear in an insensitivity to irony, which is like failing to see the point of a joke. Nothing is more annoying than to be told one has not seen that a joke is a joke, an irony an irony. Disagreements about the way to take a possibly ironic passage are likely to give rise to the bitterest and most acrimonious controversies, such as those I began this postscript by deploring. Something of this sort, nevertheless, may be the cause of the fissure or cleft between Meyer Abrams and me, though I continue to hope that he will come over to my side of the chasm. Perhaps it is the fissure between all under-readers and all over-readers, though I should prefer to make it a distinction between worse and better reading as such, for example of “A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal.”

**Questions and Answers**

*Question:* You seem to make two different claims for deconstruction, one soft and the other hard. The soft claim seems to be that deconstruction is simply an attempt to test or question the weight-bearing capacity of the ground assumed by a text. The hard claim seems to be the conclusion that the ground in each case can’t bear the weight imposed on it. I think that a critique of deconstruction like Walter Jackson Bate wouldn’t oppose the first notion; he’s not against testing or questioning texts. But it’s the second notion that alarms him.

*Answer:* I agree. The second part is the specifically skeptical aspect of deconstruction that does annoy and alarm people like Professor Bate. My answer to that would be to say to him or to anyone else, let’s look at the works together. Let’s read them together and do that testing and we’ll see whether you can persuade me that the ground of a text does bear the weight. That’s what I mean by the claim that deconstruction is simply good reading and that the best places for discussing deconstruction are to be found in shared acts of reading, not in pure theory. In the latter, untested preconceptions about what goes on in Kant or Wallace Stevens, for example, move very easily into polemical statements.

*Question:* If Bate read further into deconstruction, don’t you think that he would find comfort in the obvious conservatism that has developed there? It seems to me that the conclusion to your questioning is predetermined; that is, you already know that literature won’t sustain the meanings imposed on it. But faced with that fact you finally develop the conservative argument that since there’s no way in which you can justify any map of literary history, for example, you’re justified in holding on to the map you’ve got. Do you think that deconstruction consequentially shelters academic and intellectual conservatives who in a previous era would have been New Critics?

*Answer:* I don’t agree that my conclusions are predetermined. I’m still looking and would be glad to find solid ground to stand on. As for the map of literary history, I believe a new one on the basis of new developments is possible. Drawing that map is a major task today. Insofar as deconstruction is simply good reading or careful reading, then it is a form of reading in general of which the New Criticism was another form. Unlike the New Critics, deconstructionists argue that you can’t take it for granted that a good work of literature is going to be organically unified. Deconstruction sees irony as not necessarily (or perhaps ever) a trope of determinable meanings (saying one thing and meaning another identifiable thing) and puts more emphasis than Brooks did on such problematic tropes, however much interest he took in them. Deconstruction is more Empsonian or Burkean than Brooksian. I would say that it’s all there in Kenneth Burke and Empson: you don’t need Derrida if you have read Burke. Derrida has, however, applied notions about language like Burke’s to a larger variety of works. He is interesting to me not only as a theorist but also as a reader.
we read are essentially the ones that everybody else reads. Because the
verse is pretty well taken for granted in deconstruction, this particular
form of criticism hasn’t discovered all that many great writers whom
nobody else had noticed. Derrida, for example, teaches philosophy. He
teaches mostly the central canon of major philosophers, Plato, Leibnitz,
Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, just as any other historian of phi-
losophy would do.

Answer: Nothing, if I had been a good reader. That’s what I mean
when I say that you don’t need Derrida or deconstruction if you have
not so much Brooks and Warren as Empson and Burke, that side of
the New Criticism that’s slightly more radical in its view of figures of
speech and so on. I would also say, however, that by putting in question
the assumption that a good literary work is going to be organically
unified, deconstruction has freed me to deal with aspects of works which
are not easily assimilated on the assumption of unity. The deconstruc-
tionist critics have called attention to the special power of catharsis,
a figure of speech, if you can call it that, to which the New Critics did
not pay much attention. (Derrida’s “White Mythology” is of course a
key text here.) Catharsis and prosopopoeia have been important in
my recent work. They are limits where rhetorical analysis of literary
texts based on the opposition between literal and figurative languages
breaks down and where there may be a glimpse, as in the wink of an
eye, of something beyond language. That “something,” it may be,
forbids language, the language of poems for example, to “come clear.”
Catharsis and prosopopoeia converge, as in “face of a mountain,”
but have different temporal orientations, catharsis toward the present
and toward the “making present” by naming of what would otherwise
slip away, prosopopoeia toward the past, the invocation of the absent,
inanimate, or dead by giving it the mask of personification, speaking
to it or of it as though it were a living person: “Ye knew him well, ye
cliffs and islands of Winander.” As my example shows, apostrophe and
prosopopoeia are of course closely connected. I have tried to work some
of this out in The Linguistic Moment.

Question: But I would say that in The Linguistic Moment you give an
organic reading of Yeats’s “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen.” By
showing that there’s disorder in each of the individual parts of the
in curriculum and departmental organization are already beginning in American colleges and universities as a result of deconstruction. Your question has been raised by people quite different from Abrams in orientation. For example, Rodolphe Gasché in an essay in Glyph makes the point rather aggressively that Derrida belongs to a certain European context, that he is genuinely revolutionary in that context, that he is a philosopher, not a literary critic, and that when he is appropriated in the United States primarily by literary critics and for the purposes of reading, he is tamed and made more conservative. The people who do this kind of criticism in America, moreover, tend to be elitist institutions, say some of our critics, and therefore uphold the status quo, vote conservatively, and so on. Deconstructionists find themselves in the strange situation of being attacked by both sides: by conservatives like Bate and Wellek and Gerald Graff for being nihilistic and by Marxists for not changing the institution one iota. On the one hand we do nothing, on the other are violent anarchists. I don’t see how our opponents can have it both ways. In fact both are grievously in error. I would agree that there is a change when you move from one institutional context to another. Derrida, it is true, is supposed to be a philosopher, and most of the people in America who do this kind of criticism are literary critics, though Derrida’s influence on philosophy proper in America is beginning to be strongly felt. This fact is resisted and deplored by philosophers like Searle. On the other hand, I do think that Gasché is wrong in ignoring the fact that Derrida is primarily a reader of pieces of language and that among the things that he has read are works of literature. It’s not necessarily the case, then, that a critic of literature must be less radical than Derrida. It’s not intrinsic in the transfer that deconstruction must be weakened over here. Changed, yes, but after all Derrida teaches at Yale a few weeks each year and lectures widely in the States. At least to that degree his activity is transferred to the United States.

Question: You no longer feel that there is any sort of interaction between the self and language?

Answer: I’m skeptical about whether you can think of the self as something inside me like a grain of sand, as Yeats put it, something like a definite hard object. It seems to me that the self is a function primarily of language rather than a preexistent given which uses language. Language is prior to selfhood rather than the other way around, though the latter is what Georges Poulet, along with so many other distinguished critics, appears to think. Once you see the self as generated by language, then selfhood becomes much more varied, precarious, and complicated. I agree with Nietzsche here. He defines the self as a congeries of warring selves. The issue of selfhood is of great importance in the criticism of fiction. It is traditional to assume that a good work of fiction is going to present characters each of whom has a total unity. It seems to me, on the contrary, that one of the major things the tradition of realistic fiction does is to put that notion of selfhood in question. A marvelous example of this is Meredith’s The Egoist. Clara Middleton discovers that though her act of promising to marry Willoughby presupposes a fixed and unified self on the basis of which promises can be made, she does not in fact have such a self. She is rather “a multitude of flitting wishes.” It’s not, then, that there’s necessarily no such thing as selfhood but that it cannot be taken for granted. The nature of selfhood is one of the things that literature makes problematic or about which literature raises questions.

Question: But in “The Function of Rhetorical Study at the Present Time” you suggest that calling into question the notion of the self eventually affirms the self.

Answer: Well, the self is a hard thing to do without—almost impossible, in fact, even in the most practical sense. Suppose I could say that yesterday I signed that promissory note or took out that mortgage but I’m not the same person today that I was yesterday, so you can’t hold me to the mortgage payment. Obviously that would cause great problems. It seems like a trivial example, but our whole social life depends on the possibility of holding somebody to promises and commitments that presuppose you’re somehow the same person from day to day and from year to year. It’s a serious business, this question of self, not just a theoretical speculation. This is why I think it’s better that questions about it should be raised in a relatively safe area like novels rather than in other areas. That is one of the things we need novels for, to assuage our anxiety about a subject by allowing questions to be raised about it and perhaps to lead us, as The Egoist does, to a happy ending, thereby calming our fears. In The Egoist the idea of selfhood as a fixed, preexisting thing is replaced by a much more precarious notion of selfhood, a notion which would be a little harder to live with if it were widely accepted.

Question: But doesn’t deconstruction, in practice, affirm the self that it wants to question?

Answer: Yes, though perhaps in a form which is slightly shaken or transformed. Nietzsche is a good example of this. Book III of The Will to Power is one of the most powerful puttings into question of the notion of selfhood I know. Nietzsche argues subtly and overtly that there is no such thing as the self, that it is just a changing set of functions, linguistic conventions, etc. But notice the way Nietzsche says this: “I
poem, you suggest that the poem consistently creates an image of disorder. I am consequently still not sure what is new about your reading.

Answer: What you say is based on a misunderstanding of the opposition between an "organically unified" reading and a deconstructionist one. A deconstructionist reading can be quite specific about the particular ways a given poem, say Yeats' "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," does not hang together or cohere, is heterogeneous, defies the unifying power of logical reason, the logos, without thereby making for an organically unified reading. Nor does such a reading mean that it's a free-for-all, that one is free to make any reading whatsoever of the poem. I would say that I think my reading of Yeats' poem is right, that all right-thinking people will come, given enough time, to my reading. When one speaks of undecidability as a feature of deconstructive criticism, one doesn't mean a free-for-all but a very precise identifiable movement back and forth among possibilities, each of which can be articulated phrase by phrase. My notion is that a poem has a coercive effect on any reader and on any reading, even an inadequate one. Even the most evasive paraphrase contains latent meanings it tries to suppress, for example Abrams' reading of "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal." The exemplary statement of this is in Paul de Man's foreword to Carol Jacobs' *The Dissimulating Harmony.* To de Man's statement I give my entire allegiance. Here are his words, if I may be allowed, belatedly and in his memory, to read them into the record:

Understanding is not a version of one single and universal Truth that would exist as an essence, a hypostasis. The truth of a text is a much more empirical and literal event. What makes a reading more or less true is simply the predictability, the necessity of its occurrence, regardless of the reader or of the author's wishes. "Es geeignet sich aber das Wahre" (not die Wahrheit) says Hölderlin, which can be freely translated, "What is true is what is bound to take place." And, in the case of the reading of a text, what takes place is a necessary understanding. What marks the truth of such an understanding is not some abstract universal but the fact that it has to occur regardless of other considerations... it is not a matter of choice to omit or to accentuate by paraphrase certain elements in a text at the expense of others. We don't have this choice, since the text imposes its own understanding and shapes the reader's evasions. The more one censors, the more one reveals what is being effaced. A paraphrase is always what we called an analytical reading, that is, it is always susceptible of being made to point out consistently what it was trying to conceal.

Question: I'm always surprised when you talk about the coerciveness or independent status of the poem. How can you exempt the poem from the skepticism in deconstruction that seems to undermine every other presence?

Answer: I need something to hang on to or to stand on. It's those words on the page. They are not so much "presence" as what Mallarmé calls "une apparence fausse de présence." In giving that nonpresent presence irresistible power, I'm testifying to my experience with literature, which is that I can't make George Eliot's *Middlemarch* or Stevens' "The Rock" mean anything that I want it to mean. Such a text that has coercion over me may be complicated, heterogeneous, enigmatic, but that doesn't make it disappear or free me to make it mean anything I want. This fact preserves the possibility of saying to somebody, "You're wrong in this case." Luckily, since a teacher needs to feel able to say that. This power of the text over its readers also opens up the possibility of dialogue among readers in which you could actually work out whether somebody was right or wrong. It follows that the real way to get at Derrida—it would be hard to do—would be to try to demonstrate that he is wrong about Plato or Ponge or Hegel, that his readings are wrong. This would be far more to the point than arguing in a vacuum about his "theories."

Question: How does Frye's theory of archetypes fit in with your view of deconstruction?

Answer: For Frye, archetypes tend to be thought of as preceding or exceeding any of their embodiments. Therefore, though Frye's theory is not openly Jungian, he nevertheless suggests that there is a reservoir of archetypes somewhere, and that they have to reappear out of some place. For me or for Derrida, the patterns exist only in their bodies; there is no ur example. There is no origin other than a movement of differentiation. Frye has not been much talked about or criticized by deconstructionists as far as I know, but in "Structure, Sign, and Play" Derrida explicitly criticizes a nostalgia for an original happy savage state in Lévi-Strauss. In the Lévi-Straussian or structuralist anthropological view of myth, you have two, three, five, a dozen, a hundred different examples of the myth you have gathered, and it looks as if they bend back toward some original myth of which they are all representative, though Lévi-Strauss correctly sees that as an anachronic illusion. Frye sometimes seems to yield to that illusion.

Question: M. H. Abrams has used your essay "On Edge" to make a sharp distinction between Derrida's linguistic philosophy and the use made of it in American deconstructive criticism. Do you see any grounds for distinguishing between your literary criticism and Derrida's philosophy?

Answer: I should hope there would be a difference! On the other hand it would be a mistake to assume too easily that American deconstruction is necessarily all that tame or conservative. Profound changes
J. Hillis Miller

hold [Ich halte] that there's no such thing as the self." He cannot perform
the activity of deconstructing the self without at the same time affirming
it. It is a splendid example of your point.

Question: Where do you see literary study going in the immediate
future? Are significant further changes likely to take place?

Answer: I think the frontier or border on which we stand now is very
different from our situation five years ago when I wrote "On Edge:
The Crossways of Contemporary Criticism." We stand at a different
crossroads and have different choices to make. The assimilation of
poststructuralist modes of criticism into college and university curricula
for which I called then has to a considerable extent occurred or is
occurring. The danger now is that deconstruction might petrify, harden
into a dogma, or into a rigid set of prescriptions for reading, become
some kind of fixed method rather than a set of examples, very different
from one another, of good reading. I see the frontier of literary study
at the present time as involving the genuine assimilation of the lessons
deconstruction (no easy matter, involving as it does the careful
reading of the work of de Man, Derrida, et al.) and then requiring us
to move on as they are (or rather as Derrida is and as de Man was in
work done shortly before his death) toward the difficult questions of
what these new developments mean for ethics, for the institutionalizing
of literary study, and for the broadest and most fundamental questions
of literary history, of history as such, of social policy and social organiza-
tion, of the role of literature in society. The stakes here are enormous.
The most prudent and careful as well as the most courageous work of
thought will be necessary, but if literature, as a mode of the
esthetic, is to have the role allotted to it by Kant, and ever since Kant,
as the bridge between epistemology and ethics, the new developments
in literary study have important implications not only for the bridge
but for those realms the bridge is supposed to join. So we may be not
so much at a frontier or at a crossroads as standing on a bridge—a
bridge, moreover, that has received in recent years a new testing, shak-
ing, or solicitation.

M. H. Abrams

Construing and
Deconstructing

This age of critical discourse is the best of times or it is the worst
of times, depending on one's point of view; but there is no denying
that it is a very diverse and lively time. Never have the presupposi-
tions and procedures of literary criticism been put so drastically into
question, and never have we been presented with such radical alternatives
for conceiving and making sense of literary texts. Among the competing
theories of the last several decades we find reader-response criticism
(itself divisible into a variety of subspecies), reception criticism, anxiety-
of-influence criticism, structuralist criticism, semiotic criticism, and—
most ominous to many traditional ears—deconstructive criticism. It
was not many years ago that announcements of jobs for professors of
literature began to be supplemented by requests for professors of lit-
erary criticism. Now we find increasing requests for professors of the
theory of criticism—professors, that is, whose profession is metacriticism.

The new theories are diverse in principles and procedures, but in
their radical forms they converge in claims that have evoked indignation
from many traditional critics. One claim is that it is impossible even
to identify anything called "literature" by establishing boundaries, or
specifying features, which set it off from other forms of writing. Another
and related claim is that criticism is in no way attendant upon or
subordinate in function to the literature which, over the centuries since
Aristotle, critics have set themselves to classify, analyze, and elucidate;
criticism, it is now often said, is a mode of writing which does not
discover, but "produces" the meanings of the texts that it engages,
hence is equally entitled to be "creative." Most dismaying to traditionalists is the claim, diversely argued, that no text, either in its component passages or as an entity, has a determinable meaning and therefore that there is no right way to interpret it; all attempts to read a text are doomed to be misreadings.

Among these innovations in literary theory and practice, the signs are that deconstruction, based primarily on writings of Jacques Derrida since the late 1960s, will be predominant. Within the last ten years deconstructive criticism has generated a flood of books and articles which exemplify it, describe it, attack it, or defend it; the articles appear not only in several journals devoted primarily to deconstruction, but increasingly in the most staid of publications, including the alleged stronghold of the critical establishment, PMLA. Its focal center in America has been Yale University, whose faculty includes those exponents whom their colleague, Geoffrey Hartman, has genially labeled "boa deconstructors"—especially Derrida himself, Paul de Man, and J. Hillis Miller. Radiating from that center, the movement has captivated, in varying degree, a number of younger teachers of literature and many among the brightest of graduate students, including some who have written their theses under my direction. By J. S. Mill's maxim that the opinions of bright people between twenty and thirty years of age is the best index to the intellectual tendencies of the next era, it seems probable that the heritage of deconstruction will be prominent in literary criticism for some time to come.

I shall try to locate the deconstructive enterprise on the map of literary theory by sketching its overlap with, as well as its radical departures from, traditional treatments of literature. It is impossible to do so except from some point of view. I shall try to make allowances for mine, which is that of a traditionalist who has staked whatever he has taugh or written about literature, and about literary and intellectual history, on the confidence that he has been able to interpret the textual passages he cited with a determinacy and an accuracy sufficient to the purpose at hand.

One must approach deconstructive literary criticism by way of the writings of Jacques Derrida, the founder, names, and prime exemplar of deconstruction-in-general. To be brief about so protean, oblique, and tactically agile a writer cannot escape being selective and reductive.

It seems fair to say, however, that in terms of the traditional demarcations among disciplines, Derrida (though he has commented on some literary texts) is to be accounted a philosopher, not a literary critic, and that his writings undertake to reveal the foundations presupposed by all precedent Western philosophies and ways of thinking, to "undermine" or "subvert" these foundations by showing that they are illusions engendered by desire for an impossible certainty and security, and to show the consequences for writing and thinking when their supposed foundations are thus undermined.

Some commentators on Derrida have remarked in passing that Derrida's conclusions resemble the skeptical conclusions of David Hume. I want to pursue this comparison; not, however, in order to show that, despite his antimetaphysical stance, Derrida ends in the classical metaphysical position called radical skepticism, but in order to bring out some interesting analogues between the procedures of these two very diverse thinkers. These analogues will highlight aspects of Derrida's dealings with language, emulated by his followers in literary criticism, which are inadequately stressed, both by proponents who assert that Derrida has totally revolutionized the way we must from now on read texts and by opponents who assert that Derrida cancels all criteria of valid interpretation, in an anarchical surrender to textual "freplay."

We can parallel three moments in the overall procedures of Hume and Derrida:

(1) The point of departure in Hume's Treatise of Human Nature is that "nothing is ever really present with the mind but its perceptions," which consist of "impressions" that are "immediately present to our consciousness" and the "ideas" that are the fainter replica of these impressions. Beginning with these as the sole givens which can be known with certainty, Hume proceeds to show that, in all reasoning and knowledge concerning "matters of fact," we can never get outside the sense-impressions which were his starting point, nor establish the certainty of any connections between the single sense-impressions which constitute immediate awareness. He thus disintegrates all grounds for certain knowledge about the identity of any two impressions separated in time, about the existence of material objects in an external world, about the relation of cause and effect between any two occurrences, and about the reality even of "personal identity" or a conscious "self." All these entities and relations, Hume contends, since they cannot be established by demonstrative reasoning from his premised single

impressions, are the products of the "imagination" and of "custom," and have the status not of knowledge but merely of "fallacies," "fictions," or "illusions."

To Derrida's way of thinking, Hume's starting point in the *hic et nunc* of a nonmediated, hence certainly known perception would be a classic example of the way Western philosophy, in all its forms, is based on a "presence," or indubitable founding element independent of language, so that Hume's skeptical conclusions from this given, to Derrida, would be merely a negative counterpart of the cognitive dogmatism that it challenges. As Derrida has put it: "Perception is precisely a concept, a concept of an intuition or of a given originating from the thing itself, present itself in its meaning, independently from language, from the system of reference." Hence, he declares, "I don't believe that anything like perception exists." Instead of positing a foundational given, Derrida establishes a point of view. "The axial proposition of this essay," he declares in *Of Grammatology*, is "that there is nothing outside the text" ["il n'y a rien hors du texte," or alternatively, "il n'y a pas de hors-texte"]. This assertion is not offered either as the point of departure or as the result of a philosophical demonstration. It functions as an announcement of where Derrida takes his stand, and that is within the workings of language itself, in order to show us what standard philosophical problems, premises, and intellecction look like when viewed from this stance and point of vantage. In many of its consequences, nonetheless, Derrida's counterphilosophical linguistic ploy converges with those of Hume's skeptical philosophy. Hume, premising only single impressions, showed that there is no way to establish identity or causal connections among impressions, nor to match impressions to material objects, a world, or a self to which we have access independently of impressions. Derrida, taking his stand within language, disperses the seemingly determinate meanings of terms such as "identity," "cause," "material objects," "the external world," "the self," and shows that there is no way to match such terms to a reality to which we have access independently of the language we use to represent it.

Derrida's way of carrying out his project is to offer "readings" of passages in Western thinkers, from Plato to the ordinary-language philosopher John Austin, in order to reveal their common "logocentrism." This term denominates his claim that Western philosophical discourse—and indeed all modes of discourse, since none can escape the use of terms whose significance is "sedimented" by their role in the history of philosophy—is predicated on the existence of a logos. The logos is Derrida's overall term for an absolute, or foundation, or ground, whose full, self-certifying "presence" is assumed to be given in a direct cognitive encounter which is itself unconditioned by the linguistic system that incorporates it, yet relies on it as a foundation. Such a presence, for example, is sometimes posited as an immediately known intention or state of consciousness in a speaker while speaking, or as an essence, or as a Platonic Form accessible to mental vision, or as a referent known in its own being; in any case, it constitutes a "transcendental signified" which, though inevitably represented by a signer, is regarded as an unmediated something that is unaffected by the signifying system which represents it.

Derrida's readings are oriented toward showing that any philosophical text can be shown to rely on a ground which is indispensable to its argument, its references, and its conclusions, but turns out to be itself groundless, hence suspended over an "abyss." Derrida's view, furthermore, is that a logos-centered philosophy is a voice-centered philosophy. In consequence, one of his characteristic procedures, often misunderstood, is to overcome Western "phonoessentialism" (the reliance on the speaking voice as the linguistic model) by positing an admittedly nonexistent "arche-ecriture," "writing-in-general." By asserting the "priority" of writing (in the sense of writing-in-general) both to speech and to writing (in the ordinary sense of putting words on paper), Derrida is not claiming that the invention of writing preceded speech in history; he is deploying a device designed to get us to substitute for the philosophical idiom of speaking the alternative idiom of writing, in which we are less prone to the illusion, as he conceives it, that a speaker in the presence of a listener knows what he means independently of the words in which he expresses it, or that he establishes the meaning of what he says to the listener by communicating his unmediated intention in uttering it.

From his elected stance within language, Derrida replaces the view that language developed by a matching of words to the given world by positing an internal linguistic principle of "difference." This term, like "writing-in-general," is offered as a heuristic fiction, in which the "a" in the written form, Derrida tells us, indicates the conflation of the incompatible senses of the French word *différer* as "to differ" and "to defer." In accordance with the insight of the linguist Saussure that both a signer and what it signifies are constituted not by their inherent features, but by a network of "differences" from other signifiers and
signifieds, Derrida posits *differance* as generating internally the differential verbal signs, while deferring the presence of what they signify through endless substitutions of signifiers whose ultimate arrest in a determinate and stable meaning or reference never is, but is always about to be. For according to Derrida, in the lack of any possible "transcendental," or extralinguistic referent unconditioned by the differential economy of language, there is no stopping the play of meanings. In one of Derrida's formulations: "The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the interplay of signification *ad infinitum.*" Or, in another of his punning, deliberately contrarious terms, which in this case exploits a double etymology, any text, under radical inquisition, "disseminates": it sows its seed, and in that process loses its seeming semantic determinacy, by scattering into a regress which inevitably involves an "aporia"—that is, a deadlock between incompatible meanings which are "undecidable," in that we lack any certain ground for choosing between them.

(2) Having reached his skeptical conclusions, Hume finds himself, he tells us, in a condition of "melancholy" and "despair," "affrighted and confounded with that forelorn solitude, in which I am plac'd in my philosophy." Hume's solitude is beyond solipsism, for the solipsist is certain at least of the reality of his conscious self, while Hume is reduced to knowing only present perceptions which yield no implication of a conscious self that knows. From this dire condition he finds himself rescued not by further reasoning, but by the peremptory intrusion of a life-force—"an absolute and uncontrollable necessity" that he calls "nature." "Nature herself... cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium.... I dine, I play a game of back-gammon, I converse, and am merry with friends; and when after three or four hours' amusement, I wou'd return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strain'd, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther." Hume finds that he cannot live in accordance with his skeptical philosophy; yet his impulse to philosophical reasoning is no less compelling than his instinct to participate in human society in accordance with its shared beliefs. As a consequence, Hume finds himself living (and recommends that others should also live) a double life: the life of human society, and the life of the reason that disintegrates all the beliefs on which social life is based into fictions and illusions: "Here then I find myself absolutely and necessarily determin'd to live, and talk, and act like other people in the common affairs of life." Yet

---


1Hume, *Treatise*, p. 264.

"In all the incidents of life we ought still to preserve our skepticism. If we believe, that fire warms, or water refreshes, 'tis only because it costs us too much pains to think otherwise."

Derrida's conduct of language is analogous to Hume's double mode of necessarily continuing to live in accordance with shared beliefs that he is rationally compelled to subvert. Derrida in fact describes the deconstructive enterprise as a deliberate and sustained duplicity—"a double gesture, a double science, a double writing." And in reading texts there is a double procedure, "two interpretations of interpretation," which play a simultaneous role in life, and which, though irreconcilable, permit no option between them:

There are more than enough indications today to suggest we might perceive that these two interpretations of interpretation—which are absolutely irreconcilable even if we live them simultaneously [même si nous les vivons simultanément] and reconcile them in an obscure economy—together share the field which we call, in such a problematic fashion, the human sciences.

For my part, although these two interpretations must acknowledge and accentuate their difference and define their irreducibility, I do not believe that today there is any question of *choosing....*

We mistake Derrida's own procedure if we overlook the fact that his deconstructive readings of philosophical passages involve both these interpretive modes and consist of a deliberate double-reading—we may denominate them as reading, and reading,—which are distinguishable, even if they are irreconcilable, sometimes concurrent, and always interdependent. Reading, finds a passage "lisible" and understandable, and makes out, according to a procedure that he shares with common readers, the determinate meanings of the sentences he cites. (For convenience let us say that in reading, he *construes* the passage.) Reading2, which he calls a "critical reading," or an "active interpretation," goes on to disseminate the meanings it has already construed.

Derrida accounts for the possibility of reading, by attributing to differance the production of the "effect" in language of a fundamental presence—not a real presence, or free-standing existent, but one which is simply a "function" of the differential play—as well as the production of all the other "effects" on which the common practice of reading depends, including the "effects" of a conscious intention, of a specific

2Ibid., pp. 265, 183, 260–70.
speech act, and of a determinate meaning or reference. In this way, he explains, "the metaphysical text is understood; it is still readable, and remains to be read." And this standard reading and understanding, though only an initial "stage," is indispensable to the process of deconstruction.

For example: most of Derrida's Of Grammatology presents readings of selected passages from Rousseau's Essay on the Origin of Language. In great part Derrida, with no lack of assurance, construes these passages as conveying determinate meanings, with tacit confidence that his own readers will assent to his construal—a confidence I find well founded, because Derrida is an uncommonly proficient and scrupulous reader of texts in the standard fashion. In this process, he attributes the writing of the Essay to an individual named "Rousseau," and has no hesitation in specifying what "Rousseau affirms... unambiguously," or what "Rousseau says... clearly in the Essay" and "also invariably says... elsewhere" (pp. 173, 184), nor in attributing what the text says to Rousseau's "intention" to say it, or to what it is that "Rousseau wishes to say." In the course of this reading, Derrida paraphrases Rousseau's assertions and identifies recurrent "themes" in variant phrasings of the same assertion (p. 195; see also p. 133); undertakes to establish the time of his life in which Rousseau wrote the Essay on the basis of two kinds of evidence, which he describes as either "internal" or "external" to the Essay itself (pp. 171, 192); and, though he detects "massive borrowings" in the Essay from earlier writers, affirms the essential "originality" of Rousseau as a theorist of language (pp. 98, 272, 281). Derrida also accepts as accurate some interpretations of Rousseau's text by earlier commentators, but corrects others which he describes, politely, as the result of "hasty reading" (pp. 189, 243). And he is able to find Rousseau's text "readable" in this fashion because the language that Derrida has inherited, despite some historical changes, is one that he possesses in common with Rousseau; as Derrida puts it: "Rousseau drew upon a language that was already there—and which is found to be somewhat our own, thus assuring us a certain minimum readability of French literature" (p. 160).

Thus far, Derrida's reading proceeds in a way that is congruent with the theories of many current philosophers that communication depends on our inheritance of a shared language and shared linguistic practices or conventions, and that when, by applying the practice we share with

a writer, we have recognized what he intended to say, then we have understood him correctly. Many of these philosophers also agree with Derrida that there is no extralinguistic, nonconventional foundation for our linguistic practice which certifies its rules and their application and guarantees the correctness of a reader's interpretation; in justifying an interpretation, when we have exhausted appeals to shared, though contingent, linguistic and social conventions, in Wittgenstein's phrase, "the spade turns." Derrida's radical innovation does not, therefore, consist in his claim that no such foundation exists, but in his further claim that such a foundation, though nonexistent, is nevertheless indispensable, and that in its absence there is no stopping the continuing dissemination of construed meanings into undecidability.

In accordance with this view, Derrida designates his reading—the determinate construal of the "legibility" of passages in Rousseau—as no more than a "strategic" phase which, though indispensable, remains "provisional" to a further "critical," or deconstructive reading (pp. 99, 149). One of Derrida's moves in this critical reading is to identify strata, or "strands" in Rousseau's text which, when read determinately, turn out to be mutually contradictory (pp. 200, 237, 240, 245). A number of earlier commentators, of course, have found Rousseau's linguistic and social theories to be incoherent or contradictory, but have regarded this feature as a logical fault or else as assimilable to an overall direction of his thinking. Derrida, however, regards such self-contradictions not as logical mistakes which Rousseau could have avoided, but as inescapable features not only in Rousseau's text but also in all Western texts, since all rely on a fixed logocentric ground yet are purely conventional and differential in their economy. In this critical "sub-reading" of Rousseau's texts, Derrida asserts that their determinate reading always leaves an inescapable and ungovernable "excess" or "surplus" of signification, which is both the index and the result of the fact that "the writer writes in a language and in a logic whose proper system, laws, and life his discourse by definition cannot dominate absolutely"; a critical reading must aim at detecting the "relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command..." (p. 158). Derrida's reading of Rousseau thus repeatedly uncovers opposite meanings between what Rousseau "wishes to say" and what "he says without wishing to say it, or between what Rousseau "declares" and what the text "describes" without Rousseau's wishing to say it (pp. 200, 229, 238). What Rousseau declares and wishes to say is what is construed by a standard reading; what the text ungovernably goes on, unbeknownst to the writer, to say is what gets disclosed by a deeper deconstructive reading.
Derrida's commentary on John Austin, an ordinary-language philosopher who disclaims any extralinguistic foundation for the functioning of language, couches Derrida's views in terms which bring them closer to the idiom familiar to Anglo-American philosophers. In discussing Austin's theory of a performative speech-act, Derrida points out that all words and verbal sequences are "iterable," or repeatable in diverse linguistic and social circumstances, with a consequent diversity both in the nature of the speech-act and the signification of its words. Derrida construes Austin to make the claim that the total verbal and social context, in a clear case, establishes for certain the nature and communicative success of a speech-act. Derrida's counterclaim is that we never find an absolutely clear case, that we can never know for certain that all the necessary and sufficient conditions for determining a specific and successful performative have in fact been satisfied. (In Derrida's parlance, no context is ever "saturated," so as to make it "entirely certain," or "exhaustively determinable," which is "the sense required by Austin." 

11) He stresses especially Austin's reiterated references to the intention of the speaker—necessary, for example, in order to determine a speaker's sincerity and seriousness—as a condition for the success of a speech-act. The speaker's intention, Derrida asserts, is a condition whose fulfillment neither the speaker nor his auditor can know with certainty and one which cannot control or "master" the play of meaning. Derrida's conclusion is that there can be no "communication," as he puts it, "that is unique, univocal, rigorously controllable, and transmittable," and no way of achieving certainty about the "purity," in the sense of "the absolutely singular uniqueness of a speech act." 

To this conclusion Austin himself would surely agree. Language, as a shared conventional practice, cannot provide grounds for absolute certainty in communication; even in the clearest case, it always remains possible that we have got an interpretation wrong. Language nonetheless is adequate for communicating determinate meanings, in that the shared regularities of that practice can provide, in particular circumstances, a warranted assurance about what someone has undertaken to say. For Derrida, however, it is a matter of all-or-nothing; there is no intermediate position on which a determinate interpretation can rest, for if no meanings are absolutely certain and stable, then all meanings are unstable and undecidable. "Semantic communication," or the successful achievement of a performative or other speech-act, is indeed an "effect"; but it is, he says, "only an effect," and as such incapable of arresting the dispersal of signification in "a dissemination irreducible to polysemy." 

In the process of his critical reading, Derrida identifies various features of a philosophical text which inescapably "exceed" the limits of what its writer set out to assert. One of these features is the use in the argument of key equivocations that cannot be used to specify one meaning without involving the opposed meaning. In Rousseau's theory of language, for example, the argument turns on the duplicitous word "supplement" (meaning both something added to what is itself complete and something required to complete what is insufficient); in reading other authors, Derrida identifies other Janus-faced terms such as pharmakon and hymen. Another feature is the presumed reliance of a text on a logical argument which turns out to involve nonlogical "rhetorical" moves. Prominent in Derrida's analysis of the inherent rhetoricity of philosophical reasoning is the disclosure of the role of indispensable metaphors that are assumed to be merely convenient substitutes for literal or "proper" meanings, yet are irreducible to literal meanings except by applying an opposition, metaphoric/literal, which is itself a consequence of the philosophy which presupposes it. A third feature is the unavoidable use in a text of what are presumed to be exclusive oppositions; Derrida undertakes to undermine such oppositions by showing that their boundaries are constantly transgressed, in that each of the terms crosses over into the domain of its opponent term. Prominent among the many unsustainable oppositions to which Derrida draws our attention is that of inside/outside, or internal/external, as applied to what is within or outside the mind, or within or outside the system of linguistic signs, or within or outside a text (a book, a poem, or an essay) which is ostensibly complete in itself.

Derrida's view of the untenability of the distinction between what is inside or outside a text has had, as we shall see, an especially important impact on the procedures of deconstructive literary criticism. "What used to be called a text," Derrida says, has "boundaries," which were thought to demarcate "the supposed end and beginning of a work, the unity of a corpus"; such a designation, however, applies only on the condition that "we accept the entire conventional system of legalities that organizes, in literature, the framed unity of the corpus," including the "unity of the author's name . . . registration of the copyright, etc." 

Derrida's double-reading, reading, and re-reading, in fact produces two
One is the text, such as Rousseau’s Essay, which he reads by accepting, in a provisional way, the standard conventions and legalities that establish as its boundaries: the opening and closing lines of its printed form. Text is produced “by a sort of over-run [débordement] that spoils all these boundaries and divisions and forces us to extend the accredited concept, the dominant notion of a ‘text,’ of what I still call a ‘text,’ for strategic reasons.” This second text is no longer a finished corpus of writing” by a particular author, but a text as an aspect of textuality in general—of “a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces.” Text, however, does not simply annul the constraints and borders that function in the reading of text, for, though it overruns all the limits assigned to it so far, it does so not by “submerging or drowning them in an undifferentiated homogeneity, but rather making them more complex…”

This last quotation brings out what commentators overlook who claim that Derrida’s emphasis on “freeplay” in language is equivalent to “anything goes in interpretation,” and that is his repeated emphasis that a deconstructive reading does not cancel the role of intention and of the other conventions and legalities that operate in a determinate reading of a limited text, but merely “reinscribes” them, as he puts it, so as to reveal their status as no more than “effects” of the differential play. Derrida insists that the standard mode of “doubling commentary”—a commentary, that is, which simply undertakes to say in other words what it is that the author undertook to say—“should not doubt have its place in a critical reading.” “To recognize and respect all its classical exigencies [i.e., of reading] is not easy and requires all the instruments of traditional criticism. Without this recognition and this respect, critical production [i.e., reading] would risk developing in any direction at all and authorize itself to say almost anything…”

The deliberate anomaly of Derrida’s double interpretive procedure, however, is patent. He cannot demonstrate the impossibility of a standard reading except by going through the stage of manifesting its possibility; a text must be read determinately in order to be disseminated into an undecidability that never strikes completely free of its initial determination; deconstruction can only subvert the meanings of a text that has always already been construed. And even if a reader has been persuaded that Derrida has truly discovered a force in language (seemingly unsuspected, or at least unexploited, before Nietzsche) which forces him to overrun all the constraints and borders of standard construal, he has no option except to begin by construing a text, including Derrida’s own text; or more precisely, his only option is whether or not to read French, or English, or any other natural language.

(3) In addition to subverting all the convictions of our common life and common thought, then to asserting the inescapable need for a double life and double thinking, Hume’s epistemology contains a third moment that has an analogue in Derrida’s theory of language. This is the moment when Hume turns his skepticism back upon itself, by what he calls “a reflex act of the mind” upon “the nature of our understanding, and our reasoning.” In doing so he finds himself involved in “manifest absurdities” and “manifold contradictions,” including the absurdity that his skeptical argument has no recourse except to use reason itself in order “to prove the fallaciousness and imbecility of reason.” Hence “the understanding . . . entirely subverts itself, and leaves not the lowest degree of evidence in any proposition, either in [skeptical] philosophy or common life.” As the only reasonable way to cope with the diverse illogicalities of his philosophical and his social life, Hume recommends that we replace “the force of reason and conviction” by an attitude of insouciance—“a serious good-humor’d disposition” and a “careless” [i.e., carefree] conduct of philosophy, and a diffidence about the conclusions reached by that philosophy. “A true skeptic will be difident of his philosophical doubts, as well as of his philosophical conviction.”

In a parallel way, Derrida turns deconstruction back upon itself. Since, he says, it has no option except to take all “the resources of subversion” from the logocentric system that it subverts, “deconstruction always in a certain way falls prey to its own work.” Even the assertion that the play of writing is incomprehensible by the categories of “the classical logos” and “the law of identity” cannot escape reference...
to the logocentric logic that it flouts; and “for the rest,” he allows, “deconstruction must borrow its resources from the logic it deconstructs.” In addition, as Derrida says, his own deconstructive “production is necessarily a text.” Hence in his writing about writing, Derrida has no option except to “communicate” his views in language intended to be understood determinately by his readers, knowing that, to the extent that his own text is understood, it becomes a victim of the dissemination it asserts. The “work of deconstruction,” then—since it is forced to use linguistic tools which are themselves deconstructed by the work they perform, in a play of illogicalities which cannot be named except by the logic it undermines—cannot escape the “closure” of logocentrism; it can only provide the “crevice through which the yet unnamable glimmer beyond the crevice can be glimpsed.” And to this glimpse of what Derrida can designate only by terms borrowed from the logocentric system—“the freplay of the world,” “genetic indetermination,” “the seminal adventure of the trace”—he too recommends that we assume an attitude. This is not, in his case, Hume’s attitude of urbane “carelessness,” but a Nietzschean attitude of gaiety; a “joyous affirmation” which is “without nostalgia,” “with a certain laughter and with a certain dance.”

Where, according to Derrida, does deconstruction leave both our ordinary use of language and the philosophical and other specialized uses of language? Apparently, pretty much where they are now. He disclaims any possibility of a superior truth which would allow us to replace, or even radically to reform, our current linguistic procedures. “Deconstruction,” he insists, “has nothing to do with destruction.” “I believe in the necessity of scientific work in the classical sense: I believe in the necessity of everything which is being done.” He does not, he says, “destroy” or set out to “discard” concepts; he merely “situates” or “reinscribes” them in an alternative system of difference, in order to reveal that they indeed function, but only as “effects” which lack absolute foundation in an ontological given. What he can be said to reveal, in a change of vocabulary, is that the communicative efficacy of language rests on no other or better ground than that both writers and readers tacitly accept and apply the regularities and limits of an inherited social and linguistic contract.

Derrida has attracted little sustained comment from English and American philosophers, and that comment has been, with few exceptions, dismissive. One reason is that his writings, in addition to being abstruse, variable in procedure, and inverteately paradoxical in the give-and-take of their “double gestures,” are also outlandish. I do not mean only in the sense that they employ what, to the mainstream Anglo-American philosopher, is the foreign idiom of continental philosophy from Hegel through Heidegger. They are outlandish also because there is an antic as well as a sober side to Derrida’s philosophical writings. He likes to give rein to his inventive playfulness in order to tease, or outrage, philosophers who regard the status and role of philosophy with what they take to be excessive seriousness. He is fond—increasingly in recent publications—of exploiting Janus-faced neologisms, deliberately far-fetched analogues, bizarre puns, invented etymologies, straight-faced and often sexual jokes, and dexterous play with his own signature, and also of intercalating incongruous texts by diverse authors, in order to shake, shock, or befuddle us out of our ordinary assurance about the enabling conditions that establish the limits of a textual entity or yield a determinate and stable interpretation.

It is not on Anglo-American philosophy, but on Anglo-American literary criticism that Derrida has had a strong and increasing effect. Some reasons for this specialized direction of influence are obvious. Derrida’s examples of textual readings became widely available to English readers in the 1970s, when what was called the “New Criticism” was some forty years old. The New Criticism was only the most prominent mode of a procedure that had dominated literary criticism for almost a half-century, namely the elaborate explication, or “close reading,” of individual literary texts, each regarded as an integral and self-sufficient whole. A representative New Critic defined a literary work as a text which, in contradistinction to “utilitarian” discourse, uses a language which is metaphorical and “ambiguous” (that is, polysemous, multiply meaningful) rather than literal and univocal, to form a structure which is a free-standing organization of ironies and paradoxes, instead of a logically ordered sequence of referential assertions. By the mid-1970s this once-innovative critical procedure had come to seem confining, predictable, stale. The very features of what Derrida calls his “style” of philosophical reading which made him seem alien to Anglo-American philosophers—his reliance on the elaborate analysis of particular texts, his stress on the covert roles of metaphor and other rhetorical figures, his dissemination of ostensibly univocal meanings...
M. H. Abrams

into paradoxes and aporias—made his writings seem to Anglo-American critics to be familiar, yet generative of radically novel discoveries. Far from offering his style of reading philosophical texts as a model for literary criticism, however, Derrida has emphasized its subversion of the metaphysical concepts and presuppositions that occur in all modes of discourse without exception: there are no features, metaphorical or other, which distinguish a specifically literary use of language; and dissemination, he insists, is "irreducible" to polysemy (a set of determinate meanings), for dissemination is an "overloading" of meanings in an uncontrollable "spread" that cannot be specified as a finite set of determinate signifieds. Critical followers of Derrida have nonetheless assimilated deconstruction to their preexisting critical assumptions and procedures. The result has been in various degrees to domesticate, naturalize, and nationalize Derrida's subversiveness-without-limit, by accommodating it to a closer reading of individual works which serves to show, as Paul de Man has put it, that new-critical close readings "were not nearly close enough." Critical processes are well under way of providing a rival deconstructive reading for each work in the literary canon which had earlier been explicated by one or another New Critic.

What we tend to blanket as deconstructive criticism is in fact highly diverse, ranging from an echoing of distinctive Derridean terms—"presence," "absence," "difference," "effacement," "aporia"—in the process of largely traditional explication, through foregrounding the explicit or implied occurrence in a work of a Derridean theme (especially the theme of writing, or inscription, or decoding), to a radical use of Derridean strategies to explode into dissemination both the integrity and the significance of the literary text that it undertakes to explicate. Instead of generalizing, I shall analyze a single example of the radical type—the reading of Wordsworth's "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal" by one of the "boa deconstructors," J. Hillis Miller, in an essay of 1979 entitled "On Edge: The Crossways of Contemporary Criticism." I choose this instance because Miller presents his reading explicitly "to exemplify," "as he says, the deconstructive mode of literary interpretation;" because Wordsworth's poem is only eight lines long, so that we can have the entire text before us as we go along; because Miller specifies some of the theoretical underpinning of his enterprise and is a lucid and lively expositor of its results—and also, I admit, because some of these results will be so startling to old readers as to inject drama into my presentation. My intention is not polemical, but expository, to bring into view some of the unexpressed, as well as explicit, procedures in this instance of radical literary deconstruction; if my tone is now and then quizzical, that is because it would be both disingenuous and futile to try to conceal my own convictions about the limits of a sound interpretation.

III

A slumber did my spirit seal;
I had no human fears:
She seemed a thing that could not feel
The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees;
Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,
With rocks, and stones, and trees.

The "battle" between the earlier, metaphysic-bound reading and the deconstructive reading, Miller says, is joined in the alternative answers they offer to the question "What does this given poem or passage mean?" (p. 101). Early on in answering this question, he shows that the poem means to him very much what I and other old readers have hitherto taken it to mean. I quote from Miller's deft and lucid exposition of this moment in his deconstructive double-reading:

This beautiful, moving, and apparently simple poem was written [by Wordsworth] at Goslar in Germany in the late fall or early winter of 1798-1799.

To have no human fears is the same thing as to have a sealed spirit. Both of these are defined by the speaker's false assumption that Lucy will not grow old or die. 29

Miller identifies the "she" referred to in the poem as "Lucy" on the standard ground that we have convincing reasons to believe that Wordsworth intended "A Slumber" to be one of a group of five short lyrics—what Miller calls "the Lucy poems as a group" (p. 106). In the other four poems, the girl is named as "Lucy," and Lucy, as one of the poems puts it, "is in her grave, and, oh, / The difference to me!"

27 P. 110, above. All the succeeding page references in the text are those of the essay in this volume.

142
in the second and third clause make more specific, and give reasons for, the assertion in the first clause, "A slumber did my spirit seal." As Miller puts it, perhaps a bit flatly, "the second line . . . repeats the first, and then lines three and four say it over again" (p. 103). Miller also takes the assertions in the first sentence plainly to imply that the girl was then alive, and the assertions in the second sentence (augmented by the stanza-break) to imply that the girl is now dead.

(5) So far, I think, most standard readers of the poem will concur. Miller also goes on to specify the lyric speaker's state of feeling, now that the girl is dead. Since the second stanza does not advert to the speaker's own feelings, but leaves them to be inferred from the terms with which he asserts a state of affairs, the text allows standard readers considerable room for variance in this aspect of interpretation.77 Miller's statement on this issue seems to me sensitive and apt: "The poem expresses both eloquently restrained grief for that death and the calm of mature knowledge" (p. 103).

(6) Note also that Miller reads the poem as a verbal presentation of a human experience which, as he says, is both "beautiful" and "moving"; that is, its presentation is ordered—especially in the sharp division of the stanzas between the situation then and the situation now—so as to effect an emotional response in the reader. That experience might be specified as the shocking discovery, by a particular

---

77The disagreement about "A Slumber" between Cleanth Brooks and F. W. Bateson (which E. D. Hirsch has publicized and made a notable interpretive crucifix) has to do solely with this issue. (See E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* [New Haven and London, 1967], pp. 227–30.) Both readers construe the text as signifying that a girl who was alive in stanza one is dead in stanza two; their disagreement is about what we are to infer about the speaker's state of mind from the terms in which he represents the circumstances of her death. Brooks says that the closing lines "suggest . . . [his] agonized shock at the loved one's present lack of motion . . . her utter and horrible inertness"; Bateson claims that his "mood" mounts to "the pantheistic magisterialness of the last two lines. . . . Lucy is actually more alive now that she is dead, because she is now a part of the life of Nature, and not just a human 'thing.'" Miller's description of the lyric speaker's state of mind seems to me much more attuned to what the speaker says than either of these extreme versions.

Almost all of the many critics who have written about "A Slumber" agree with Miller's construal of the basic situation—a lyric speaker confronting the fact that a girl who seemed invulnerable to aging and death is now dead; they differ mainly in their explication of the overtones and significance of the presented facts. The one drastic divergence I know of is that proposed by Hugh Sykes Davies, in "Another New Poem by Wordsworth," *Essays in Criticism*, 15 (1965), 135–61. Davies argues against the evidence that Wordsworth intended "A Slumber" to be one of the Lucy group and suggests that Wordsworth intended the "she" in the third line to refer back to "spirit" in the first line; hence that the text is to be construed as a poem about a trance-state of the speaker's own spirit. Such a reading seems to me to be not impossible, but extremely unlikely. What Davies' essay does serve to indicate is that no construal of a poem can, by reference to an infallible criterion, be absolutely certain; it is a matter of adequate assurance, as confirmed by the consensus of other competent readers.
person in a particularized instance, of the awful suddenness, unexpectedness, and finality of death.

These are features of Miller's reading of Wordsworth's lyric, phase one: the determination of specific meanings in the poem read as an entity. Phase two, the deconstructive reading, follows from Miller's claim that, since literature is not "grounded in something outside language," the determinate bounds of its meanings are "undermined by the text itself," in a "play of tropes" that "leaves an inassimilable residue or remnant of meaning ... making a movement of sense beyond any unifying boundaries" (p. 101). The intrinsic anomaly of the deconstructive procedure is apparent: in claiming that a determinate interpretation is made impossible by the text, Miller has already shown that it is possible, for he deconstructs a text that he has already determinately construed.

We find the same double-reading—the first performed, but declared to be in some sense impossible, the second held to be made necessary by the text itself—in Paul de Man, whose deconstructive criticism is often said to be closest in its "rigor" to the model of reading established by Derrida himself. As it happens, in an essay of 1969 entitled "The Rhetoric of Temporality," de Man dealt with this very poem by Wordsworth; and he there constructs the text in a way that, for all its difference in idiom, emphasis, and nuance, approximates the way that Miller, and I, and almost all traditional readers, construe it. In the two stanzas,

we can point to the successive description of two stages of consciousness, one belonging to the past and mystified, the other to the "now" of the poem, the stage that has recovered from the mystification of a past now presented as being in error; the "slumber" is a condition of non-awareness. . . .

The curious shock of the poem . . . is that this innocuous statement ["She seemed a thing . . ."] becomes literally true in the retrospective perspective of the eternal "now" of the second part. She now has become a thing in the full sense of its word. . . .

De Man also reads the poem as the utterance of its first-person speaker whose responses we can infer from the way he describes the situation then and the situation now:

The stance of the speaker, who exists in the "now," is that of a subject whose insight is no longer in doubt. . . . First there was error, then the death occurred, and now an insight into the rocky barrenness of the human predicament prevails.24


In this early essay de Man goes on to describe the poem he has so read as, in a special sense, an "allegory." He thus opens the way to the intricate deconstructive strategy exemplified in his later Allegories of Reading (1979). "The paradigm for all texts consists of a figure (or a system of figures) and its deconstruction." But such a reading engenders a second-order "narrative" which he calls an "allegory"—of which the tenor, by the inherent nature of discourse, is invariably the undecidability of the text itself: "Allegories are always allegories of metaphor and, as such, they are always allegories of the impossibility of reading."25

To return to Miller's engagement with Wordsworth's text: I shall first list some of the significations into which (forced, he asserts, by an "inassimilable residue" in the text itself) he disperses the meaning that he has already construed as "apparently simple"; I shall then go on to inquire into the operations which enable him to arrive at these multiplex and self-conflicting significations.

(1) "An obscure sexual drama is enacted in this poem. This drama is a major carrier of its allegorical significance" (p. 105). Miller explains that he applies "allegorical" in the technical sense in which that term is used by Walter Benjamin or by Paul de Man, with temporal reference to "the interaction of two emblematic times," that of stanza one and that of stanza two (p. 104).

(2) "The possession of Lucy alive and seemingly immortal is a replacement for [Wordsworth's] lost mother," who had died when he was eight years old. It follows that Lucy's "imagined death is a reenactment of the death of the mother," hence a reenactment of the loss of "that direct filial bond to nature" which his mother, while alive, had established for him (p. 106).

(3) "Lucy was [line 3] a virgin 'thing.'" In fact she was, by Miller's account, a very young virgin thing, in that she was viewed by the adult and knowledgeable male "speaker of the poem" as possessing a "prepubertal innocence." Consonantly Miller interprets "the touch of earthly years," line 4, to be "a form of sexual appropriation"; but since time is the death-bringing aspect of nature ("earthly years"), that touch is also "the ultimate dispossession which is death." Yet, since Lucy had died so young as to remain intact, "to be touched by earthly years is a way to be sexually penetrated while still remaining virgin" (p. 107).

(4) "The speaker of the poem" (signified by "I," etc.) is not, as it initially seemed, "the opposite of Lucy, male to her female, adult knowledge to her prepubertal innocence." In Miller's disseminative reading of the speaker's temporal transition to knowledge in the second stanza, he becomes "the displaced representative of both the penetrated and the

25Paul de Man, Allegories of Reading (New Haven, 1979), p. 205; see also p. 151.
penetrator, of both Lucy herself [thus also of the mother whom Lucy has replaced] and of her unravishing ravisher, nature or death." "The speaker's movement to knowledge," Miller remarks, "as his consciousness becomes dispersed, loses its 'I' " (p. 108). The I-as-construed, we can add, is dispersed not only into a "he" (the knowledgeable male), but also into a "she," a "they" (Lucy and his mother), and, as the representative of nature, an "it."

(5) "Lucy is both the virgin child and the missing mother.... Male and female, however, come together in the earth, and so Lucy and the speaker are 'the same'.... The two women, mother and girl child, have jumped over the male generation in the middle. They have erased its power of mastery, its power of logical understanding, which is the male power par excellence" (p. 108).

(6) Climactically, in his deconstructive second-reading, Miller discovers that the poem "enacts one version of a constantly repeated accidental drama of the lost sun. Lucy's name of course means light. To possess her would be a means of rejoining the lost source of light, the father sun as logos, as head power and fount of meaning.... Her actual death is the loss both of light and of the source of light. It is the loss of the logos, leaving the poet and his words groundless.... As groundless, the movement is, precisely, alogical" (pp. 109–10). The poem thus allegorically reenacts the inescapable dilemma of our logos-centric language, and that is the reliance on a logos, or ground outside the system of language which is always needed, always relied on, but never available.30 From this ultimate alogicality stem the diverse aporias that Miller has traced. As he puts it: "Whatever track the reader follows through the poem he arrives at blank contradictions.... The reader is caught in an unStillable oscillation unsatisfying to the mind and incapable of being grounded in anything outside the activity of the poem itself" (p. 108).

IV

Now, what are the interpretive moves by which Miller deconstructs his initial construal of the poem into this bewildering medley of clashing significations? In a preliminary way, we can describe these moves as designed to convert the text-as-construed into a pre-text for a superimposed over-reading that Miller calls "allegorical." There are of course precedents for this tactic in pre-deconstructive explications of literary texts. The old-fashioned close reader, however, undertook to over-read a text in a way that would enlarge and complicate the significance of the text-as-construed into a richer integrity; the novelty of Miller's deconstruction is that in his over-reading he "undermines," as he says, the text, then detonates the mine so as to explode the construed meaning into what he calls, in one of his essays, "an undecidability among contradictory alternatives of meaning."

Miller's first move is to identify in Wordsworth's poem an "interrelated set of binary oppositions. These seem to be genuinely exclusive oppositions, with a distinct uncrossable boundary line between them" (p. 102). He lists almost a score of such oppositions; among the more obvious ones are "slumber as against waking; male as against female; sealed up as against open;.... past as against present; self-propulsion as against exterior compulsion;.... life against death." About such linguistic oppositions Miller, following the example of Derrida, makes a radical claim. This is not the assertion, valid for standard readers, that the boundary between such opposed terms is not a sharp line, but a zone, and that the locus of this boundary is not fixed, but may shift between one utterance and another. Miller's claim is that the seeming boundary between each pair of these terms dissolves into what he calls an inevitable "structure of chiasms"; that as a result there is "a constant slipping of entities across borders into their opposites" so as to effect a "perpetual reversal of properties"; and that this "cross over" is forced on the reader by a "residue" of meaning within the text of Wordsworth's poem itself (pp. 110, 107, 101).

When we examine Miller's demonstrations of these crossovers and reversals, however, we find, I think, that they are enforced not by a residue of meaning in the two sentences of Wordsworth's "A Slumber," but only by these sentences after they have been supplemented by meanings that he has culled from diverse other texts. Miller acquires these supplementary meanings by his next move; that is, he dissolves the "unifying boundaries" of the poem as a linguistic entity so as to merge the eight-line text into the textuality constituted by all of Wordsworth's writings, taken together. ("His writing," Miller explains, "is what is meant here by 'Wordsworth'" [p. 106].) This maneuver frees "A Slumber" from the limitations involved in the linguistic practice by which Miller himself had already read the text as a specific parole by a specified lyric speaker. Miller is now licensed, for example, to attribute to the "I" in line 1, initially construed as a particular speaker, and the "she" in line 3 and elsewhere, initially construed as a particular girl, any further significances he discovers by construing, explicating, and over-reading passages that occur elsewhere in Wordsworth's total œuvre.

30As Miller puts it, the poem instances the way in which, in any "given work of literature... metaphysical assumptions are both present and at the same time undermined by the text itself" ("On Edge," p. 101).
By way of brief example: Miller reads "other texts both in poetry and prose" as providing evidence that Wordsworth (whom he now identifies with the unspecified "I" of the poem) "had as a child, and even as a young man, a strong conviction of his immortality," and that this conviction "was associated with a strong sense of participation in a nature both enduringly material, therefore immortal, and at the same time enduringly spiritual, therefore also immortal" (p. 103). Miller reads other passages in Wordsworth as evidence that "nature for Wordsworth was strongly personified," though "oddly, personified as both male and female, as both father and mother." He cites as one instance of the latter type of personification the passage of The Prelude in which the "Infant Babe," learning to perceive the world in the security of his mother's arms, and in the assurance of her nurturing love, comes to feel in his veins "The gravitation and the filial bond / Of nature, that connect him with the world." Miller interprets this statement to signify that the "earth was [to Wordsworth] the maternal face and body." In other episodes in The Prelude and elsewhere, on the other hand, nature is "a frightening male spirit threatening to punish the poet for wrongdoing," hence representative of his father. Miller points out that "Wordsworth's mother died when he was eight, his father when he was thirteen," leaving Wordsworth feeling abandoned by the death of the former and irrationally guilty for the death of the latter. He then cites another passage, this time not directly from Wordsworth but from his sister Dorothy's journal, in which she describes how she and her brother lay down in a trench, and Wordsworth "thought that it would be as sweet to lie so in the grave, to hear the peaceful sounds of the earth and just to know that our dear friends were near"; this remark Miller identifies with Wordsworth's "fantasy" of Lucy lying in the earth in stanza two of "A Slumber" (p. 107).

It is only by conflating the reference and relations of the "I" and "she" in "A Slumber" with these and other passages that Miller is able to attribute to Wordsworth's text the oscillating, contrarious meanings that Lucy alive was a replacement for the lost mother, while her death reenacts the death of the mother, hence the loss of the "filial bond to nature" which his mother had established for him; and the further meaning that Wordsworth's "only hope for reestablishing the bond that connected him to the world is to die without dying, to be dead, in his grave, and yet still alive, bound to maternal nature by way of a surrogate mother, a girl who remains herself both alive and dead, still available in life and yet already taken by Nature" (p. 107). And it is only by merging the reference of the "I" with other passages, interpreted as expressing Wordsworth's sense of participation in an enduring, immortal nature, or as signifying Wordsworth's experience of a nature which is male and his father as well as female and his mother, that Miller achieves the further range of simultaneous but incompatible meanings that "the speaker of the poem rather than being the opposite of Lucy, male to her female... is the displaced representative... of both Lucy herself and of her unavailing raver, nature or death" (p. 108).

It might seem that Miller acts on the interpretive principle that whenever Wordsworth uses a narrative "I" or "she" in a poem, the pronouns inescapably carry with them reference to everything the author has said, in any of his texts, about himself and any female persons and about their relations to each other and to nature. In fact, however, Miller's procedure is constrained in various ways. It is constrained by Miller's tacit reliance on plausible bridges for the crossovers between the "I" and "she" and the various personas and relationships that he finds, or infers, elsewhere in Wordsworth's writings. These are primarily doctrinal bridges, whose validity Miller takes for granted, which serve to warrant his "allegorical" reading—in other words, to undermine his over-readings of the text of "A Slumber." Some underwriters remain implicit in Miller's essay. He relies throughout, of course, on the views, terms, and strategies of Derrida. He patently accepts Freud's doctrines about the unconscious attitudes of a male to his mother, father, and lover, and the disguised manifestations of these attitudes in the mode of symbolic displacements, condensations, and inversions. And in his discussion of Wordsworth's lyric as simultaneously affirming and erasing "male mastery" and the male "power of logical understanding," Miller manifests a heightened consciousness of the relations of men to women in a patriarchal society, as delineated in recent feminist criticism.

Some of his connective bridges, however, Miller explicitly identifies; and one of these is Martin Heidegger's assertions about the use of the word "thing" in German. I want to dwell on this reference for a moment, as representative of the way Miller both discovers and corroborates some startling aspects of the allegorical significance of "A Slumber" as "an obscure sexual drama."

Miller cites (and construes determinately) a passage in which Heidegger points out that in German, we do not call a man a thing (Der Mensch ist kein Ding); and that "only a stone, a clod of earth, a piece of wood are for us such mere things." We do, however, "speak of a young girl who is faced with a task too difficult for her as being a young thing, still too young for it (eine noch zu junges Ding)" (p. 104). This is
Construing and Deconstructing

Now, what is the relevance of the gender-specific uses of “young thing,” whether in German or English, to the third line of Wordsworth’s poem—which does not call the girl a “young thing” at all, nor even simply “a thing,” but that term as qualified by a clause Miller had initially construed to signify that she was a thing so vital “that she could not possibly be touched by time, reach old age, and die”? To oldreaders like myself, they have no relevance whatever. But to a second-order reading which has deliberately cut itself free from the limitations in construing the poem as a specific lyric parole, such uses help to endow the text with a diversity of contradictory sexual significations.

There remains the last feature that I have listed in Miller’s deconstructive reading of “A Slumber,” the discovery of a general aporia that underlies and necessitates all the local aporias; and to track down this discovery requires us to identify a final interpretive operation. This move (already suggested by Miller’s reference to the use of junges Ding in German, and by his comment [p. 109] that Wordsworth’s “identifying the earth with a maternal presence” repeats a trope that exists “in the Western tradition generally”) is to dissolve linguistic boundaries so as to merge “A Slumber” not only with Wordsworth’s other writings, but into the textuality constituted by all occidental languages taken together. In this all-embracing linguistic context, by way of the etymological link between “Lucy” (a name not mentioned in the poem) and the Latin lux, or light, the death of the girl is read as enacting “a constantly repeated occidental drama of the lost sun . . . the father sun as logos, as head power and fount of meaning” (p. 109).

The implicit warrant for this over-reading of the “she” in “A Slumber” is a remarkable essay by Derrida, “White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy.” There Derrida undertakes to show that metaphysics is inescapably metaphorics, and that the founding metaphors of philosophy are irreducible. All attempts to specify the literal meaning, in implicit opposition to which a metaphor is identified as metaphorical, and all attempts to translate a metaphor into the literal meaning for which it is held to be a substitute, are incoherent and self-defeating, especially since the very distinction between metaphorical and literal meaning is a product of the philosophical system it purports to found, or “subsume.” Derrida stresses particularly the reliance of traditional philosophical systems on metaphors, or “tropes,” in which terms for visual sense-perception in the presence or absence of light are applied in what purports to be the mental or intellectual realm. Philosophers claim, for example, that they see the meaning or truth of a proposition, or they distinguish clear and distinct from obscure ideas, or they appeal to contemplative vision and to the natural light of reason;

---

a striking quotation, with its parallel (of the sort Miller is often and impressively able to introduce) between Heidegger’s “a stone, a clod of earth, a piece of wood” and Wordsworth’s triad, “with rocks, and stones, and trees.” As Miller implies, this sexual asymmetry in the application of the term “young thing” applies to English as well as German. Among speakers of English, women as well as men are apt to refer to inexperienced or innocent girls, but not to inexperienced or innocent boys, as “young things.” On this feature of the language Miller largely relies for important elements in his sexual drama. By referring to her as “a thing,” the speaker invests the girl with a virginial innocence—a “prepubertal innocence,” in fact—which nature tries, only half in vain, to violate; by the same epithet, he implicitly stresses his own male difference, and claims superiority over the young virgin in knowledge, experience, physical attributes, and logical power; only to have the oppositions dissolved and the claims controverted by implications derived from crisscrossing “A Slumber” with other texts in Wordsworth.

There comes to mind a familiar folk song in English, not cited by Miller, whose parallel to Miller’s disseminative second-reading of “A Slumber” seems a good deal closer than the German passage in Heidegger. In this song the term “young thing” is again and again applied to a girl who resists (or seems to resist) the advances of an important and experienced male. Her age—or rather ages—are compatible with her being prepubertal, nubile, and maternal too:

Did she tell you her age, Billy boy, Billy boy,
Did she tell you her age, charming Billy?
She’s three times six, four times seven,
Twenty-eight and near eleven,
She’s a young thing, and cannot leave her mother.

In the concluding stanza the young thing is represented as vulnerable, acquiescent, yet unpenetrated by her lover:

Did she light you up to bed, Billy boy, Billy boy,
Did she light you up to bed, charming Billy?
Yes, she lit me up to bed,
But she shook her dainty head,
She’s a young thing, and cannot leave her mother.34

I am not at all opposed to incorporating deconstructive theory and deconstructive critical practice as subjects for study in university curricula. They have become the focus of the kind of vigorous controversy which keeps a discipline from becoming routine and moribund, and have had the salutary result of compelling traditionalists to reexamine the presuppositions of their procedures and the grounds of their convictions. The question is: when, and in what way, to introduce this subject?

Miller's answer is to incorporate it at all stages, "from basic courses in reading and writing up to the most advanced graduate seminars." The basic courses are presumably freshman and sophomore courses. Such early and reiterative presentation of the subject would seem to rest on the conviction that Derrida's theory, which deconstructs the possibility of philosophical truth, is itself the truth about philosophy, and furthermore, a theory capable of being taught before students have read the philosophy on which it admittedly depends even as it puts that philosophy to radical question. And how are we to introduce Derrida's theory and practice of deconstructing texts to novices at the same time that we are trying to teach them to write texts that will say, precisely and accurately, what they mean, and to construe, precisely and accurately, the texts that they read? In his sustained "double gestures" Derrida is an equilibrist who maintains a precarious poise on a tightrope between subverting and denying, between deconstructing and destroying, between understanding communicative "effects" and dissolving the foundations on which the effects rely, between deploying interpretive norms and discarding their power to "master" a text, between decisively rejecting wrong readings and declaring the impossibility of a right reading, between meticulously construing a text as determinate and disseminating the text into a scatter of undecidabilities. In this process Derrida is also a logical prestidigitator who acknowledges and uses, as a logocentric "effect," the logic of noncontradiction, yet converts its either/or into a simultaneous neither/nor and both/and, in a double gesture of now-you-see-it, now-you-don't, of giving and taking back and regiving with a difference. I find it difficult to imagine a population of teachers of composition and reading who are so philosophically adept and pedagogically deft that they will be able to keep novices from converting this delicate equilibristic art into a set of crude dogmas; or from replacing an esteem for the positive powers of language by an invertebrate suspicion of the perfidy of language; or from falling either into the extreme of a paralysis of interpretive indecision or into the opposite extreme of interpretive abandon, on the principle that, since both of us lack a foundation in presence, my misreading is as good as your misreading.
Miller's recommendation to teach deconstruction as a subject to advanced students after, it is to be hoped, a student has become competent at construing a variety of texts, and knowledgeable about traditional modes of literary criticism, and has also achieved the philosophical sophistication to understand the historical position and the duplicities of Derridean deconstruction—seems to me unobjectionable. No student of literature, in fact, can afford simply to ignore deconstruction; for the time being, it is the focus of the most basic and interesting literary debate. And it is only fair to add that, if a graduate student elects to adopt, in whole or in part, this strategy for liberating reading from traditional constraints, it offers, in our institutional arrangements for hiring and advancing faculty, certain practical advantages. It guarantees the discovery of new significations in old and much-criticized works of literature, hence is eminently publishable; and while, because of the built-in conservatism of many literary departments, it still incurs institutional risks, it increasingly holds out the promise of institutional rewards.

As a long-time observer of evolving critical movements and countermovements, I am not disposed to cavil with this latest innovation; I do want, however, to express a few caveats. In appraising the old against the new mode of teaching and writing about literature, Hillis Miller declares that the old mode, since it is "controlled by the presupposition of some center," "already knows what it is going to find," while the deconstructive mode "is more open to the inexhaustible strangeness of literary texts" (p. 110). I recognize the justness of the second clause in this claim, but not of the first. As Miller's reading of "A Slumber" demonstrates, deconstruction has indeed proved its ability to find strange meanings that make the most ingenious explorations of new-critical oldreaders seem unadventurous—although it should be noted that deconstructive readings are adjudged to be strange only by tacit reference to the meanings of the text as already construed. But surely it is deconstructive criticism, much more than traditional criticism, which is vulnerable to Miller's charge, in his first clause, that it "already knows what it is going to find." Whatever their presuppositions, traditional modes of reading have amply demonstrated the ability to find highly diverse structures of meaning in a range of works from Wordsworth's "A Slumber" through Shakespeare's King Lear, George Eliot's Middlemarch, and the rhymes of Ogden Nash. But as Miller himself describes deconstruction, it "attempts to show that in a given work of literature, in a different way in each case," following out "the play of tropes leads to ... the experience of an aporia or boggling of the mind" (p. 101). This presupposition makes a deconstructive reading not merely goal-oriented, but single-goal-oriented. The critic knows before he begins to read what, by deep linguistic necessity, he is going to find—that is, an aporia—and sure enough, given the freedom of interpretive maneuver that deconstruction is designed to grant him, he finds one. The readers of radically deconstructive critics soon learn to expect that invariable discovery. So one of my caveat is this: for all the surprising new readings achieved en route, I do not see how Derrida's counterphilosophical strategy, when transposed to the criticism of literature, can avoid reducing the variousness of literary works to allegorical narratives with an invariable plot.

Another caveat: to be successful in his chosen métier, the apprentice needs to approximate the proven strengths of the masters of deconstruction: their wide-ranging and quite traditional learning, for example; their quick eye for unexpected similarities in what is taken to be different and of differences in what seems to be the same; their ingenuity at finding openings into the linguistic substructure of a work and resourcefulness at inventing diverse tactics in the undeviating deconstructive quest; and not least, the deftness, wit, and wordplay which often endow their critical writings with their own kind of literary value.

My third warning is this: Derrida is careful to point out, as I have said, that deconstruction does not destroy, and cannot replace, traditional humanistic pursuits, including presumably literary criticism; nor can it, as his own theory and practice demonstrate, dispense with a determinate construal of a text, as a necessary stage toward disseminating what has been so construed. Above all, then, the young practitioner needs to be sure that he establishes his credentials (as Derrida, Miller, de Man, and other adepts have impressively established theirs) as a proficient, acute, and sensitive construer and explicator of texts in the primary mode of literary understanding. Otherwise, as traditional literary readings may degenerate into exercises in pedantry, so deconstructive readings may become a display of modish terminology which never engages with anything recognizable as a work of literature.

My final point has to do with the difference between traditional and deconstructive motives for reading literature, and the distinctive values that each reading provides. To read a text in the traditional way, as a work of literature, is to read it as a human document—a fictional presentation of thinking, acting, and feeling characters who are enough like ourselves to engage us in their experiences, in language which is expressed and ordered by a human author in a way that moves and delights the human reader. Deconstructive critics, if they acknowledge such features at all, treat them as unauthored, linguistically generated illusions, or "effects." Literature has survived over the millennia by
being read as a presentation of human characters and matters of human interest, delight, and concern. It is far from obvious that the values in such a reading can for long be replaced by the value, however appealing in its initial novelty, of reading literature as the topological vehicle for a set of conundrums without solutions.

I am reassured, however, by the stubborn capacity of construed texts to survive their second-order deconstruction. When, for example, I turn back from Miller's essay to Wordsworth's "A Slumber," I find that it still offers itself, not as a regress of deadlocked "double-binds," but as what Wordsworth's friend Coleridge found it to be when he called it a "sublime elegy," and what Miller himself at first found it to be, when he described it as a "beautiful" and "moving" poem—beautiful in the terse economy, justness, and ordering of its verbal expression, and moving in that it presents a human being at the moment in which he communicates the discovery, in a shocking instance, of the suddenness, unexpectedness, and finality of death. Let's put the text to trial:

A slumber did my spirit seal;
I had no human fears:
She seemed a thing that could not feel
The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees;
Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,
With rocks, and stones, and trees.

Questions and Answers

Question: In "Behaviorism and Deconstruction" (1977) you wrote that you expected deconstruction to pass on soon. Do you see that prophecy coming true?

Answer: It probably hasn't reached its climacticer, although things turn faster and faster in the carrousel of literary theory these days. Look at the New Criticism, which came into dominance in the thirties. It reigned—though not unchallenged—a good quarter century before there appeared a serious rival in Frye's archetypal criticism. If I were forced to guess, I would say that deconstruction will be crescent for another five or ten years, after which it will pass on; but it won't pass away. In the Hegelian term, it will be aufgehen; that is, it will be

canceled, yet survive at another level. That higher level is the traditional way of reading works of literature, which has shown over the centuries a powerful survival value. Because it has enormous inertia (based, I believe, on its grounding in enduring human concerns and needs), traditional criticism assimilates innovations and continues on, although sometimes with important and positive differences.

It's now the fashion to derogate the New Criticism. We forget that the sustained close reading of literary texts had almost no precedent before the New Critics showed us how to do it. I was in mild opposition to some manifest deficiencies of the New Criticism during the earlier part of my critical career. I must say now, however, that there isn't anyone I know who teaches literature or writes about it who hasn't learned a lot from the New Criticism. Because I manifest a skeptical stance toward the radical claims or procedures of deconstruction, don't assume that I think that everything the deconstructionists say is wasted.

Deconstruction raises important questions and has some important things to tell us, too.

Question: Wouldn't the deconstructionists concede your point about the staying power—or inertia, or durability—of traditional criticism? They often say that there's no escaping the metaphysics that underlies traditional criticism. Why do they try to escape a tradition that they themselves acknowledge cannot finally be escaped?

Answer: If you return to the fountainhead, Derrida himself, he would indeed claim that there is no escaping Western metaphysics, because it is involved in our very language: the minute you use language you accede to its fallacy of presence, the ground for which there is no ground, always needed but never in fact available. But I don't think he means that we can never get rid of a particular philosophical position within that overall frame.

In any case, I think that many of Derrida's followers are less consistently aware than he is of the implications of their position, which makes everything that they themselves say vulnerable to deconstruction. For Derrida, the writing in which you undermine any other piece of writing is equally subject to being undermined. That's a persistent admission on his part, and he means it; but some of his followers seem to make truth-claims without awareness of the rebound, or ricochet, of their operations upon themselves. Perhaps because it's a rather unpleasant thing to contemplate: what's the use of deconstructing others if you're deconstructing yourself in the process?

Question: I've heard it suggested that certain kinds of literature bring about certain kinds of theories about literature. People have proposed that modern literature helped bring about the New Criticism, which
darkness, things which have hitherto been central in our view of literature. In the process of achieving its own aims, deconstruction has in fact been constructively; for example, in drawing attention to the subtle play in a literary work of figurative language, concealed rhetorical devices and modes, and so on. The claim of a radically deconstructive critic, following Derrida’s lead, is that these figures uncontrollably get out of hand and subvert the very grounds of the literary document within which they were meant to be constructive. I don’t agree to the force of this claim; it can be maintained only by setting up a rationale for waiving the rules for the practice of writing and understanding language on which the deconstructor himself tacitly relies, in presenting his own claims in language that he intends his readers to understand. But I believe nonetheless that one can profit from a deconstructive critic’s sensitivity to certain aspects of the play of language, which goes beyond the range of perception of the New Critics, however much they did to open our eyes to the play of figuration in a literary text.

Question: Speaking of the relatively hospitable climate that Derrida has found among literary critics, can you explain the neglect of Derrida by Anglo-American philosophers?

Answer: Neglect, or sometimes contempt. The standard procedure in philosophy is to read other philosophers to get at the content of their thought by looking through their language to the doctrines, and the arguments for those doctrines, that the language is taken more or less transparently to convey. Derrida’s procedure is quite different. Derrida insists that language, even at its most abstract and logical, is never transparent to meaning; he reads selected passages of a philosophical text minutely, with close attention to the play of language and figuration as indiscernible from the doctrines and arguments—and indeed, as ultimately subversive of the doctrines and arguments. Such close reading, which foregrounds the linguistic medium itself, seems strange, or aberrant, to most American philosophers, but much more familiar to literary critics nurtured on the close reading of the New Criticism. So, once we got habituated to the repertory of special terms, neologisms, and analytic maneuvers that Derrida deploys, what he was doing did not seem all that strange to us.

The relatively few Anglo-American philosophers who take Derrida seriously enough to read him with some care interpret his central assertion about the lack of “presence,” hence of a “ground,” in metaphysics to be coincident with the assertion by American pragmatists, and one especially familiar in Anglo-American philosophy since Wittgenstein, that there is no ultimate “foundation” on which metaphysical truth-claims can rest. This seems to me to be on the right track. The distinctive and radical aspect of Derrida’s thinking, however, as I put it
in 1979 (in "How to Do Things with Texts"), is that he "is an absolutist without absolutes"; that is, though he denies the possibility of the traditional metaphysical claim that there is an absolute foundation for valid knowledge, he tacitly accepts the metaphysical assumption that such an absolute foundation is indispensable to valid truth-claims and indeed indispensable to all determinate communication that is more than an illusory "effect" of the internal, differential play of language; Derrida’s "dissemination" of seemingly determinate meanings, like his subversion of metaphysical claims to an absolute truth, rests on this presumption of the indispensability, yet radical absence, of an absolute foundation for language. To this, I think, the proper response is that a language is a highly complex conventional practice that requires no ontological or epistemological absolute or foundation in order to do its work; furthermore, that we have convincing evidence that as speakers or auditors, writers or readers, we share the regularities of this practice in a way that makes possible determinacy of communication and also makes it possible to utter assertions that can not only be understood determinately, but adjudged validly to be true or false. Such understanding cannot never be absolutely certain, nor can the asserted truths be absolute truths; understanding can at best be an adequate or practical assurance, and the truths practically certain within the limits of a given frame of reference. That is simply our human condition. But we should not let what Derrida calls our human "nostalgia" for absolute certainties blind us to the fact that, as an inherited and shared practice, and despite the attested failures in some attempts at communication, language in fact can work, can work determinately, and can work wonderfully well—in literature as in other modes of discourse.

Question: Do you think there's any truth to the charge that deconstruction, despite its distressed, radical rhetoric, actually shelters conservative ideas about literature and literary criticism, especially by isolating the literary work from life in a way that's comfortable for at least some old New Critics? Does the "autonomous" literary work that we heard so much about from the New Criticism reappear as the self-reflexive, self-subversive work—a work that talks mainly about itself—that we're hearing about now?

Answer: Yes, in a way. One of the standard claims in poststructuralism generally is that literature and criticism can't be distinguished, that they're both equally creative, equally interesting, equally figurative, equally fictive, and so on. But then, as you suggest, many critics— such as Hillis Miller—are writing deconstructive close readings of the same literary texts that the New Critics wrote new-critical close readings of. Such deconstructors, like the New Critics, are thereby—in a way—maintaining the autonomy of the work they're dealing with, both by separating it from specific relevance to human life and human concerns and by treating it as a self-sufficient, self-reflexive linguistic entity.

In a way, and up to a point: there is always, in other words, a point at which Miller, for example, crosses over. He first deals with Wordsworth's "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal" as a separate poem—an independent textual entity. But then he goes on to dissolve its boundaries and to merge it first into all of Wordsworth's other writings, then into the differential play of language throughout the Western world. It's only in the initial moment, or aspect, of his criticism that Miller resembles a new-critical close reader of an autonomous text, before he proceeds to dissolve that text into what Edward Said has called the sea of textuality. But of course he continues to sustain the view that a literary text, as a self-enclosed play of linguistic difference, makes none but illusory references to the experienced world, human life, and human concerns.

Question: At the end of your essay "Behaviorism and Deconstruction: A Comment on Morse Peckham's "The Infinitude of Pluralism," you write of a "central Romantic hope" for the reintegration of the self, of the self with a community, and of the self with a humanized nature. Deconstruction, you say there, is a "subversive" kind of criticism leading to "cultural vacuum"—refuting Peckham's notion that deconstruction, despite its problems, may at least manage to destroy the sometimes violent and authoritarian side of the Romantic ideology of "secular redemptionism" (pp. 184–85, 193). In some respects J. Hillis Miller's criticism seems to fit this Romantic pattern. His use of violent analysis to move the reader to the abyss of underlying nothingness perpetuates a revolution of the spirit in the affirmation of a personal code, thus allowing him to say: "I believe in the traditional canon of English literature and the validity of the determinate text" ("The Function of Rhetorical Study at the Present Time," p. 12). The ultimate outcome of the secular ritual of repeatedly affirming the unit of the self over the abyss sounds much like the Romantic affirmation you have described: "life, love, liberty, hope, and joy." Can't one see Miller within the Romantic tradition?

Answer: I haven't seen the essay you allude to, but it doesn't surprise me to find Hillis Miller reaffirming the traditional literary canon and the determinacy of a text. As you suggest, he can be viewed as recapitulating the process of many Romantic writers in England and America, who moved from a literal belief in violent revolution as carrying out the millenarian prophecies of the Bible to a translation of central elements of biblical and exegetical ethics into a secular, humanistic
ethos. I think I'm right in saying that Hillis Miller is the son of a preacher, and he is certainly imbued with the humanistic ethos derived in many ways from certain values which, in the Bible, are grounded in divine revelation. When Miller adopts his heroic central figure—Poulet once, Derrida now—he speaks at first almost like John the Baptist. Whether the evangel is consciousness criticism or deconstruction, his initial tone tends to be evangelistic. But when the chips are down, Miller is very much a middle-of-the-road humanist who shares the central ethos of Western humanism. I think that's the post-theological heritage that the moral and other values of our civilization rest on, and I have the strongest confidence that Miller rests there, too.

In the earlier period of his enthusiasm for Derrida, I think that Miller tended to stress, and laud, some negative, countercultural implications of deconstruction. But it doesn't surprise me if he now moves to a more conservative or centrist position. In terms of the figure in my essay, of Derrida's tight-rope act, one might say that Miller now stresses the righthand side, in which Derrida affirms and uses the logocentric "effects" of a construable determinacy of meaning, of the existence of a canon of discrete and distinctive literary works, etc., where earlier Miller had stressed the lefthand side, whereby all such effects subvert, disseminate, and deconstruct themselves.

*Question:* In "What Is the Use of Theorizing . . . ?" you claim, with certain reservations, that all applied criticism presupposes a theory of criticism. Can you explain why your own self-proclaimed pluralism is not as limited by its presuppositions as the kinds of criticism you attack for their narrowness?

*Answer:* Yes, I did say, and do believe, that any set of critical observations by a practicing critic involves general, or theoretical, presuppositions, even though the critic may seem to eschew a general theory of literature. Matthew Arnold, for example, who always denigrated abstract theorizing about art, quite clearly presupposes certain premises which are distinctively Arnoldian premises about literature, very different from those of other critics, including many critics in his own time such as Oscar Wilde. And of course that generalization applies to my own preferred critical practice no less than to the practice of others. There's no way for any of us to escape the limitations of a particular set of presuppositions—what for short I call a "critical perspective"—because the very sharpness of focus that a perspectival view makes possible also blurs, or conceals, what lies outside its purview. When I proclaim myself a "pluralist" in criticism, I mean to affirm my belief in the usefulness—in fact, indispensability—of diverse sets of critical presuppositions or perspectives, if we are to see literature in the round, rather than in two-dimensional flatness.

Some of our critics are very reluctant to give up the idea that we can somehow invent one set of critical premises and procedures that will tell us the whole story about literature. Historically, that has never happened, nor do I think it possible. Anybody who tries to be eclectic and all-inclusive ends up mashing everything together—instead of an egg you get an egg salad. I don't think we should be nonplussed by the recognition that our preferred premises can never yield everything. Why should we want to believe that one set of theoretical presuppositions will suffice to reveal the whole story about something so richly textured, so complexly structured, so diverse in the human interests it can appeal to and in its relevance to matters of human concern, and so interinvolved in both its causes and effects with other cultural factors, as literature? I'm not bothered by thinking that whatever I myself have to say about literature is only one part of the story—of a story, in fact, which has no conclusion. From my preferred, broadly humanistic premises, I decry the radical exclusiveness of certain opposing views, and even mutter darkly about their implicit threats to the very fabric of our culture. But in a more genial humor I recollect my principles as a pluralist, and say that I welcome well-considered alternative viewpoints and often find that I can learn something of substantial value from them. And since I'm now speaking in my genial humor, I'll add that this statement applies to deconstruction.

*Question:* How would you characterize Northrop Frye's attempt to construct a single inclusive system of criticism?

*Answer:* I think it's an admirable synoptic enterprise, but in some sense futile. He has made a remarkably strong and persistent effort to show how everything valid that's been revealed about literature by alternative critical premises and analytic procedures is subsumable under his own archetypal theory. But the minute they are subsumed, they can no longer play the role they played in earlier theories. They're now playing a different, circumscribed role within his particular overview of literature.

It's an admirable overview, however. It places all individual literary works within a world of imagination, wherein human needs and desires project a realm of archetypes which reshape the experienced world, yet remain relevant both to ordinary life and ordinary human concerns. Frye traces his basic conceptions back to Blake, but they seem to me no less close to Shelley's views, in his *Defence of Poetry*, that all great works of literature reflect an enduring realm of neoplatonic archetypes.
But whatever his precursors, Frye's treatment of literature is remarkable both for its originality and for its comprehensiveness. When I reviewed The Anatomy of Criticism many years ago, I drew attention to its limitations as well as to its strengths. Let me affirm now my overall judgment that in that book, and in many writings which have followed it, Frye has proved himself to be the most innovative, learned, and important literary theorist of my generation.

Nevertheless, Frye's system can't achieve what it sets out to achieve. That is, it cannot, by assimilating them all, displace all alternatives. Take a basic premise of the New Criticism, that what matters in reading poetry is to come to terms with the autonomous and unique organization of an individual work in isolation. Frye's theory is antipodal, in that it moves from the individual back to the universal. The work is viewed as participating in an imaginative universal, or archetype, and that archetype is conceived as having its place in the total and enduring structure of the imaginative world, with its seasonal analogues and so on. Now, Frye is so flexible and acute a critic that I am sure that if he chooses to, he can operate to great effect as either a New Critic or an archetypal critic. But even Frye can't operate, coherently, as an archetypist in such a way as to achieve the critical results made possible by the special premises and methods of the New Criticism.

**Question:** Might it be possible that the presuppositions of your own views have biased your conclusions about Romanticism? Since your approach in Natural Supernaturalism seems to assume the values of Western religion, for example, is it any surprise that it ends up in the realm of the Romantic positives, which are transformations of those religious values?

**Answer:** As a matter of biographical fact, my thinking, of which Natural Supernaturalism was the published product, developed in the opposite direction: first I found what I call "the positives" (the chief moral and cultural values) that were assumed and affirmed by many Romantic poets, and only gradually did I come to see how deeply they were grounded in certain values of the religious tradition, of which they constitute, in part, a secularized translation. These values, of course, are in that aspect culture-bound, but many of them are not simply Hebraic-Christian values; they have equivalents in other major religions. Furthermore, we mustn't forget that the values of much Western theology are not simple derivatives from the Bible, but were biblical concepts as reinterpreted and expanded in terms of the philosophy of the Greeks and Romans. So that the primary Romantic values had a mixed origin; and they seem to me to remain central to a humane view of life and to be relevant among the criteria by which to judge literature—as T. S. Eliot put it, not to judge whether a work of literature is literature, but to judge whether a work of literature is great literature.

One other thing. There are numerous elements in the Western religious tradition which I find abhorrent and which have had disastrous implications in history—they have fostered fanaticism, tyranny, cruelty, internecine warfare. Radical antinomianism, for example, is a recurrent strain in that tradition. Another is a literal apocalypticism, or chiliasm, which in times of stress has led people to pin their fanatical loyalty to a messianic leader of what Rufus Jones has called "an apocalyptic relief expedition from the sky." So it is a question of which values from the inherited tradition you select. I think it a good thing that many major Romantic poets turned from their early faith in a chilastic recovery of Eden by bloody violence to a belief in an imaginative transformation of the self that would make one see the old world in a new way, and to act accordingly. Some historians regard that change as no more than a weak retreat from political radicalism to political reaction. But I think it undeniable that some of the greatest Romantic poets, including Blake, Hölderlin, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, wrote their best poetry after abandoning their literal faith in an apocalypse by violence for a metaphorical faith in an apocalypse by imagination.

**Question:** Changes in theories of literature seem to change the shape of literary history. The New Criticism, for example, devalued Romanticism, while Frye's archetypal criticism makes Blake central to Romanticism and Romanticism central to literary history. Is deconstruction changing our view of Romanticism?

**Answer:** It's hard to see how it could do so without being unfaithful to its own premises, which make it radically ahistorical. It dissolves not only the boundaries between literature and nonliterature in any one period, but also the boundaries between one writer and another and between one period and another. Writing, that is, is always writing; its constitution is always the same play of difference, it always exhibits logocentrism, and it is always ultimately self-subversive. Of course, there is the conservative righthand side of Derrida's equilibrium, which acknowledges the standard distinction between distinct works, individual writers, and various periods on the level of logocentric "effects": but Derrida recognizes and uses such effects only "provisionally," or "strategically," as a stage toward disseminating them. Since a major thrust of deconstruction is to convert all antitheses into chiasmus, and to dissolve temporal as well as all other "boundaries," I don't see how any thoroughgoing follower of Derrida can have anything in particular
to say about Blake, Romanticism, or any individual writer and any literary period. Except, of course, to the degree that a deconstructive critic forgets his own premises. Fortunately, all of us theorists sometimes escape from our premises long enough to say things which, however inconsistent, are insightful and important.

**Question (continued):** Under the influence of deconstruction, isn't it natural to value Blake more than Wordsworth? Complaints about Wordsworth seem to have increased sharply—it no longer seems undiplomatic to launch an outright attack on his self-contradictions—while I've heard it said more than once that Blake may have been the first deconstructionist. He seems so aware of the pitfalls of language and so playfully wily in confronting them. Wordsworth's linguistic earnestness makes him an easy target of deconstruction instead of a paradigm. How true is the generalization that literary history under deconstruction favors the writers who reflect its concerns and attitudes toward language?

**Answer (continued):** You persuade me of the need to make a distinction between deconstructive procedures in reading that I neglected in my previous answer. Derrida clearly, in his readings, distinguishes his treatment of writers whom we may for convenience call "paradigmatic," from his treatment of other writers. Paradigmatic writers he construes as asserting, or at least implying, doctrines about language and metaphysics and central Western concepts which approximate his own views—even though I think he would not want to call his own views "truths." Among his paradigmatic writers are, of course Nietzsche, and also Mallarmé—in fact, it is my impression that Derrida's typical essays on writers ordinarily called "literary" are not radically deconstructive, but stop at the stage of reading these writers paradigmatically or at tracing approvingly their way of playing with key metaphysical concepts and distinctions.

In his deconstructive essays, Hillis Miller seems to follow Derrida's differential way of treating paradigmatic and nonparadigmatic writers, but he applies the distinction within the literary realm as well as outside it. For Miller as for Derrida, Nietzsche is clearly and reiteratively paradigmatic. And within literature itself, Miller treats Wallace Stevens, for example, primarily as paradigmatic. That is, he for the most part stops at reading—in my sense of construing—selected textual passages from Stevens as anticipating what he presents as deconstructive truths about language and metaphysical concepts. His analysis of Wordsworth's "A Slumber," on the other hand, is devoted to showing how that poem, when read allegorically by an unstified reader, can't help but manifest the deep truth of the death of the "logos," and thereby undoes itself despite itself. Which can, I think, be translated to say, in my terms, that its implicit allegorical meanings inadvertently but inescapably undo its construed meaning.

But to the thrust of your question: deconstructive critics indeed seem to set higher value on paradigmatic writers whom they can construe, and not simply allegorize, as anticipating their own revealing convictions about language. But there's another factor involved in their choice of writers to write critical essays about, and that is the challenge of taking a writer who seems canonical, straightforward, and resistant to deconstruction, and then showing how his texts unknowingly deconstruct themselves. I'm very dubious indeed that Blake, for all his counteracting standard uses of language, can be read by a deconstructor as paradigmatic; beyond most poets, he is an essentialist who claims that his fundamental assertions disclose presence. Another major poetic text of the Romantic era, Byron's *Don Juan*, is of a more paradigmatic order. It is easy to show that in many passages in *Don Juan*, Byron can be construed as deliberately subverting not only the poem's own narrative premises, but also major concepts and oppositions in Western metaphysics—so easy, in fact, that it doesn't present much of a challenge. Wordsworth, in his seriousness of asseveration, presents a much more inviting challenge.

We find a parallel in the evolution of the New Criticism. Cleanth Brooks, like his colleagues, began by reading Donne as a paradigmatic exemplar of the major literary virtues of ambiguity, symbolic imagery, irony, and paradox, and used those criteria to derogate poets of the reigning canon—Milton, Romantic and Victorian poets—as writers who are defective because unironic, committed to forthright assertions, and unparadoxical. But as time went on, Brooks delighted in taking up the challenge of demonstrating that such canonical poems as Milton's "Lycidas," Wordsworth's "Intimations Ode," and Tennyson's "Tears, Idle Tears" can also be accounted great poems, insofar as they in fact embody features, overlooked both by critical precursors and by the poets themselves, of ambiguity, symbolic imagery, irony, and paradox.

**Question:** Do you think that the deconstructionist interpretation of a text has any cognitive value beyond correctly "construing," as you say, the primary meaning of the text? To put it another way, do you learn anything from the specifically deconstructionist moves involved in Miller's reading of Wordsworth's "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal," or are you merely entertained by them?
**Answer:** I’ve already said that I have learned things I value both from the analytic procedures and verbal play of Derrida. (I find particularly notable the essay called “White Mythology.”) I have also profited from the writings of de Man, Miller, Barbara Johnson, and other expert practitioners of the deconstructive craft. Some things I’ve learned are positive; others (no less valuable to me) are negative, in that they’ve forced me to redefine and defend my own critical stance, and led me to try to identify the moves which enable deconstructors to achieve their startling new readings.

Miller’s essay on “A Slumber” I chose for commentary, as I have said, in part because it is so extreme an instance of radically deconstructive criticism. One of its inherent values consists in Miller’s flair for language and the zest he communicates in his own ingenuity at finding in Wordsworth’s little poem a galaxy of meanings that no one hitherto has in the least suspected. (I shudder to think what we may expect in a similar vein from deconstructive critics who lack Miller’s talents, learning, flair, and, the *sine qua non*, his tact and sensitivity in reading a text on the primary level of construing.) But in this particular instance of the deconstructive, or “allegorical” phase of Miller’s criticism, I can’t say I’ve learned anything that I consider valid about the meaning of Wordsworth’s poem, except insofar as his claims have driven me back to scrutinize the text itself.

It’s worth noting that, according to its own frequently given account, poststructuralist literary criticism aims to be “productive” and autonomous rather than auxiliary, with a function no less creative and interesting than that of the literary work to which it ostensibly directs its attention. To the degree to which deconstructive criticism in fact accords with its own statement of its function, it is a mode of what Aristotle called epideictic rhetoric. That is, it belongs in the class of display oratory, of which the aim is to celebrate an occasion such as the Fourth of July. The orator doesn’t really undertake to tell us anything we don’t know already about his ostensible subject, the Fourth of July; instead, he sets out to show how well he can meet a ritual emergency which has evoked innumerable earlier orations and to display his own invention, verbal and rhetorical skills, and aplomb for the admiration and delight of his audience.

**Question:** Would you clarify the difference in the role that construing a text plays in more traditional criticism as against deconstructive criticism?

**Answer:** At the level of construing a text, the reader makes out what the sentences of a text signify, in the order in which those sentences occur. He does so on the supposition, for which we have convincing grounds in our experience in learning, using, and understanding a language, that he shares with the writer of the text certain conventions governing the practice of the language which enable him to understand what, on this primary level, the writer undertook to say.

All of us, including deconstructive critics, have to construe a text such as Wordsworth’s “A Slumber,” or else we’re simply not reading English: and although no construal is ever capable, by reference to an infallible criterion (what Derrida calls “a transcendental referent”) of being absolutely provable beyond any possibility of error, we are capable in most instances of achieving adequate assurance about its construed meaning, which is confirmed by substantial agreement with other competent construers. But construal of a poem merges, without sharp boundary, into what I have called “explication,” which poses questions about the kind of poem it is, what is central to the poem, how it is structured, what effects its author undertook to achieve, etc. In this aspect of what we loosely call “interpreting” a poem, criticism begins to become variable, and by that fact, more interesting. You get, for example, the application to the construed poem of diverse critical perspectives, as well as favored value-concepts, such as the ambiguity, irony, and paradox of the New Criticism. (In “Five Types of Lycidas,” an essay written decades before the emergence of deconstruction, I pointed out how radically different are the explications effected by applying to a single text diverse critical perspectives and criteria.) Here we find the area of critical disagreement widening, and a diminishing consensus about the criteria for deciding between alternative explications; I’ve always liked the formulation of F. R. Leavis that, in this aspect of his procedure, a critic who proposes an explication learns to expect from another critic at most the qualified agreement, “Yes, but. . . .” By and large, however, the mixed class of what Hillis Miller called traditional critics agree in keeping the text-as-construed a primary reference—that is, they would reject an explication which is patently out of keeping with the construal; a traditional critic will also agree that many of the reasons offered by another critic, even for a radically alternative explication, may be sound reasons, even though he regards them as falling short of being convincing reasons. The deconstructive critic, however, rejects both the reference to the construed text and the standard reasons for justifying an explication, as illusory “constraints” on reading which are overcome by an inherent force, or “surplus of meaning,” which is beyond any possibility of control by either the writer or the reader of the poem.

170
(Let me interject, by the way, that although New Critics tended to regard the “interpretation”—constituted by the construal and the explicacion of a text—as the be-all and end-all of criticism, literary critics before, during, and since that era have fortunately continued to carry on the traditional enterprises of enhancing our understanding of individual works of literature by bringing them into various relations with other works, other genres, other modes of discourse, the life and times of the author, and the intellectual, social, and economic as well as literary history of the West.)

I have said that a standard move of the deconstructive critic, in establishing a requisite freedom of interpretive maneuver, is to make the text-as-initially-construed (and in part explicaded) into a pre-text for interpretive over-reading—often this over-reading is labeled “allegorical” and is imposed entirely independently of any evidence that the author intended his work to be an allegory. This move has some, though only partial, parallels in more traditional critical procedures. Let’s take a very simple case. A Freudian critic comes across Blake’s gnomic lines:

Can Wisdom be put in a silver rod?
Or Love in a golden bowl?

Aha! A rod is convex and a bowl is concave; we all know what such shapes symbolize; we can now proceed to over-read what Blake meant according to Freudian mechanisms, independently of what Blake may have consciously undertaken to say. Notice that this interpretation begins by construing the determinate meanings of “rod” and “bowl,” which become a pre-text for the over-reading, and that the Freudian critic would agree that if he has misconstrued the primary meanings of “rod” or “bowl,” then his symbolic over-reading is also mistaken. Notice also that our postulated critic proposes that his symbolic over-readings of Blake’s sentences constitute their determinately right, or deeper meanings, even though these meanings are supervenient on the construed meanings.

It is with this last claim that the deconstructive critic radically disagrees. His or her allegorical over-reading of the construed text “produces” a disseminative “overloading” (Derrida’s terms)—an endless scatter of meanings which are “undecidable,” rather than determinately multiplex, or “polysemantic.” That is, the construed text, as over-read deconstructively, has no determinately right meaning, nor even a limited set of specific meanings; it disseminates, allegorically, into an indefinitely open set of inevitably contradictory possibilities.

(Construing and Deconstructing)

(By the way, my intention is to use the term “over-reading” non-vidiously, for convenience of exposition. I would be glad to reverse the implicit diagrammatic polarity, and trade the metaphor of over-reading for the metaphor of under-reading. This change to under-reading is compatible with the deconstructive claim to undermine meaning and would also cancel the built-in implication of “over-reading” that to read deconstructively is to do something excessive. I must point out, however, that the change would also cancel the implication that deconstruction is a mode of higher criticism. I leave the choice between these directional metaphors to the deconstructive critics.)

Question (continued): When you say that deconstruction can produce traditionally acceptable or genuine readings in passing, do you mean that these insights occur despite the theory rather than because of it? Just what is it that you claim to have learned from a deconstructor such as Derrida?

Answer (continued): A deconstructive reader, even in his disseminative phase, establishes a mode of reading which (I quoted Derrida as saying in my essay) is relatively, but not entirely, free from the “legalities” that constrain the initial phase that I call construing. Furthermore, deconstruction is in principle a mode of double-dealing with texts, in which you can take or leave (rather, take-and-leave) such constraints. Both in principle and in practice, then, deconstruction can produce readings that are sound according to traditional criteria of interpretation.

Besides, there are things one can learn from what Derrida calls his “style.” Some of his characteristic modes of verbal and rhetorical play are very infectious. I would not, for example, be prepared to avow that my own procedures in the present dialogue have in no instance been affected by Derrida’s proclivity, rejecting the “logocentric” logic of either-or, to speak and write in a way which, instead of being either serious or nonserious, is at the same time neither serious nor nonserious and both serious and nonserious. I leave the decision to my auditors as to which of my assertions from this platform were intended to be taken as entirely serious. (Including, of course, what I’ve just asserted.)

Question: You distinguish between construing, explicating, and disseminating a literary text. How would you respond to Stanley Fish’s claim that all aspects of interpreting a text are relative to a particular strategy, which is an arbitrary, or at least an optional, strategy? To Fish, even what you call “construing a text” deducedly thinks it finds shared meanings which are in fact projected on an empty text by members of an interpretive community who simply happen to share a certain strategy of interpretation.

Answer: Those issues are too complex to be fully discussed here. But
diverse "types" of "Lycidas," with identifiable family resemblances among the instances of each type; and that individual critics within an explicative community are much more apt to agree with each other than with someone who applies a radically different critical perspective.

To bring an over-hasty discussion to a hasty conclusion: In construing Milton's text, we have no interpretive option except whether to resign from the ongoing community of speakers, writers, and readers of English into which we, like Milton, were born. In the phase of explicating a construed text, however, we can distinguish a variety of loosely constituted subcommunities; and in this aspect of critical interpretation, it makes sense to say that readers have a choice among available interpretive strategies.

**Question:** While you obviously believe that it is possible for an author to communicate a meaning and for a reader to get that meaning, you have on at least one occasion characterized metaphors as inherently inadequate:

The human compulsion not only to say, do, and make but also to understand what we say, do, and make enforces a discourse about these processes and products of consciousness, intention, purpose, and design. This discourse unavoidably involves metaphors whose vehicles are natural or artificial objects, and since none of these objects runs on all fours with the human primitives it undertakes to define and take into account, each metaphor, however pertinent, remains inadequate. It is because a number of metaphorical vehicles are pertinent, yet no one is adequate, that the history I undertook to narrate [in The Mirror and the Lamp] displays the recurrent emergence, exploitation, displacement, and supplementation of constitutive metaphors; this historical process seems to me to be in the long run profitable to understanding, in that it provides... a vision in depth in place of the two-dimensional vision of the complex realities with which the metaphors engage.

**Answer:** Your quotation occurs in a context in which I was explaining why none of the "constitutive metaphors" that are applied to works of art, since their vehicles are natural or artificial objects, can equate exactly with the human, intentional, and purposive procedures by which a work of art is designed and produced. But the point can be generalized. I quote Coleridge as saying that "no simile runs on all four legs." That is, no figurative term squares exactly with whatever it is you're applying it to; otherwise, you wouldn't be able to recognize that it's figurative. So I agree with Derrida that we can't dispense with metaphors, and also that there's always a discrepancy, which he calls a "surplus," or "excess," between a metaphor and its application.
What I don’t agree, however, is that this discrepancy, or excess, in
the vehicle of a metaphor is uncontrollable by a user of the metaphor,
or by the listener or reader who understands how he’s applying it—
that the excess, by an internal energy, runs wild and inescapably goes
on to say what the user of the metaphor doesn’t want to say. In *The
Mirror and the Lamp* I explored, for example, the way in which later
users explored the implications of discrepancies in organic metaphors,
as applied to the production and internal organizations of works of art,
which earlier users of such metaphors, in the contexts of their usage,
overrode as unintended and irrelevant. But when I read a user of
organic metaphors such as Coleridge, I recognize what he intended
that metaphor to signify—I understand, what, in the context of Col-
eridge’s *parole*, the metaphor means. At the same time, I recognize
potentialities in the features of the organic vehicle of the metaphor
that Coleridge did not call into play; and on investigation, I find that later
writers did exploit these features in their *paroles*. The process of the
surplus getting out of control, that is, is a historical process, which I
discover by examining a sequence of textual *paroles* by a variety of
writers. I don’t find that process necessarily occurring, despite the
writer’s intention, in every *parole* by every user of an organic metaphor
on every occasion of its use; nor do I see how such a conclusion follows
from the fact that in no metaphoric vehicle do all the features equate
exactly with its tenor—with what someone in a particular context uses
it to say.

*Question:* J. Hillis Miller confessed his willingness to say that met-
aphors signify a finite set of meanings. If so, aren’t you and he agreeing?

*Answer:* I’m not familiar with the statement of Miller’s that you
allude to. But insofar as he undertakes to describe or paraphrase what
any text, or metaphoric segment of a text, signifies, he has no recourse
except to list a number of determinate meanings, which he presents to
be determinately understood by us, his readers. You cite him as saying
that this set, or scatter, of determinate meanings is finite; but as his
analysis of Wordsworth’s “A Slumber” demonstrates, it’s a very large
set, and probably an open set; I feel quite certain that if Miller should
return to the poem, he could, by the freedom of interpretive maneuver
he permits himself, readily make new discoveries of signification. But
whether it is finite or not, the important features of his set of meanings,
on which Miller indubitably insists, is that the set is very large, inev-
itably includes aporias, and is undecidable—that is, there is no valid
reason whatever for choosing between incompatible alternatives.

We know, both from the texts written by some authors and from
what they say about their own writings, that some literary works are
intentionally written to be read in precisely this way, so that we can’t
in fact be said properly to understand such works except if we read
them as signifying an indefinite set of undecidable and mutually incom-
patible meanings; this is a literary genre energetically exploited by
some writers of the present era. The novelty of the deconstructive
claim is that all literary works are instances of this genre, no matter
how lucid, determinate, and coherent are the meanings that an author
undertook to express in a work. The model of writing that a decon-
structive critic presupposes is that of a power struggle between what
a writer tries to use language, in his *parole*, to mean and what language,
by an internal compulsion which manifests itself by an “excess” in the
*parole*, goes on willy-nilly to mean—a struggle in which language in-
eluctably overcomes all attempts by the writer to control its unruly
differential energy. This model seems to me to be radically unfit for
our actual linguistic practice; but it serves as an effective rationale
for the surprising semantic discoveries of a determined deconstructive
reader.

*Question:* You have described yourself as, among other things, a
cultural historian. Can you use your distinction—the distinction between
the level of construing and explicating a text, and the second level on
which the text-as-construed is used as a pre-text—to compare your role
as an interpreter with the role of deconstructive critics? For example,
would it be fair to say that you, as a cultural historian, substitute “real
world” for “text” in the distinction I have described? And if so, that
you confine yourself to the level of construing and explicating the real
world, whereas deconstructors and fiction writers begin with a text and
move up to the level of using it merely as a pre-text for a supervenient
allegory?

*Answer:* I do not, in *Natural Supernaturalism*, claim to be interpreting
“the real world.” The materials that I interpret are texts and passages
from texts. I construe them and explicate them in a determinate way;
and on the basis of identifying in these texts certain thematic similari-
ties, and changes in those themes over time, I develop a complex
narrative history not about reality, but about altering human views
concerning the nature of reality—about (to mention only one of many
such themes) the overall form of the past, the present condition, and
the future of the human race. The soundness of the history I relate—
as a pluralist I hold that it can be a sound history, even if it is only
one of diverse possible histories—depends on the representativeness of
the texts I choose, given the focus of my undertaking, and above all,
on the validity of my determinate readings of those texts. I don’t deny
that there are meanings of the same texts which, since they fall outside
my purview, I do not explore; my implicit claim is only that by and large, and whatever else they mean, the texts that I cite at least mean, determinately, what I interpret them to mean.

An added comment. I think that I recognize in the way you pose your question a widespread current assumption that, since we can say, sensibly enough, that we interpret the world and also that we interpret a text, then an interpretation of a text is subject to no more "constraints" than is an interpretation of the natural world. Where this parallel fails is in ignoring the fact that the language of a text is a medium specifically developed to convey meaning, and that the text was written by an author who undertook to say something determinate by his use of that medium. The constitution of reality, or the natural world, lacks those distinctive and essential features for the determination of meaning—except, of course, for a theologian who believes, as many have indeed believed, that the world is the great book of nature, whose true meanings can be interpreted by cracking the code which determines the significations that its divine Author intended it to convey.

**Question:** Most of your published work is about Romantic writers. Do you see any Romantic tendencies in yourself and your work?

**Answer:** I'm not sure by what criteria I'd qualify as a Romantic or a nonromantic. But I think that my writings about selected writers of the era between the French Revolution and the third or fourth decade of the nineteenth century manifest a strong sympathy with many of their characteristic enterprises. This applies above all to the great Romantic undertaking, in a time of social, cultural, and moral crisis and dehumanization—many writers agreed with Wordsworth that it was without precedent a time of "dereliction and dismay"—to reconstitute the grounds of social, cultural, and moral values in the West by translating the earlier theological concepts into primarily secular terms. In *Natural Supernaturalism* I traced this enterprise, as variously, and sometimes explicitly, proposed by many writers, whether in poems, novels, philosophy, or history. This is a common feature, for example, in Romantic works otherwise as diverse as Wordsworth's *Prelude*, Hegel's *Phenomenology*, Hölderlin's prose romance *Hyperion*, and Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*.

**Question:** J. Hillis Miller said in answer to a question about his reading of a poem by Yeats that a traditional historical reading of that poem would be an incompetent or wrong reading. Would you say that his reading of "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal" is incompetent or wrong?

**Answer:** Competency or incompetency in reading are terms that apply within a particular frame of reference. When he operates within the limits of traditional construal and explication, Miller has shown himself to be a competent traditional reader; when he operates with the freedom established by deconstructive premises, he has shown himself to be a competent disseminative reader. I don't, as you know, subscribe to the premises that serve to justify such freedom of interpretive procedure. But no gong rings in heaven or hell to proclaim that the premises and practices of deconstruction are wrong or wicked; nor do I know of a knock-down argument guaranteed to convince critics of the deconstructive persuasion that they are on a hopelessly wrong track. I point out to deconstructionists, for example, how easy it is, given the requisite learning and wit, to produce sensationally novel readings when their elected premises permit them to operate with such minimal constraints. Deconstructionists counter that my inordinate constraints are illusions engendered by a logocentrism from which I can't possibly escape, and which prevent me from discovering in a text anything more interesting than the reflection of my own projected illusions.

Now, how am I to argue against that? It's of no rational or practical use to hurl epithets and call down anathema, as some conservative critics do. What I first try to do is to understand what it is that competent deconstructors are actually doing, on what premises, and what it is that makes it, to such obviously intelligent, learned, and sensitive critics, seem worth doing. Then (as in my essay and in this discussion) I point out what seem to me anomalies in the theory and extravagances in the practice of deconstruction. In doing that, I solicit my wit and marshal rhetorical resources such as irony and *reductio* to highlight and exaggerate such features. But as I suggested at the end of the essay, the choice between a radically deconstructive and a more traditional mode of reading is a choice between premises which can't be conclusively argued by logic alone, because it involves a choice between values—it is a matter, as I said in an earlier essay ("How to Do Things with Texts"), of "cultural cost-accounting." Even so, if I should say to Hillis Miller that ultimately such a choice entails whether or not to be a communicant in a society held together by our capability to say determinately what we mean and to understand (actually, and not merely as a provisional stage of illusionary effects to be noted and transcended) what someone else has said—well, I'm quite sure that Miller would produce reasons for denying that his own choice of a deconstructive mode of reading entails so drastic a consequence.

**Question (continued):** If Derrida or Miller shows that he can competently construe the text before deconstructing it, does that competence determine the competence of his deconstructive interpretation?

**Answer (continued):** If a deconstructive critic doesn't demonstrate competence at the primary aspect of reading that I called construing a text and explicating it in a way closely tied to that construal, he cannot be
competent in what follows, because (as Derrida himself is careful to point out, in the passage I quoted in my essay) the effects of “classical exigencies” that constrain what he calls “traditional criticism” not only precede but, in ways that he leaves indefinite, continue to exert some kind of control over a second-order dissemination; otherwise the latter reading would, as he says, “authorize itself to say almost anything.” Those classical exigencies, in my view, are grounded on solid evidence that authors largely share with their readers the regularities that govern the practice of a language and the evidence that most authors have in fact exploited their expertise in those conventional regularities to write texts designed to be determinately understandable by their readers.

In his disseminative commentary on Wordsworth’s “A Slumber,” Miller continues to rely, in however loose and tenuous a fashion, on some of the constraints that determine his initial construal. And even when he claims for his second-order deconstructive reading the feature that he regards as its special value, its openness “to the inexhaustible strangeness of literary texts,” he uses “strangeness” in tacit opposition to the meanings we (and he) expect in the standard reading of a text; by what other criterion can he adjudge the disseminated meanings to be “strange”? So Miller’s radically deconstructive reading is dependent upon standard reading not only in its initial phase, and (in undefined ways) in its disseminative phase, but also in his very attempt to argue the virtues of his deconstructive way of reading.

Question: You claimed that you have tried objectively to understand the premises, procedures, and reasons for the appeal of deconstructive criticism, and then went on to suggest that to choose it involves, in a final analysis, the choice whether or not to participate in a community for which the capability to communicate determinately constitutes an indispensable bond. But is that claim of objectivity sincere, and the alternatives that you suggest alternatives in which you genuinely believe? Might it not be the fact, as deconstructionists often assert, that your claim is a facade, and that your reasoning is in fact a rationalization of your nostalgia for a lost certainty of presence, involving a variety of rhetorical ploys that are motivated by anger (which is in turn a result of your terror) at the deconstructive demonstration that all our Western talking, writing, and thinking is suspended over an abyss by its reliance on a ground which deconstruction shows to be in fact groundless?

Answer: I am familiar with the charge by some deconstructionists that any attempt by a nondeconstructionist to understand their position objectively and to argue against it rationally can never be anything other than a rationalization for metaphysical nostalgia and cultural terror. That seems to me to be itself a rhetorical device to put all possible opponents in an untenable position. As a literary and intellectual historian, and as a theorist of language and of literary criticism, I have tried to emulate the procedure that J. S. Mill, in a great essay, attributed to Coleridge: When confronted with a position, posed by highly intelligent thinkers, which seems to me mistaken, I try to “look at it from within . . . to see it with the eyes of a believer in it; to discover by what apparent facts it was at first suggested, and by what appearances it has . . . been rendered . . . credible.”

This is the third public occasion on which I have tried to come to terms with deconstructive theory and with radical deconstructive criticism. Each time, as the result of continued reading and reflection, I think that, in the Coleridgean sense, I understand it better and find in it, as I said, interesting and even profitable insights. But I nonetheless remain radically unpersuaded. So far as I am able to assess my motives, I remain unpersuaded on grounds of experience and reasoning and also (as I have said) of my commitment to certain social and cultural values; but not because of my nostalgia for a demolished ontological ground of absolute certainty in which I have never, in my maturity, invested any belief; nor of my abject terror at a conclusive demonstration that our culture is suspended by a network of illusions over a linguistic and intellectual abime.

But I do confess to occasional fits of anger, or rather of irritation, at some deconstructive moves, such as the one you describe, designed proleptically to put out of play any possibility of validly reasoned grounds for opposing it. By way of conclusion, let me specify another such move. I have said that deconstructive theory proposes a model for the relation of a speaker or writer to language which seems to me to be very defective—the model, that is, of a power struggle between unequal antagonists in which the inherent differential energy of language ineluctably overcomes any effort by a user to master it, by disseminating what he says into an undecidable suspens vibratoire which includes significations that controvert what the user has undertaken to say. Some poststructuralists have translated the metaphor of power struggle into a metaphor of Machtpolitik, and have extended it from the relation between the writer and his linguistic medium to the relation between a written text and its interpreter. They assert that to interpret a text as signifying what its writer undertook to mean is nothing other than to succumb to the “author’s” illegitimate claim to “authority,” or “authoritarianism,” over both his text and his reader. But to set ourselves to make out what someone has undertaken verbally to convey is simply to try to understand him or her, and the attempt to understand
each other's utterances, whether spoken or written, seems to me indispensable to the maintenance of anything we can account a human community. I am thus irritated whenever I encounter this rhetorical move, by a play on words, to put anyone who tries to understand what someone else has tried to communicate into the humiliating posture of obsequiousness to an arrogated authoritarianism.

Stanley Cavell

In Quest of the Ordinary:
Texts of Recovery

When Morris Eaves and Michael Fisher first invited me to contribute to this enterprise, I naturally declined, on the ground that I did not know enough on the subject of Romanticism to be of use to others. They replied that what they expected from me might take the form of an account of why, in the concluding part, Part Four, of The Claim of Reason, Romantic texts and preoccupations keep putting in their appearances (some lines of Blake, “The Boy of Winander,” Coleridge’s Ode on Dejection, Thoreau on neighboring, or nextness). Put so, the question seemed too sympathetic to the work I had done for me to walk away from, however unprepared I felt for mastering it; indeed too congenial to paths I was already taking from the book.

The first half of The Claim of Reason contains, along with some other things, an interpretation of Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations which focuses on its linked notions of criteria and of grammar and which argues that while Wittgenstein’s work is written as a continuous response to the threat of skepticism, it does not, and is not meant to, constitute a refutation of philosophical skepticism. By skepticism I mean directly those radical doubts, or anxieties as expressed in Descartes and in Hume and in Kant’s determination to transcend them, about whether

1 In November 1982 I presented at Albuquerque a version of some of what is to follow here. By February 1983 that material had developed into good parts of the first three of the four lectures I gave at Berkeley as the Mrs. William Beckman Lectures, sponsored by the Department of English at the University of California, under the general title “In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism.” This essay is roughly what became the third Beckman lecture, though I begin by sketching some of the ground covered in the first two. A version of the second lecture is printed in Raritan, 3 (Fall, 1983). The Claim of Reason was published by Oxford University Press in 1979.