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 presuppositions 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 literary 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 taught 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, namer, 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 "freeplay."

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 indubitatable 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 in 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 intelllecction 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 designates 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 signifier, 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 "phonocentrism" (the reliance on the speaking voice as the linguistic model) by positing an admittedly nonexisting "arche-écriture," "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 "différance." 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 signifier and what it signifies are constituted not by their inherent features, but by a network of "differences" from other signifiers and
signifieds, Derrida posits différence 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," "afrighted and confounded with that forlorn 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

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.) Reading, 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 difference 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


Hume, Treatise, p. 264.


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, constructs 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 in all Western texts, since all rely on a fixed logocentric ground yet are purely conventional and differential in their economy. In his 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 opposed 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 constructs 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, in 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.”) 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 readings, in fact produces two
texts. 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 overrun [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." Texts, 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 no 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 "manifest 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 illogicalsities 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 diffident 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 differance, 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 inveterately paradoxical in the give-yet-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 he takes 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 beguile 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 role of metaphor and other rhetorical figures, his dissemination of ostensibly univocal meanings
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 critics to be familiar, yet generative of radically novel discoveries. Far into paradoxes and aporias—made his writings seem to Anglo-American dissemination, he insists, is "irreducible" to polysemy (a set of determinate meanings), for dissemination is an "overflowing" 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." The process is 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 oldreaders 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.

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.

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!"
... the shift from past to present tense [between stanza 1 and stanza 2] 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. Lucy seemed so much alive... that she could not possibly be touched by time, reach old age, and die. Then Lucy seemed an invulnerable young "thing"... now she is truly a thing, closed in on herself, like a stone... unable to move of her own free will, but unwillingly and unwittingly moved by the daily rotation of the earth. (Pp. 102-3)

Thus far Miller, with no want of assurance, has read the text, in its parts and as a whole, as having determinate meanings. He has, to use my term, construed the text and gone on to explicate the implied purport of these meanings in ways closely tied to the construal. Here are some features of Miller's reading:

1. He accepts the historical evidence that the poem was written by an individual, William Wordsworth, during a particular span of time, 1798-1799. And in the assurance with which he construes the poem, it seems that Miller assumes, as standard readers do, that Wordsworth deployed an acquired expertise in the practice of the English language and of short lyric poems, and that he wrote his text so as to be understandable to readers who in turn inherit, hence share, his competence in the practice of the language and the conventions of the lyric.

2. By implicit reference to this common practice, Miller takes it that, whatever the intended thematic relation to other Lucy poems, Wordsworth undertook to write a poem, beginning with the words "A slumber" and ending with the words "and trees," which can be understood as an entity complete in itself.

3. Miller takes the two sentences which constitute the poem to be the utterance of a particular lyric speaker, the "I" of the text, and to be about a girl, who is referred to by the pronoun "she." And he takes the tense of the verbs in the first sentence- stanza ("did... seal," "had," "seemed"), as signifying an event in the past, and the tense of the verbs in the second sentence-stanza ("has... now," "hears," "sees") as signifying a state of affairs in the present—the sustained "now," that is, of the speaker's utterance.

4. He takes the three clauses in the first sentence, although they lack explicit connectives, to be related in such a way that the assertions 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. 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

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2The disagreement about "A Slumber" between Cleanth Brooks and F. W. Bateson (which E. D. Hirsch has publicized and made a notable interpretive crux) 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... the 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 magnificence 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 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.
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 construes 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.28

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."29

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,") 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

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 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. . . . 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, as against exterior compulsion; . . . life as 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 chiasmus”; 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 oeuvre.

As 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 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”; 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 unravishing ravisher, 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 requirement of some connection to partial aspects of the text as initially construed, as well as by his tacit reliance on plausible bridges for the crossovers between the “I” and “she” and the various personages 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 underwrite 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
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 a-symmetry 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 virginal 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 importunate 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.”

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 jungen 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 metaphoric, 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 metaphoric 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;
all are instances of standing at gaze before something which compels belief, in the way that we are supposedly compelled to believe in the presence of a thing perceived by our sense of sight. Such mental tropes, like their visual correlates, must assume a source of light, which is ultimately the sun; and with his customary wit, Derrida names this key trope (that is, "turn") of Western thought—which as metaphor is also an instance of what are traditionally called "flowers of rhetoric"—the "heliotrope"; that is, a kind of sunflower of rhetoric. But the visible sun, itself ever turning, rises only to set again; similarly, the philosophical tropes turn to follow their analogous sun, which appears only to disappear, even though, as the source of light, it constitutes the necessary condition for the very opposition between seeing and not-seeing, hence between presence and absence. The sun thus serves Derrida himself as a prime trope for the founding presence, or logos, which by our logocentric language is ever-needed and always-lost.

Miller, it is evident, has plucked Derrida's heliotrope and carried it over, via the unnamed Lucy, into the text of Wordsworth's poem. (Derrida himself remarked, possibly by way of warning, that "the heliotrope may always become a dried flower in a book," it may become, that is, a straw-flower.) As a radically deconstructive critic of literature, Miller always knows in advance that any literary text, no less than any metaphysical text, must be an allegorical or "tropological" vehicle whose ultimate tenor is its constitutional lack of a required ground. And by ingeniously transplanting the heliotrope, he is indeed enabled to read the death of the "she" in Wordsworth's short lyric as an allegory for "the loss of the logos, leaving the poet and his words groundless" (p. 109).

V

Miller introduces his exemplary analysis of Wordsworth's poem in the middle of an essay which begins and ends with a discussion of literary study in the university, and in the course of this discussion he raises a pressing issue for the teaching of literature. He divides the "modes of teaching literature and writing about it" into two kinds. One kind is the deconstructive "mode of literary study I have tried to exemplify"; the other comprehends all the more traditional modes. And, he declares, "both can and should be incorporated into college and university curricula" (p. 111).

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 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 counter-movements, 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 caveats 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 unaauthored, 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 tropological vehicle for a set of conundra 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 climacteric, 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 aufgehoben; 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
was promoted by critics who were also modern poets. If the same thing can be said of deconstruction—that it was the natural product of certain kinds of postmodern literature, criti-fiction and so on—is its uselessness limited to helping us understand that particular kind of literature, or can it be useful in dealing with other kinds?

Answer: I agree that deconstruction feeds upon certain phenomena in literature of the last couple of decades or more. Whether that's a sufficient explanation of its emergence or vogue is another question. You can easily move to a higher explanatory level and claim that certain kinds of postmodern literature and deconstruction are both manifestations of a skepticism about the bases of Western culture that is part of the intellectual ambience of our time; the literature undertakes to subvert the basic assumptions and conventions on which earlier literary documents were built, and the criticism undertakes to subvert the bases of all earlier modes of reading and of Western thinking in general.

But at any rate they do feed on each other. Derrida learned from Barthes, who before his death became more deconstructive in his mode, picked up ideas from Derrida. Barthes's early criticism was based in large part on experimental fiction like the nouveau roman, which undertakes to subvert prominent features of the implicit social contract involved in storytelling which had been the grounds of almost all earlier fiction. But both deconstructive literature and deconstructive criticism flourish because they appeal to the temper of the times—a dangerous temper, one that worries me—in which we tend to be much more hospitable to negative modes of thinking and writing than to positive modes. A vigorous culture can never do without the negatives; traditionalists need to be driven to reexamine and reconstitute their premises and to refresh their procedures. But the negative seems to be what at present absorbs the interest and enthusiasm of many of the younger intellectuals—graduate students, teachers, writers. Sometimes the ready hospitality to negative ideas appears to me to be ominous; but it's reassuring to remember the attested power of traditional criticism to adapt itself to—even, selectively, to absorb—ideas which seem to threaten its own survival.

I think that deconstruction leaves radically out of account features of works of literature which have been essential to their survival as presentations of human matters and concerns which themselves embody human values. That doesn't mean, however, that deconstruction, en passant, may not reveal other features of these works which have been neglected. My own position is that of a critical perspectivist; it seems to me that a new mode of criticism, insofar as it has validity, throws a strong shaft of light on features in literature we're apt to have overlooked or insufficiently stressed, but throws into shadow, even into 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 constructive; 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 can 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-subversive, reflexive 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, 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 us 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 the 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...
Wordsworth’s “A Slumber,” on the other hand, is devoted to showing how that poem, when read allegorically by an unmystified reader, can’t passages from Stevens as anticipating what he presents as deconstruction primarily, as paradigmatic. That is, he for the most part stops at reading—in my sense of construing—selected textual 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 paradigmatic. 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 with 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 unmystified 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 countering 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?
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*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.
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(Let me interject, by the way, that although New Critics tended to regard the “interpretation”—constituted by the construal and the explication 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 explicated) 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.

Answer (continued):

Those issues are too complex to be fully discussed here. But...
let me propose some crude headings for a response to Fish’s claim. I have said in an essay (“How to Do Things with Texts,” p. 587) that Fish seems to me right in his claims that the meanings of a text are relative to an interpretive strategy and that agreement about meanings depends on our joint membership in a community which shares an interpretive strategy. It’s a question, however, of how extensive that community is and whether it includes the writer, as well as the reader, of a text. Take Milton’s “Lycidas” as an example. In construing the sentences of Milton’s text, we have excellent grounds for the assurance (based on reading Milton, Milton’s contemporaries, and writers before and after Milton) that he belongs to our interpretive community, which is no less extensive than all those who speak, write, and understand English; that Milton used his inherited expertise in the conventional regularities of the English language to write texts (admittedly, on a high level of complexity) meant to be determinately construable by competent readers; hence that we, as members of Milton’s community—making allowance for limited and largely discoverable historical shifts in the conventions of the language—by applying our shared expertise, are for the most part quite able to construe what Milton undertook to mean by the sentences he wrote.

It is our diversity of interpreting “Lycidas” on the level I have called “explication” that gives some plausibility to Fish’s claim that there are an indefinite number of interpretive communities, each of which produces its own poem. (A fuller discussion would need to point out that the distinction between construing and explicating is not sharp-boundaried but nonetheless useful for exposition; also that even the phrase of construal is to some degree responsive to a particular explication, yet recalcitrant to excessive explicative distortion.) In explicating “Lycidas” as a poem, for one thing, we have less grounds for assurance than we have in construing its component sentences as to just what poetic conventions Milton deployed, though we do have a number of sound clues to their nature. Also, as I pointed out in “Five Types of Lycidas,” a number of critics have chosen to explicate “Lycidas” by applying a diversity of critical perspectives independently of any clues about Milton’s own artistic intentions. You can, if you want to use Fish’s concepts, say that the set of new-critical explications of “Lycidas,” the set of archetypal critics, the set of more or less Freudian critics, as well as the set of old-fashioned critics like myself who undertake to read “Lycidas” “with the same spirit that its author writ,” each constitutes a distinct explicative community; that these communities have all been institutionalized in the Academy; that the diverse critical perspectives adopted by these communities produce what I have called 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.
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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 Coleridge’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 metaphors 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, inevitably 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 incompatible 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 deconstructive 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 ineluctably overcomes all attempts by the writer to control its unruly differential energy. This model seems to me to be radically unapt 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 similarities, 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 demoralization—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 seems 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 Hills 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 prophetically 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 indis-
pensable 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.