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The Ethics of Criticism

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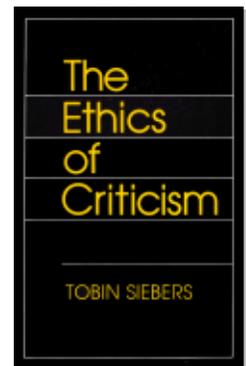
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The Ethics of Nuclear Criticism: Conclusion

The danger of ethical criticism is its tendency to think about moral philosophy or about an ideal form of criticism instead of about literature. Literary criticism of any kind risks substituting its own interests for those of literature, but ethical criticism has been especially susceptible to the problem. Traditionally, ethical criticism has tried to avoid the question of literature in two ways. Either it limits the value of literature for moral thinking in the manner of Plato, or it stands in for literature by affirming, in a Nietzschean gesture, the essentially fictive nature of all moral discourse. Either literature cannot compete with moral philosophy, or everything is only literature, but this "only literature" refers to the idea that meaning in general is fictional, mythic, or deceitful. This either/or position, ironically, leaves little space for a literary ethics; indeed, the antipathy between literature and ethics emerges as a phenomenon too little questioned by moral philosophers and literary critics alike. Not to think about literature, modern theorists assume, is the only way to think critically and ethically. To think about literature is to deny the possibility of thought. The objective of critical theory would seem to be not to think about literature.

But how *not* to think about literature?

This question, perhaps the master question for the ethics of criticism, requires a context with some finality, and the current scene provides none better than that of nuclear criticism. For nuclear criticism is obsessed with the ends of literature, ethics, criticism, and humanity. As an invention of literary theory, however, nuclear criticism confronts an awesome problem of self-definition, and not merely because it is the latest phase in critical fashion. Rather, its self-definition goes awry because it finds itself obstructed by the apparent incompatibility of literature and ethics. For nuclear critics, by definition, attempt to think about the relation between literature and life, and insofar as they remain within the tradition of critical thought as we know it, they do not have the resources necessary to the task.

Definitions: From Apocalypse to *Hamlet*

The Summer 1984 issue of *Diacritics*, which introduced the phrase "nuclear criticism" to the reading public, provides a working definition in which the obstacle between literature and ethics found throughout modern theory may be tested.¹ There are two forms of nuclear criticism, according to the editors. The first form applies "literary critical procedures to the logic and rhetoric of nuclear war" (1). The second interprets canonical texts through the perspective of the nuclear age (1). The definitions rely on two local assumptions and an overarching ethical imperative. The first definition assumes that "the terms of the current nuclear discussion are being shaped by literary or critical assumptions whose implications are often, perhaps systematically ignored" (2). The second arises from the feeling that a certain amount of criticism and critical theory "recounts an allegory of nuclear survival" and that other critical and canonical texts conceal "unknown shapes of our unconscious nuclear fears" (2). But the general imperative for expounding a nuclear criticism is ethical: "critical theory *ought* to be making a more important contribution to the public discussion of nuclear is-

1. Unless otherwise indicated, parenthetical page numbers refer to the special issue, "Nuclear Criticism," *Diacritics* 14.2 (1984).

sues" (2; my emphasis), and "critical theory *must* play a role in analyzing the mechanisms by which nuclear narratives are construed and enacted" (3; my emphasis).

Despite their apparent unfamiliarity, both definitions of nuclear criticism continue the long tradition, from Plato to linguistic pluralism, of dividing literature and ethics, and they run as a result into the difficulties raised by that division for the relation between literature and life. If nuclear critics have difficulty defining their discipline, it is not necessarily due to faulty thinking about the nuclear problem, although one may question whether a tradition that has defined literary issues as largely disinterested can now successfully contribute to political arguments that are highly interested. To suppose that professional readers of literature have expertise in nuclear policy merely because they have a good sense of grammar ignores that we have generally formulated our theories of rhetoric in purposeful isolation from political and legal issues. Rather, the contradictions of nuclear criticism derive from a certain kind of thinking about literature and criticism. It is not the unconscious fear of nuclear devastation that shapes our present crisis in criticism. Nuclear criticism is only the most recent development in what is now a long-standing practice of associating literature and violence, and it uses this all too conscious tradition of fear to imagine the nuclear catastrophe. Thus, the first definition of nuclear criticism dwells on the relation between literature and war, and the second one creates an analogy between theory and war. Both definitions end by giving literature and its theories a marginal status with regard to human interests, and as such they represent a flight from politics and social life disguised as an embrace.

First Definition. That nuclear critics view atomic war as a possible object for literary analysis exposes their urgent desire to enter current discussions of the nuclear age. This large ethical imperative is admirable, but it relies on assumptions about literature and theory that undercut its effort. The first definition, by applying literary criticism to the logic and rhetoric of nuclear war, launches its ethical project by assuming a strong resemblance between literature and war. This resemblance is only implied, but it exposes the explicit connection established by

many critics today between literary language and violence. Indeed, this connection leads to the familiar presupposition found among nuclear critics that war is mainly textual. The assumption remains that nuclear war cannot be extrinsic to literature, and this idea divides the aesthetic interests of literature from its ethical ones because it insists that the letter is violent.

Nietzsche originally suggested that violence and power follow linguistic laws, but the idea was implied as early as Plato's attempts to free society from aggressive competition by controlling literary expression. Today, few people outside the field of literary criticism take the position that violence is linguistic, but many nuclear critics do assume, unfortunately, that language establishes the basis for aggressive and willful actions. Michael McCanles's "Machiavelli and the Paradoxes of Deterrence," for example, examines the problem of nuclear dissuasion as largely a matter of language. McCanles correctly describes "human textuality" not only as an "extension of war" but as a "displacement of it" (19). Yet he soon begins to take for granted that power equals the language of power, although he identifies with precision the linguistic strategies and rhetoric of deterrence. The "deployment of armies," he writes, "remains a mute language, void of meaning and therefore impotent, until they are trans-coded into discourse, and thereby given both a meaning and the power to threaten" (12). McCanles's idea that military maneuvers are but an extension of diplomatic display leads to his belief that literary criticism has a role in nuclear deterrence, but he accomplishes this lofty role for criticism at the expense of literature. For McCanles concludes that a literary rhetoric empowers military arms, and not that weapons provide the basis for threats.

Derrida argues an even stronger case for the relation between war and literature in his example of nuclear criticism, "No Apocalypse, Not Now (full speed ahead, seven missiles, seven missives)." The essay pivots on the relation between "missives" and "missiles," leading Derrida to exclaim that writing "includes the power of a death machine" (29). Throughout the essay, Derrida deploys his missives on nuclear war, and although he sometimes claims that they are "tiny inoffensive missiles," the critical

zeal of their launch betrays his belief that the letter has a cutting edge. Here Derrida's usual hesitation about power seems to dissipate, and he refuses to acknowledge the limitations of students of literature in the discussion of nuclear issues. Rather, the fact that the humanities are "incompetent" makes them more competent to enter the debate, since nuclear war is a "phantasm," a "hypothesis," a "fabulously textual" nonevent. Nuclear war exists only as a fable because it has no precedent and has never happened, and everyone, according to Derrida, has equal expertise in the matter of fables.

Derrida's purpose, however, is not to prove the competence or incompetence of the humanities to solve nuclear problems but to write a piece of nuclear criticism. In this respect, his essay is too deconstructive to succeed, if nuclear criticism designates a new approach to a new problem. Derrida's description of nuclear war as fabulously textual and massively real at the same time exposes the extent to which his version of nuclear criticism relies on the same laws and ethical presuppositions as deconstruction. The essay recuperates deconstruction for nuclear criticism only by declaring that the "hypothesis of this total destruction watches over deconstruction, it guides its footsteps; it becomes possible to recognize, in the light, so to speak, of that hypothesis, of that fantasy, or phantasm, the characteristic structures and historicity of the discourses, strategies, texts, or institutions to be deconstructed. That is why deconstruction, at least what is being advanced today in its name, belongs to the nuclear age. And to the age of literature" (27). The passage reveals admirably what deconstruction has often assumed: that the fabulously textual and the real are identical insofar as neither offers humanity a reprieve from violence. The age of literature is the nuclear age because "nuclear war is the only possible referent of any discourse and any experience that would share their condition with that of literature" (28). Quite simply, "literature has always belonged to the nuclear epoch," for literature expresses the sublime death of knowledge and the humanities whose equal in destruction can be found only in the apocalyptic nuclear vision of total global annihilation, or the revelation that reveals nothing (27). According to Derrida, "'literature' is the

name we give to the body of texts . . . most radically threatened . . . by the nuclear catastrophe," for the preoccupation of literature with the nuclear is analogous in his view to its "absolute self-destructibility without apocalypse, without revelation of its own truth, without absolute knowledge" (27).

In the same way that Heidegger launched the "destruction" of metaphysics and classical ontology against humanism, Derrida directs "deconstruction" against the idea of humanity.² In neither case, however, do Heidegger or Derrida, especially the former, actively seek to destroy humane values. What we witness, however, is the triumph of a point of view in which such values no longer exist. The idea of a point of view needs to be taken seriously, for it exposes the distance covered by the metaphors, the transports, of nuclear destruction and its implications for humanity and the humanities. This is not to dispute Derrida's idea that philosophy, and especially moral philosophy, tends to take an outside point of reference, be it metaphysical or religious, from which to guarantee the unity of its discourse; it is, rather, to assert that there is a choice involved in that point of view, and the proper view is the human one. Although Derrida has struggled against metaphysical positioning by inventing a radical form of inclusiveness in language, most often characterized by the phrase "il n'y a pas de hors-texte," his statements come from an outside point of reference nevertheless. But not until now has the location of his viewpoint been so unabashedly clear. If, as Derrida claims, the hypothesis of total nuclear destruction watches over deconstruction, his language crosses over quite literally from beyond the pale. Instead of choosing the point of view of a human being, Derrida decides to write from the vantage of a postnuclear landscape in which humanity has accomplished its end; and the agent and expression of that end remains literature.

Having found the proper context of deconstruction, then, "No Apocalypse, Not Now" exposes the source of Derrida's insights

2. Cf. Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), pp. 189–242, and Jacques Derrida, "The Ends of Man," *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: At the University Press, 1982), pp. 109–36.

as never before. The essay emphasizes at every turn the destruction implicit in deconstruction. Its opening sentence, "*At the beginning there will have been speed,*" places the deconstruction of the nuclear epoch within the logos of John and its preoccupation with beginnings, but the apocalyptic tense of Derrida's prophecy, its future perfect, originates from the book of endings, Revelation. The essay insists on one of Derrida's favorite topics, "the beginning and the end of the book," now properly revealed as an apocalyptic theme. The image of language, upon which Derrida fixes, also expresses the unity of beginning and end in violence, for the "word" issues from someone whose mouth holds "a sharp double-bladed sword" and who announces: "I am the first and the last" (31). The duplicity and violence of language described by deconstruction find an apt image in the double-bladed sword, for Derrida imagines the word to be double-edged as well. Finally, the essay ends by asserting the elite position of Derrida himself as the apocalyptic messenger of Alpha and Omega. By taking the form of the seven missives on missiles, Derrida's essay ironically imitates the seven letters of Revelation, delivered by the visionary Saint John the Divine, and purposively revels in satirical correspondences between Saint John and Saint Jacques. The last word of the essay, "John," names the messenger who delivered the seven letters to the seven churches of God, concluding in Derrida's often repeated gesture of signing off his writings with a pun on his own name.³

The resemblance between nuclear war and literature may be only a metaphor, but it remains a controlling metaphor for the way that critics think about literary language and violence today. The link established between literature and war would be insignificant if it were not enthusiastically promoted as well by the principal thinkers of poststructuralism. A thorough list of statements would require too much space and would take us far afield from the ethics of nuclear criticism, but a few samples may demonstrate to what extent the image of nuclear war provides

3. For Derrida's practice of signing off his essays, see "Signature Event Context," *Margins of Philosophy*, pp. 307–30, esp. p. 330, and "Ellipsis," *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: At the University Press, 1978), pp. 294–300, esp. p. 300.

only a new metaphor for the old practice of marking literature with the frustration felt by those who desire to act morally within society. Roland Barthes: "This Hunger of the Word, common to the whole of modern poetry, makes poetic speech terrible and inhuman." Harold Bloom, who finds that poetry is repressive: "The trope-as-defense or ratio between ignorance and identification might be called at once a warding-off by turning and yet also a way of striking or manner of hurting." Jacques Derrida, who insists that writing carries death: "What writing itself, in its nonphonetic moment, betrays, is life." Paul de Man, for whom literature is like the smile behind which we hide rage or hatred: "texts masquerade in the guise of wars or revolutions." Michel Foucault: "We must conceive discourse as a violence we do to things." J. Hillis Miller: "all imitation is subversive."⁴ For the poststructuralists, it appears, "literature" is the name that we give to the impediments, violence, and deceptions that make human life unbearable.

Second Definition. By interpreting canonical texts from the perspective of the nuclear age, the second description of nuclear criticism presumes that the nuclear has a theoretical status. It assumes that placing literature in the context of nuclear war will bring an added dimension to it. The approach is extrinsic because it is radically contextual. Without worrying about the fact that this second approach contradicts the first—that nuclear war cannot be both intrinsic and extrinsic to literature at the same time, that it can make no sense for an extrinsic criticism to place a language that is essentially nuclear (i.e., literature) in a nuclear context—the gesture of granting a methodological or theoretical status to nuclear war is highly questionable. A critic may examine the influence of the Napoleonic Wars on Jane Austen's *Pride*

4. References are, respectively, Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (Boston: Beacon, 1967), p. 48; Harold Bloom, *Poetry and Repression* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), p. 10; Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), pp. 25, 292; Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight* (1971; revised, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), pp. 11, 165; Michel Foucault, "The Discourse on Language," *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1972), pp. 215–37, p. 229; and J. Hillis Miller, "Tradition and Difference," *Diacritics* 2.4 (1972): 6–13, esp. 9.

and Prejudice, but what does it mean to commit the anachronism of applying nuclear issues to *Hamlet*? Is nuclear war a methodology or a discursive practice with its own specific rules of formation? Can one interpret from the perspective of nuclear war in the same way as one does from a Freudian or Marxist perspective?

If literature somehow remains innocent of nuclear war, literary criticism works to remedy the problem. Nuclear criticism exists to draw literature into the nuclear age; it insists on interpreting the canon from the perspective of global destruction. Here nuclear criticism reveals its greatest paradox. It enters the public discussion of nuclear war on the side of peace and proposes aesthetic values as an antidote to those of violence. But it insists on bringing literature into the war zone to make its point. Literary theory begins to resemble nuclear war in its assault on literature, and critics confess their own underlying guilt about theorizing by revealing a secret equation between critical method and nuclear violence. More than one critic of late has alluded to the similarities between the paranoia of theory and nuclear terrors and has expressed the wish for the apparent serenity of aesthetic reflection.

Mary Ann Caws's "Singing in Another Key: Surrealism through a Feminist Eye," for instance, succumbs to the temptation of representing critical method as nuclear violence. Although finally a statement on the importance of human community, the essay nevertheless puts under suspicion the language of theory in the manner now typical of feminism's distrust of warring male discourse. Caws argues that surrealism, like feminism, "works its recreative techniques to bring back together what was lost, but in different combinations, toward a new full providence" (62). Yet the world of discourse that she describes has been contaminated by nuclear energy: "Even if the energy released in our *proliferating textual universe* is only mental, that very universe had its erstwhile apparent *explosion* of its myth by intertextuality, leading to the challenge of our authorial control and critical vision as they are in fact *uncontrollable* and their results *unpredictable*, of our own safe tenets as they were felt to

leak, our own ironic elements as they *contaminate*" (61; my emphasis). Surrealism invents correspondences to create a community of objects and humans, whereas theory achieves a collective sense only through the negative image of nuclear proliferation and contamination. Although Caws favors community, a division exists in her mind between literature and theory.

The antagonism between literature and theory is an old story for literary criticism, and it is certainly not the invention of nuclear criticism. But interpreting works from the perspective of the nuclear age tends as a method to exacerbate the tension between literature and theory, and the metaphor of nuclear war becomes a convenient image with which to express one's critical inadequacies, hesitations, and guilty conscience about the problems of ethical criticism.

Although not exclusively devoted to nuclear criticism, René Girard's "Hamlet's Dull Revenge" clearly demonstrates the effect of the nuclear metaphor on the antagonism between theory and literature.⁵ The presence of nuclear issues literally divides the essay along two contradictory poles. On the one hand, Girard seems to disparage the ethical impulses that cause critics to impose strict meanings on literary works. On the other hand, he insists that the nuclear age, as a context, presents an ethical imperative requiring that we "read *Hamlet* against revenge" and international warfare (200). In the first case, Girard manages to denigrate the critical temperament by resuscitating the notion of Shakespeare's two audiences—the idea that the bard wrote his works to reach two types of spectators—in the form of the poststructuralist ideal of undecidable textuality. According to Girard, Shakespeare writes with a "mixture of forcefulness and ironic nonchalance that constantly verge on the parodic, without actually turning into an obvious parody" (171). In ironic fashion, Shakespeare "keeps destroying with one hand what he

5. René Girard, "Hamlet's Dull Revenge," *Stanford Literature Review* 1.2 (1984): 159–200. Subsequent references will be given parenthetically in the text.

In this connection, consider the words of Robert Wilson, head of the bomb project's nuclear physics division: "You can't play Hamlet and fight a war at the same time" (*New York Times*, July 16, 1985).

is building with another," and such undecidable language makes it impossible for the ethical critic to render an interpretive decision without committing an act of violation (169).

Not unlike J. Hillis Miller's notion of the linguistic moment, in which poetic language achieves the heights of self-referentiality and undecidability, Girard's idea of Shakespeare's writing seems to encourage a particular ethics of reading. Girard has two specific targets in mind. He attacks the Freudian interpretation of *Hamlet* as a specious form of rhetoric and likens it to Polonius's diatribes about Hamlet's mad love for Ophelia. His other target is the moral tradition in Shakespeare criticism that wishes to differentiate between good and evil characters. According to Girard, Shakespeare is more interested in the undifferentiation of the revenge process than in the moral differences of character portrayal. In revenge, Girard concludes, character differences disappear, and *Hamlet* insists that the rites of vengeance make it difficult to distinguish between Hamlet the elder and Claudius. Hamlet's enterprise is sick precisely because he must participate in an act of revenge that accepts his father's goodness and Claudius's evil, whereas Hamlet cannot in fact perceive that difference. This undecidability thwarts ethical critics, forcing them to obscure Shakespeare's insights about violence in order to make critical decisions. Indeed, the ethical dimension of Shakespeare's work, in Girard's eyes, may only be described as a process of "*equalization in villainy*" (161). Shakespeare asserts negatively "the basic identity of all men" by insisting on their equal proclivity for evil, and this assertion characterizes his poetic genius. Shakespeare "can juxtapose two more or less incompatible views of the same characters. He does not choose between the two and the results show that it is better for a playwright not to choose. This paradoxical practice, far from diminishing, increases his effectiveness as a playwright" (162).

Only the most attentive reader, according to Girard, understands Shakespeare's double goal. The rest of the critical community works feverishly to limit Shakespeare's poetic powers. These critics ignore the lack of character differences in Shakespeare and try to recuperate a moral. They focus, for instance, on Richard III's death, but Girard contends that "if we look

closely we will see that this demise represents neither the victory of right over wrong which the old tradition of optimistic humanism demands, nor the triumph of wrong over right which our perverse and inverted pessimism now seems to require" (166). Shakespeare's plays thwart ethical conviction and rational persuasion, exposing mob actions as a "kind of moral or even physical lynching, fundamentally irrational and arbitrary in spite of the superficially rational and moral motivations which are exhibited by the lynchers" (166). What characterizes Shakespeare's writings is not the moral duty of demystification but a double textuality that means different things to different people: "The most reflective part of the audience will perceive as ironic a handling of the material which will actually reinforce the more vulgar pleasure of the unreflective crowd" (169). Whereas the "knowledgeable few" with a "certain ethical sensitivity" will perceive "equalization in villainy," the majority will derive a vulgar pleasure from the ethical differences of the characters and the spectacle of violence that they encourage. In short, ethics must be reinvented as a form of linguistic pluralism, in direct antagonism to the old binary form of morality, if ethical and aesthetic sensitivities are to exist in concert, and even then only elite readers may be expected to understand. But if they, in turn, create a moral difference between themselves and the vulgar mob, they fall back into the sickness of revenge, victimizing the ignorant in a ritual scapegoating that eventually becomes a form of self-victimization. In the final analysis, then, equalization in villainy is the only form of ethical representation possible in both society and literature.

The second half of Girard's essay, however, seems to reverse some of these principles, and the upset occurs in the context of nuclear criticism. Girard invites Shakespeare critics to bring Hamlet into the nuclear age and to understand that his dilemma defines the modern space of nuclear politics. Hamlet rests his finger on the button, Girard argues, but perceives that he will be the victim of any act of violence. His tactics in fact delay the act of revenge for as long as possible, postponing revenge without giving it up. Such is the no-man's-land of sick revenge, and "like Hamlet," Girard argues, "we are poised on the brink between

total revenge and no revenge at all, unable to make up our mind, unable to take revenge and yet unable to renounce it" (195). Only Shakespeare critics fail to perceive this dilemma, for they vie to solve the "Hamlet problem" and to cure Hamlet's sensible hesitation so that he may commit the act of violence. Girard taunts them with a fable, arguing that should our critical literature on *Hamlet* fall into the hands of some future people ignorant of our race, it could only convince them that "our academic tribe must have been a savage breed, indeed. . . . The only way to account for this curious body of literature is to suppose that, back in the twentieth century no more was needed than some ghost to ask for it, and the average professor of literature would massacre his entire household without batting an eyelash" (196–97).

Given Girard's previous discussion of Shakespeare's double goal, a question nevertheless arises. If the good dramatist must harbor such double goals, must the good critic respect them? Or is the good critic destined to be a bad dramatist in the desire to read *Hamlet* against revenge? Except for the negative ethical ideal of equalization in villainy, Girard cannot conceive of a situation in which aesthetic and ethical purposes may combine. His characterization of Hamlet attempts to harmonize them, but he ends unwittingly by producing a sweet version of the character and a truncated version of the play. One cut is particularly stunning, given Girard's interest in scapegoats. To convince his readers that Hamlet hesitates because he understands the truth about revenge, Girard ignores the murder of Polonius in act III. Indeed, Polonius emerges as the scapegoat of Girard's reading. His sexual theorizing reminds Girard of Ernest Jones, and his platitudes ring of deconstruction. But Polonius is also a scapegoat in the play. Indeed, a Girardian reading of *Hamlet* could be expected to stress that Hamlet calls Polonius a "capital calf" three scenes before he stabs him. And after slaying the old man, Hamlet confesses that he thought that Claudius was hidden behind the arras. The sacrificial substitution between Polonius and Claudius is all the more compelling because Hamlet's reference to the "capital calf" occurs after Polonius brags of playing

Julius Caesar on the stage: "I did enact Julius Caesar; I was killed i' the Capitol; Brutus killed me" (III, ii, 105). For Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* stands in Girard's reading as one of the most powerful demonstrations of ritual scapegoating in all of literature. If a substitute "Claudius" is murdered in act III, Hamlet's delay becomes less tenable, and the play loses vitality as a model for ethical inaction in the nuclear age.

Even though Girard's reading against revenge is a dazzling display of ethical criticism, he does not allow literature to have an ethical purpose. He argues in favor of literary knowledge, granting it a scientific status, but the possibility of literary ethics remains questionable in the final analysis.⁶ Literature partakes of moral insight only when it reproduces the divine revelations of the Bible. If literature follows its own inclinations, it falls prey to the blind requirements of desire, envy, and hatred. Much like Derrida, Girard often emphasizes the death carried by literature and the danger of theorizing about it, following the long tradition in the West of relegating literature and its theory to the margins of culture.

For the poststructuralists, those who love literature apparently live in a no-man's-land between literature and ethics, a postnuclear landscape strewn with the remains and prophecies of nuclear destruction. Past and future merge in the living ruins of the present. The ruins become a text that has no message other than the inevitability of human violence and death. Either literature, whether an oracle or monument of the nuclear holocaust, is contaminated by the images of atomic war, or literature is the victim of nuclear violence. The nuclear critic desires to give up both war and theory that we might find literature. But such desires are hopeless if literature is allied to war.

6. The division between ethics and literature has existed in Girard's work from its inception. In *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, for example, Girard argues for two different forms of literary expression: the *romantique* (or romantic) and the *romanesque* (or novelistic). Despite the etymological similarity of the terms, Girard argues that the former reflects the trappings of desire and is overly aesthetic, whereas the latter reveals desire and is implicitly moral. See *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, trans. Y. Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965).

The Nuclear Unconscious

Nuclear criticism assumes that unconscious fears of atomic devastation shape the present crisis in literature and critical theory. Indeed, the idea of unconscious activity remains central to the struggles of the nuclear age, for critics insist that unknown drives and impulses feed the arms race. More important, for the literary critic, the rhetoric of nuclear arms discussion always tends toward unconsciousness. According to many nuclear critics, strategic rhetoric moves in Orwellian fashion toward an obfuscation of its motives. In "The Nuclear Sublime," Frances Ferguson conceives of the sublimities of nuclear war as the most recent version of the unthinkable and provides a genealogy of the idea from Longinus, through Kant, to Mary Shelley's gothic sublime. To experience the sublime is to be possessed by something bigger, more powerful, and more threatening than any human being. It is to be trapped in a space that you cannot think your way out of. The nuclear sublime, Ferguson suggests, realizes this psychology of the unthinkable with a vengeance, portraying a claustrophobic world, in which individual freedoms are severely limited by the daunting presence of unknowable fears.

Critical theorists have felt trapped for some time, and the nuclear landscape lends a startling geography to their sense of claustrophobia. For some nuclear critics, these terrors are essentially psychological. Like the unconscious itself, the age of nuclear proliferation crams everything into its space, refusing to exclude anything and quelching all individual claims for the uniqueness of personal domain. In "Baltimore in the Morning . . . After," Dean MacCannell argues that the proliferation of nuclear weapons is directed not against an enemy but against one's own society, in the "realization of a collective unconscious desire" (34). Here nuclear destruction represents the ultimate technological fulfillment of Freud's *Todestrieb*. For Girard, similarly, the psychology of human society relies on the unconscious mechanism of collective victimization, but its full revelation leaves "the human community deprived of sacrificial protection" (191). The unconscious nature of violence guaran-

tees the persistence of hatred, yet revealing the mechanisms of hatred does not result in a form of consciousness that has the power to surmount violence, and so unconsciousness remains all-embracing.

Other critics blame language for the spread of unthought. Like the prison-house of language, the nuclear world permits no escape from its ever-enclosing confines. The opening definition of nuclear criticism in *Diacritics* encourages the idea that literary assumptions shape current nuclear discussions but remain systematically ignored (2). It follows that literature plays the role of the unconscious in nuclear rhetoric. Michael McCanles also posits that words lead us into self-binding structures (19), and Derrick de Kerckhove's "On Nuclear Communication" maintains that the bomb has become a powerful unconscious symbol, informing our feelings and attitudes (78).

The idea of a nuclear unconscious, then, brings together the two most powerful images of enclosure to emerge in the last century. It combines into a provocative icon those theories of language and the unconscious most enthusiastically embraced by poststructuralist critics. The nuclear unconscious resembles language in its capacity for infinite digression and opaqueness, and it carries with it as well the deep power of death that Freud isolated in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* as a feature of the unconscious. Language and unthought join forces as weapons of death in the service of nuclear devastation. There is no thinking about the bomb, but no way to stop thinking about it. There is no speaking about the bomb, but we cannot avoid talking about it symptomatically with every word. Like Freud's sublime *Ananke*, the nuclear unconscious speaks one final truth: "the aim of all life is death."⁷ No wonder, as Frances Ferguson notes apropos of Frankenstein's monster, we feel that our skin is too tight. Frankenstein supposedly brings the monster to life, but

7. Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," *The Standard Edition*, ed. James Strachey, vol. 18 (London: Hogarth, 1953-74), p. 38. Interestingly, in contrast, see "Why War?" *The Standard Edition*, vol. 22, pp. 197-215, where Freud discovers an aesthetic and ethical perspective on warfare. The essay argues that civilized human beings have developed a "constitutional intolerance of war" based both on their disgust with its violence and on the fact that war causes a "lowering of aesthetic standards" (215).

the monster grows acutely aware that his master has brought only death to life. Similarly, our masters of suspicion have continually brought death to life, and it sometimes seems that our release will arrive, like the monster's, only with a final flight into some arctic void, either to escape the claustrophobic world of human beings or to embrace the negative freedom of suicide.

The idea of the nuclear unconscious has bleak consequences to say the least, but it is useful in posing a final question of self-definition to critical theory. To what extent has the nuclear metaphor become only another means of representing the dominant theories of modern literary study? (Indeed, the description of nuclear criticism provided by *Diacritics* merely repeats the latest phrases of critical theory in the context of nuclear politics: "use value," "mimetic rivalry," "the power of horror," "the interpretation of origin," "the role of gender," "rhetoric," and so on.) To what extent has the claustrophobia of current criticism found its ideal image? And what value can literary theory have for the understanding of the current scene, if its interest is only to convert the nuclear problem into an image of itself? Can theory be political, if it insists on importing into the present discussion of nuclear issues not openness and insight but definitions of thought and language that deny the possibility of insight and education? This is not to assume that sentimental humanism will provide the faithful cure for nuclear war. It is, rather, a question for modern theory. Has the marginalization of literary study through time become a habit that threatens to cripple it permanently for any significant contribution to human life?

The Finally Human

Nuclear criticism does have one advantage that has lately been absent from literary theory: it contains the potential to read literature not against human interests but for them. Whereas poststructuralist theory has been defined principally as linguistic, in direct opposition to psychological and anthropological issues, nuclear criticism exposes the fact that the most abstract of theoretical designs and the most simple of literary ventures conceal human interests. The central human issues, for nuclear

critics, are the value of the human community and the danger of its destructive tendencies. Nuclear criticism may therefore serve a double purpose. It provides a means of reading the ethical preoccupation of those literary artists and critics who declare most zealously their antagonism to ethics, and it asserts those principles of human community and opposition to violence so vital to the discussion of nuclear issues.

Despite Derrida's claim, for example, that ethics originates as a violent gesture, his writings on nuclear criticism work to establish a parallel between his theory of differance and nuclear deterrence. He cites the wisdom of deferral through linguistic tactics, and one senses that he sometimes associates the play of language in dissemination not with nuclear proliferation but with a kind of playing against time. Given the right context, it would not be difficult to trace to what extent all of Derrida's writings strive—and not merely for philosophical reasons—to answer the question, "What links writing to violence?" The question marks the point where Derrida begins to contribute to the ethics of criticism and enters into the tradition of moral philosophy, for an ethical argument must result from Derrida's claim that writing is linked to violence.⁸

More important, Derrida's "No Apocalypse, Not Now" makes a tangential contribution to the ideals of humanism, seemingly breaking away from his long-standing practice of critiquing the tradition of humanity and the humanities. He opens the essay by referring to "what is still now and then called humanity" (20) and admits that "the stakes of the nuclear question are those of humanity, of the humanities" (22). Derrida's opening of the question of humanity is not a temporary breakdown in defenses, a sentimental moment born of the pressure of the nuclear question. The "now and then" of humanity reads in the same way as the phrase does elsewhere in his theory. In "Differance," Derrida announces: "I shall speak then of the letter *a*, this first letter which it seemed necessary to introduce now and then in writing the word 'difference'" (131).⁹ Writing difference

8. See Chapter 4.

9. Jacques Derrida, "Differance," *Speech and Phenomena*, trans. and ed. David B. Allison (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1973), pp. 129–60.

with an *a*, “now and then,” means understanding that the structure of difference always and already engages in the process of deferral. Similarly, writing about “what is still now and then called humanity” means that we write always and already about humanity.

It seems that the claustrophobia of the nuclear unconscious reveals a specifically human content, and it eventually yields the sense that we are “finally human,” as Wallace Stevens writes, “Natives of a dwindled sphere,” in which “each person completely touches us / With what he is and as he is, / In the stale grandeur of annihilation” (cited by Mary Ann Caws, 69–70). Nuclear criticism, in fact, returns with insistence to the idea that nuclear war makes human community more apparent than ever. When Derrida reveals that nuclear devastation watches over deconstruction, he represents the bomb as the outer limit of human existence. Derrick de Kerckhove also argues that our “growing awareness of the planet’s mortality is synonymous with the growth of its unified identity” (79). For de Kerckhove, the bomb becomes a principle of equality, for it says “the same thing to everybody” (81). Similarly, Girard describes the “modern space” of nuclear war as resembling a tribal village, where strict principles of reciprocity govern to preserve the community. The inevitability of this “modern space” orients Girard’s desire to found a criticism that reveals the self-defeating nature of human aggression and the value of reverence and communion. Mary Ann Caws refers to this collective mentality as the spirit of Melusina, the threshold person, who contradicts warring impulses with the music of “slow rhythms, loving digressions and deflection, savoring deferral” (66). Born of literature, Melusina opposes to the glitter of nuclear weapons the harmonies of the body and social existence: reproduction, childbirth, and mothering.

The metaphor of nuclear war creates a sense of human community by virtue of exploring its loss. Indeed, according to de Kerckhove, the bomb instills the feeling that Yeats called “the emotion of multitude,” a sense of “the magnitude of the human dimension on the planet and of the magnitude of the threat which is now forced upon it” (79), and he further compares the

emotion of multitude to the sensation reported by many astronauts as they witness the unity of the planet from space. Nuclear criticism portrays total destruction and asks that we imagine in its absence what we might have had. It walks in the night to remember the day, choosing nuclear devastation over the astronaut's human elation. That nuclear criticism expresses the values of human life and peace only with negative representations indicates to what extent the spirit of modern disillusionment, which mocks sentiment and optimism as unintellectual and naive, has contaminated our positive images of life. The truth remains, however, that the thinking behind images of nuclear catastrophe is no less sentimental and no less naive than that of sentimental humanism in its inability to see the diversity of human behavior. The sentimentalist may be naive in singing songs of Melusina, but critical theorists are just as unintellectual in chanting *Dies Irae*.

If the dwindled sphere of nuclear criticism has any lesson, it is not one unique to its specific concerns. The value of nuclear criticism remains its ability to reveal that literary criticism in general holds to a set of ethical principles involving human community and its violence, despite various attempts on the part of criticism to seclude itself in a purely aesthetic realm. These ideas are not the particular province of those critics who call themselves ethical; they are the unspoken ethics of criticism, and they derive from the persistent cares and desires of people who write, read, and live together. They are human concerns, focused on the eminence of human society and the forms of violence that threaten community, and they represent the only space from which people cannot free themselves and still exist. The human space is often heavy with the stale grandeur of annihilation. More often it is simply mundane, as it should be, sounding of human language, conversation, and noise. Both aspects constitute the world not as seen from above but as seen by human beings, a world in which ethics and aesthetics, life and literature, and human beings cannot escape one another.

Nuclear missiles now have the capacity to penetrate the atmosphere, and it is tempting to accept their bird's-eye view of the planet. But literature provided a human view of the world long

before our rockets reached their orbits. It has persistently given us a view of the whole of humanity, not with the false serenity of a mile-high vantage point, which presents the world as a ball of clouds, earth, and ocean, but with a distinctly human viewpoint, sometimes too peaceful, sometimes too violent, for any one human taste. The nuclear metaphor communicates in its care for life the wholly negative image of planetary death that literature has forever balanced with an ethical and aesthetic image of human life. To be human is to tell stories about ourselves and other human beings.

The finally human is literature.