Poetic Presence and Illusion

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Literature versus Ecriture: 
Constructions and Deconstructions in Recent Critical Theory 

I want to begin by surveying in a brief compass the theoretical conflicts currently animating our academic literary criticism and to make clear my own attitude toward them. Since I want to be brief in my summaries, I shall have to oversimplify various critical positions in order to place the variety of statements within each of them into patterns that I hope are accurate, even if only generally so.

Since those days, now at least two decades back, when we could speak confidently about the dominance of American criticism by the so-called New Criticism, a number of contenders has arisen to claim the place of primary influence. Whatever the differences among them, they seem to share the role of exacting retribution upon the New Criticism for its excesses. We associate the New Criticism with an

This essay was originally written for the Literary Theory issue of Studies in the Literary Imagination (Spring 1979). Perhaps I should make explicit at the outset my intention to limit my use of the term literature to "poesis" in the Aristotelian sense of self-conscious fiction-making. Hence my use of the term poetry or even poems (with no reference to verse, of course) as a synonym for it. If, then, I am defining "literature" at its narrowest point, I am defining "poetry" at its broadest.
exclusive focus upon the isolated literary work to the neglect of its relations to its author, its audience, and the language of which it is representative. Thus New Critics overemphasized the discontinuity of the poem and the experience appropriate to it, rejecting any continuity with the experiences of its creator and its reader or its continuity with discourse in general. Each of these areas of neglect seems to have sponsored a variety of criticism which has claimed some following in these post–New-Critical days.

If their idolatrous approach to the insulated poem as something like a sacred object led some New Critics to ignore authorial consciousness and with it the act of writing, some post–New Critics turned from work to author with a vengeance, blending the work into his consciousness. Others turned instead to the passing moments of the actual and even wayward experience of the reader and dissolved the work into them. And since New Critics, in their exclusive concentration on the poem, conferred upon it a privilege which cut it off as a discrete entity from the rest of language, still other post–New Critics have tried insistently to reestablish the unbroken continuity of all our discourse, poems and non-poems, as they merge the aesthetic into the continuity of all our experience.¹

In the later 1950s it was Northrop Frye who, with his followers, led a resurgence of interest in romanticism which sought to undercut the antagonisms of the classic dispassion that characterized the New Criticism. Then the influence of newer continental critical movements began to assert itself, first by the so-called phenomenological critics, more accurately called “critics of consciousness” after the model of the Geneva school, most often seen in this country as represented by Georges Poulet. Though there have been other, philosophically more faithful versions of phenomenological criticism after Husserl, Ingarden, and Merleau-Ponty, it was the freer, more subjectivistic variety introduced to us by Poulet that attracted the neoromantic mood already aroused by Frye. It also fed the neoromantic return to an interest in the writer and his world as his consciousness constitutes it for him. Those other critics we more accurately call phenomenological have usually preferred to concern themselves with the mental states of readers in their perceptions of literary works. Such reader-oriented

¹I of course do not mean to suggest that these movements were primarily motivated by the desire to counter any aspect of the New–Critical orthodoxy or, in some cases, that they were even aware of the New Criticism as a movement to be countered. But I would argue that the effect of these movements, seen from this end of recent critical history, was to undo the several aspects of what we think of as New–Critical doctrine.
criticism is reflected not only in the so-called School of Konstanz but—perhaps even more influentially among younger American scholars—in the critics trying to apply speech-act theory to the work's confrontation of its reader, and especially in the "affectivist" work of Stanley Fish. But on this occasion I cannot pursue these several directions since there is one other major movement on which I want to dwell.

Only with structuralism, together with post-structuralism, also derived from continental sources, do we find a movement with the spread and attempted dominance to match the New Criticism's. Indeed, in the semiotic ambition that would synthesize all the "sciences of man," structuralism would claim a far greater hegemony. And its following among younger scholars threatens to become far more extensive, spreading as it does well beyond the precincts of literary study. Its power rests on totally new and revolutionary grounds that would destroy the basis of all traditional criticism which it would replace as it deconstructs. For, in its most forceful posture, it would do away with any distinction among the modes of discourse, indeed in its extreme form even the distinction between criticism and the poem which is its object: it would deny that criticism serves, as a secondary and derivative art, the primary art of poetry. Instead it would see them both, with all their sister disciplines, sharing—as coordinates and equals—the common realm of écriture. There are, of course, many different voices in the domain of structuralism and post-structuralism, and they are often raised in violent debate with one another, as we move from a Lévi-Strauss to a Lacan or a Foucault or a Derrida, or as we move through each of Barthes's new and changing pronouncements, as these debate with one another. And we must ask, with some of these writers, whether he is structuralist or not, as he protests his freedom from the movement. More generally, we must ask when post-structuralism ceases to be structuralist.

What these positions share derives from a Saussurean view of language, which, by way of its universal analysis of discourse into langue and parole, must come to the leveling of any privilege which poems have been granted. Man is seen as an identical speaker-writer in all his varied discourses, each built upon equally arbitrary signifiers, based upon a monolithic principle of differentiation. We are instructed to find the unity of all discursive disciplines in a common structure of signifiers, whatever their arbitrary signifieds may turn out to be. Thus our analysis of any of these disciplines rests on the methodological assumption that homology is all. However favorable our attitude toward interdisciplinary study may be, however intense
our search for a unifying principle for the human sciences, this procedure may well suggest too easy and undifferentiated a series of analogies (or rather homologies), especially—we should add—for a theory expressly based on the doctrine of difference. Still, these theorists surely represent (among other things) history's egalitarian revenge upon the New Criticism's aristocratic worship of the poem as a privileged and hence elite object, an object as separate from all others as it is from our normal experience. (This socio-political language is intended more than figuratively as it is used by many in the structuralist tradition.)

In the extreme form of Barthean semiology, the literary work (as we may obsolesctly term it) flows with all others into the sea of écriture, part of an anonymous universal and intertextual code that is a single system. The structural sameness behind the disposition of signifiers, though they parade their would-be signifieds before us, should remind us that it is but a mythification for us to take those signifieds literally, as if they and their claims represented a conceptual “reality.” For, instead of signifiers embracing their signifieds, they stand at a hopeless distance from them, with a relationship between the two that is arbitrary at best. And, for the post-structuralist, the world of discourse becomes as empty as the world itself. With this claim, we are reminded that the post-structuralist, if not the structuralist, impulse, though its motives seems to be linguistic, may be seen as springing from the metaphysical (or rather anti-metaphysical) anguish that accompanies our sense of the “disappearance of God.” Verbal meanings seem to follow God out of our experience, the one abandoning our language as the other abandons our world. Thus in Jacques Derrida or Paul de Man we often see linguistic terminology disguising an existential sense of absence. It is a lingering Heideggerian impulse. If their literary theories seem breathtakingly new, the motivating notion of the death of God does not. (It is not difficult to understand the role of Nietzsche as one of the major prophets of the movement.)

In such theorists both world and language come to be seen as decentered since, in the grand marriage of Nietzsche and Saussure, the world is reduced utterly to language, a now-empty world of language defined as the disposition of signifiers alone. Both world and language are seen as decentered; for any of us to claim to find a center ringed by signifieds, concepts whose would-be meanings we reify into reality, is for us to resort to the mythology of metaphysics, ripe for deconstruction. But if all language, as the common écriture, is equally doomed to emptiness, then our long-standing convictions about poetic presence in the book and the word can be demystified and revealed as the
pious delusions they are. The study of poems becomes, for such theorists, the study of such decentering, such emptiness. The critic, thus licensed (or thus deprived), must content himself with the absence rather than the presence of meaning, with verbal deferral rather than self-assertiveness, with poems as centrifugal rather than centripetal movements. As in de Man, criticism studies the poet at a distance from himself and the world, sending forth words that acknowledge the gap, the awesome void, between themselves and their would-be objects. Linguistics, having yielded to thematics, now claims a poetics, what Joseph Riddle, in the spirit of Derrida, terms "the poetics of failure," the failure of the word. The "uncreating word" of the Dunciad's apocalyptic end has come again, this time heralded and theoretically shepherd.

As I have suggested by mentioning Nietzsche, this movement may well represent an extreme extension into poetics of the mood of wan despair that has been with us for over a century. We may recall that Matthew Arnold's own concern to come to terms with the new unmetaphysical realities, while retaining a special role for poetry, led him to grant to poetry the psychological powers lost by religion along with our belief in its claims. If we share Arnold's loss of faith, we can go either of two ways: we can view poetry as a human triumph made out of our darkness, as the creation of verbal meaning in a blank universe to serve as a visionary substitute for a defunct religion; or we can—in our negation—extend our faithlessness, the blankness of our universe, to our poetry. If we choose the latter alternative, then we tend, like de Man, to reject the first, affirmative humanistic claim about poetry's unique power, seeing it as a mystification arising from our nostalgia and our metaphysical deprivation.

Stubbornly humanistic as I am, I must choose that first alternative: I want to remain responsive to the promise of the filled and centered word, a signifier replete with an inseparable signified which it has created within itself. But I am aware also that my demythologizing habit, as modern man, must make me wary of the grounds on which I dare claim verbal presence and fullness. And I am grateful for my recollection that the aesthetic domain—the domain of aesthesis, of Schein—has been, from Plato onward, acknowledged to be the world of appearance, of illusion, so that verbal power, under the conditions of the aesthetic, need not rely upon a metaphysical sanction to assert its moving presence.

I have before now in several places argued for the power of a poem to persuade us of its own verbal presence, even while its "theme" may
well have been that of separateness and absence. The point I have been trying to establish is that the existential theme of absence, of distance, indeed of one's very failure to touch the world while being overcome by it—however moving and universal this theme has been in our time and earlier—need not lead to an equal absence, distance, and failure in the created language of the poet who deals with it. Critics used to believe that a mark of the great poet was his power to overwhelm with his expression the gaps in the commonplace language of the rest of us as we try to stammer out our sense of the human predicament. It does not require us to surrender our sense of that predicament if we claim that combinations of words can be created which permit us to grasp it as we cannot for ourselves. Although Yvor Winters was not one of my favorite critics, I begin to sympathize with the impatience with which he used to invoke "the fallacy of imitative form" to characterize the activity of the poet who deprived himself of the capacity to transcend (and thus to transform) his materials.

It may be instructive, as an indication of how criticism has moved from valorizing the formal overcoming of thematic distance to valorizing the formal (or rather the anti-formal) echo of it, to compare Cleanth Brooks's invocation of romantic irony to Paul de Man's. For Brooks, as the representative New Critic, the poet employs irony as his device to master the several separated and even opposed layers of meaning and being—through the conflation of them within a word. For de Man, irony is a reflection of the subject's isolated and powerless state as he relates himself to the nature (object) from which he is alienated. Poetry cannot for de Man succeed in escaping the fate of language as a differentiating instrument, trapping itself within its speaker. So in de Man irony returns the subject upon himself, thereby guaranteeing the inefficacy of his language to touch the endlessly differentiated world—differentiated, most of all, from himself. On the

2 See my treatment of the poems by Ben Jonson and John Donne in Theory of Criticism: A Tradition and Its System (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), pp. 234–40; of Sidney's and Shakespeare's sonnets in "Poetic Presence and Illusion I: Renaissance Theory and the Duplicity of Metaphor" (above); and of Tristram Shandy at the conclusion of "Poetic Presence and Illusion II: Formalist Theory and the Duplicity of Metaphor" (also above). In each case I have tried to demonstrate the poem's capacity, by its own verbal nature, to collapse the distance which it acknowledges.

other hand, the irony of Brooks enables the speaker—whatever the
dehumanized state of the outside world as it oppresses him—to cap-
ture it all in his word and thereby, at least aesthetically, to humanize
it after all. If neither’s irony alters the fallen reality, at least that of
Brooks asserts man’s formal power to comprehend it, whatever his
existential status as forlorn subject.

Now it is true that the New Critics tended to bestow this substan-
tive ontological role upon the word too literally, so that a later lin-
guistic skepticism provided a needed demystification. Still, within the
provisional nature of our aesthetic habit of response, is there not an
illusion of verbal presence which we can find in the poems which
constitute our canon? And from here can we not move to the further
illusion that existential space and its gaps are collapsed into the sensi-
ble unity contained in words exploited for themselves? Would these
moves not seem to preserve literature as a kind of discourse which
seemed to be performing differently from its fellows?

Can we, then, propose a theory of literature that allows for litera-
ture even while taking into account the warnings about mystification
which the structuralist movement has effectively used to displace its
precursors? I see this as the major question I must answer since, as we
saw at the opening of this essay, post–New-Critical movements seem
to have defined themselves by their opposition to one or another
element of neglect (poet, reader, or discourse as a whole) indulged in
by the New Criticism as it reified its object. Need all the gains be-
queathed by this movement be washed away along with the metaphys-
ical orthodoxy and epistemological naïveté that apparently made
those gains possible?

Clearly, any defense of a separatist concept of literature must
today be provisional, if not paradoxical, in that it must free itself to
attend to an object in whose independent existence it cannot afford to
believe. It is for this reason that I see the critic dealing with inten-
tionalities and illusions, even though his attention to our habits of
aesthetic perception and the history of artistic conventions permits
him to salvage what he can of an art object—not altogether unstable
—functioning within its culture and serving that culture’s visionary
needs. Under the literary man’s pressure to do justice to the art he
tends, but equally under the pressure of recent deconstructionist the-
ory, I feel both the presence of the object and the phantom nature of
that presence. In this way I hope that—if one is candid enough—it is

4 This is to use, for a moment, the language of Harold Bloom, who has been show-
ing some signs—despite his vast difference from them in emphasis—of becoming
their ally.
possible to evade a wishful reification on the one side and the dissolu-
tion of the literary experience on the other.

So, despite contrary tendencies, I mean to urge not only our recog-
nition of the poet’s verbal power for humanistic affirmation even in
the face of the blankness of our common language, but also the avail-
ability of the poet’s product as a special sort of stimulus for our
response. Still, I must emphasize our present instinct for demystifica-
tion in order to remind us of the crucial phenomenological qualifica-
tion which reduces the art object from ontology to illusion. As we
yield to the prodding of our aesthetic experience which would have us
reify literature as an autonomous entity, we dare not forget that its
illusionary role must somehow allow for its existence within the indi-
visible domain of écriture. It is thus the case that any concept of
literature which recognizes its ties, before and after, to a continuum of
language and experience will have to treat its status as literature most
delicately if that status is to be salvaged at all.

Even a modified phenomenological defense of literature as a special
mode of discourse is likely to depend upon some claim in behalf of a
peculiarly literary use of language. Such a claim rests, in turn, upon
an assumption that there is a “normal” use of language and that
language becomes poetic through deviations from the norms of “non-
poetic” language usage. But the long-accepted doctrine about lan-
guage norms and deviations from them has been steadily undermined
in recent years. Stanley Fish’s attack on “deviation theory” and its
dependence on the concept of an “ordinary language” is only one—if
one of the more effective—of such attacks. The insistence of Hayden
White that all language is tropological, that it all has a “swerve” in
the direction of the peculiar figurative vision of the discourse, leaves
no neutral linguistic ground for language to swerve from. One could
observe this general tendency in recent theorists who, with a neo-

5 Such deviations do not, of course, refer to anything as superficial as “poetic diction.”
Rather, in the tradition of Russian and Prague School Formalism and the New
Criticism, these are seen as “dislocations” or “defamiliarizations” in the semantics
or syntactics of language, breaking in upon our normal responses to discourse in
order to promote a special fictional or aesthetic function.

6 Fish, "How Ordinary Is Ordinary Language?" New Literary History 5 (1973):
41–54, and recently, "Normal Circumstances, Literal Language, Direct Speech Acts,
the Ordinary, the Everyday, the Obvious, What Goes without Saying, and Other

7 Originally in Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century
Europe (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), especially “Introduction:
The Poetics of History”; but more carefully and persuasively in “Introduction:
Tropology, Discourse, and the Modes of Human Consciousness,” Tropics of Dis-
course (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978). The term swerve is of
course borrowed from Bloom.
Kantian awareness of the constitutive nature of language and cognition, insist on seeing all language as revealing a version of reality rather than reality itself, a context-controlled shaping of verbal figures rather than a transparent show of universal meanings outside and independent of all language. So all language comes in recent theory to be seen as constitutive of its visions, creative of its fictions, in poetry and non-poetry alike. Consequently, any line between poetry and non-poetry is seen to be mythical as all discourse is similarly gathered under the blanket of écriture.

How, then, can I at this late date urge the deviationist claim for poetry which I need if I am to urge its separatist mode of functioning? For how—to ask the same question another way—can I still speak of “normal” discourse as a mythical background against which deviations are to occur? Perhaps my answer is summed up precisely by such an acknowledgment that the concept of normal discourse is mythical, though it is a necessary fiction if we are to account for the effects which the poetry in the Western canon is capable of producing in those of us who come to it with the trained habit of aesthetic response. Can recent arguments for a seamless écriture altogether wipe out our common-sense awareness of the distinction between those discourses which are predicated on the assumption that they are telling us about a “reality” outside language—that they are more or less “true”—and those which are self-consciously cultivated fictions? We of course approach made-up stories about imagined people differently from discourse which claims to say things directly to us about the world; and we do so in part in deference to what we assume the writer means to do with us and to us. Yet the sophisticated claim about the similar metaphorical fictionality of all discourse would lead us to deny any such “common-sense” distinction as naive.

I would urge our “common-sense” awareness of yet a second distinction, this one between discourse which seems anxious to sacrifice itself in order to transmit extra-linguistic notions available in several possible verbal sequences or languages and discourse which seems to generate its meaning out of the very internalized play of its verbal medium, so that its meaning is untranslatably locked in “these words in this order.” Recent theorists may well argue that there is no synonymity in any discourse,8 thus reinforcing the antagonism against

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8 E. D. Hirsch, Jr., to the contrary, argues that there is synonymity in discourse, and—since for him literature exists within “the continuum of discourse” without a “special nature” to separate it from that continuum—synonymity can exist in poetry and non-poetry alike (The Aims of Interpretation, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976, esp. chaps. 4 and 8). It should be noted that his argument for synonymity is one I am quite prepared to accept for all discourse in which the satisfaction of
a claim for a poetic discourse which would create its nature through its unique untranslatability; but shall we not distinguish between the grappling with language to generate meanings as special as the very words and the lazier, stereotyped thing most of us do most of the time? It is refreshing to recall that the one earlier and most universally recognized contribution of the New Criticism was its power to distinguish the originally creative use of language from the general storehouse of stock expressions which appear, in borrowed form, in discourse. To call the latter "creative," whatever the epistemological likelihoods in the mind of man as language-user, is to engage in a basic misuse of the language of creation. (I thus acknowledge my belief that, even in my desire to say something original here, I am essentially discovering—picking up as best I can to satisfy my minimal verbal requirements at each step—the language I am using and not, in any way that suggests what the poet does, creating it in the sense of making it new.)

I argue, then, that most trained readers of poetry feel an acute difference between discourse characterized by a self-generating play of words which maximally exploits all that is potentially in them, exploding them into its meaning, and the loosely instrumental "use" of words selected from the bag of almost equal candidates for service which our culture places at our disposal to carry—one or another of them in its minimal way—a predetermined extra-linguistic meaning. Of course, this is a matter of degree rather than of kind, so that boundary cases will have to exist and be debated about—and perhaps with almost every case a potential boundary case. Yet the theoretical distinction is a crucial and felt one for so many readers that there is likely to be considerable agreement about poetic and prosaic extremes. Between extremes of verbal manipulations tending toward and away from synonymity, and all that synonymity implies about the verbal satisfactions of maximal or minimal requirements, there may well be difficult and confusing examples of discourse which may appear to some to ask to be read one way and to others another way. And these often turn out to be the not-quite-philosophical-not-altogether-"literary" texts at the center of much recent theoretical discussion. But, far from proving the non-existence of literature as a relatively separate entity demanding unique interpretive methods,
such texts (as they have recently been treated) may rather be seen as broadening the applicability of literary methods, thereby enlarging the peculiarly literary domain of literature to include self-consciously reflexive writers whose fictions include the illusion that they are non-fictional.

So all discourse may indeed be a metaphorically derived fiction at its source, and its language may indeed be creative of its reality. But, in the face of such epistemological concessions as I make here, I still suggest the phenomenological distinctions which the differentiated structures of our verbal experiences present to us. The self-consciously developed fictional illusion of discourse to which we respond as aesthetic creates in its turn the illusion that there is a "normal" discourse from which it deviates. (Of course, we must grant that by this time there is nothing either shocking or blameworthy in our creating—among all the fictions we create—the fiction that there is a "normal" discourse or that, except in poetic discourse, there is a synonymy among words.) As we contemplate and seek to define what can happen in that fused linguistic "corporeality" which poetic discourse sponsors the illusion of attaining, our habit of finding (or making) binary oppositions may be pressed to the invention of another class of discourse, a prosaic sort that helps us mark by opposition the magical behavior we feel we have witnessed and been partner to in poetry. And we come up on the other side with the ruthless instrumentality of a neutral, normal discourse which is self-deceived in its intention to be self-effacingly referential. The structuralist insistence that the signifier cannot have more than an arbitrary relation to its supposed signified is perhaps the strongest way of putting this claim of universal synonymity—a claim that is supposed to allow me here, for example, to grab onto any word that satisfies the minimal requirements, from moment to moment, of the field of linguistic forces developing before me. The invention of binary opposition as a structuralist principle can thus win the literary man's assent through his own need to have such a principle as one from which the uniquely monistic principle of poetic discourse can deviate, and with apparently magical results.

In behalf of this sort of literary man and his cherished response to his favored works, we have been doing little more than circling and recircling his one tautology: that a poem is a speech-act and writing-act which deviates radically from our non-poetic uses of speech and writing. It is seen as becoming a version of parole which has been made to deviate from others so significantly as to make it autonomous and self-regulatory such as no parole, by definition, can be. Thus the experienced and properly initiated reader of poetry may be encouraged by the successful poem to sense the generic language system, or
language, behind it as violated and distorted until what is before us is seen as a self-generating and self-responsive—in short, as a reflexive—system. As this reader comes to view it, every deviation from normal usage is converted into a constitutive element of an apparently new system which can occur only this one time. The minimal functions of language, which usually satisfy us as speakers and writers are thus converted—as he watches—into maximal functions of the totally realized poem.

In this way the need to operate in a special way upon all that goes on in a poem forces this reader to retain the opposition between "normal" and "deviationist" models of discourse as his binary fiction. The contrary claim—that all paroles stand in a similar relation to their langue so that a poem is just another parole on the same level as all others—collapses the opposition, of course. If the parole is to the langue as the particular to the universal in the Platonic model, then all paroles—poetry among them—are equally subordinate, common subjects all. Structuralist uniformity, extending parole into écriture, here makes alliance with the claim of E. D. Hirsch in precluding—or at least demystifying in advance—the very concept of poetry as a kind of discourse.

Yet must we not resist such a denial to the extent that our profoundest literary experience is otherwise? In the greatest literary works, those documents which have—throughout their history with us—been treated as elite, those which, in other words, constitute the literary canon in the Western tradition, the illusion of an autonomous, self-generating reflexivity in language persists for those trained to read them appropriately (that is, in ways appropriate to our conventions for reading our elite literary works). We are persuaded toward viewing such a work as a self-sufficient system because we grant to it a peculiar status as a fiction, a free-standing fiction which seems conscious of that status, building that consciousness (which we grant it) out of the self-referential devices we claim to find in it. Skeptically aware these days of the literary man's propensities for mystification, we may be uncertain of the extent to which we have been hypnotized by it or merely self-hypnotized. Yet the sensitive and knowing reading

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9 It is thus that I have argued elsewhere for the paradoxical term micro-langue as a label for this verbal creation. See Theory of Criticism, p. 188: "Like all the other generic and minimal elements, the langue has been violated to the point that the parole appears to have become its own langue, a system of which it is the only spoken representation. In effect it becomes its own micro-langue, the only langue that speaks, the only parole that is its own system—the true concrete universal. Not that it is literally incompatible with the existing langue of which it is a parole, but that the langue cannot account for what this particular speech act has performed."
of the work which seems to do its work upon us somehow each time breaks through our wariness and our willfully irreverent inclination for demystifying our idols.

In this discussion I have been using the terms *langue* and *parole* and other references to linguistics in a metaphorical sense far broader than what is meant technically by them. To those who know my work it should be clear that the norms I speak of, or the deviations from them and the systems constituted by those deviations, are not to be thought of as exclusively verbal, though surely in many poems the words are the major element of the literary medium being manipulated into its own constitutive form and into its own self-consciousness. But as we move outward from lyric to narrative and dramatic modes, we find a number of presentational elements which serve as the manipulable medium, whether the staged presence (at once real and unreal) in drama, the point of view in narrative, or the great variety of received conventions—stylistic, formal, topological, or tropological—in all the genres. In effect, the medium is anything which the poet can convert into his performance space within his fiction, within his radical of presentation, within his language. That is, it is the space within which he performs his reflexive play, and persuades us to join him in it. We learn the internally generated rules fabricated for the occasion, and what they give rise to—within that performance space, whatever the genre—is the special sort of fiction we call literature.

Still, once we have decided—with whatever qualifications—to separate out literature from *écriture*, we must concern ourselves with the placement of a theoretical dividing line between literature and non-literature. This problem is especially troublesome if we have acknowledged the authority of those arguments which would deconstruct any separatist notion of literature. But whatever the mystifications of its more idolatrous critics, literature itself is no enemy to the deconstructive impulse. Far from it. Indeed, one might well argue that in its reflexivity and self-consciousness literature not only deconstructs itself but is the very model for our use in the deconstruction of other discourse. Modern theorists may be anxious to undercut the privilege granted literature by leveling it into common *écriture*, but what they have for the most part done is to raise *écriture* (or at least those non-literary examples of *écriture* they are dealing with) into literature. If these critics argue against the exclusiveness of poetry (that is, fictions, "imaginative literature") as the proper subject for criticism, and rather seek to include a wide range of works by essayists, philosophers, and even social scientists, they do so by treating these works as texts to which techniques appropriate to literary criticism may be applied.
Even more, their techniques of deconstruction, of “unmetaphoring” their texts, are to a great extent echoes of what poems have always been doing to themselves and teaching their critics to do to them.

It is for this reason I suggest that, instead of the concept of literature being deconstructed into écriture, écriture has been constructed into literature. As a consequence, everything has become a “text,” and texts—as well as the very notion of textuality—have become as ubiquitous as writing itself, with each text now accorded the privileged mode of interpretation which used to be reserved for discourse with the apparent internal self-justification of poetry. But if the no-longer-elite object of criticism has fewer characteristics which seem to deserve this concentrated treatment, it is a boon to criticism (and a boost to critical arrogance): as deconstruction ceases to be an element in a work no longer reflexive and device-filled, it increasingly becomes a central feature of the critic’s interpretive reading of it. And the text of the critic, in its deconstructive shrewdness, can now expect to outdo its object-text, whose native qualities are no longer a match for the critic’s own.

Yet even in the face of this development in recent theory, we still can seek a separate phenomenological definition for the peculiar forms we call literature, those whose justification for deconstructionist treatment appears to lie within themselves. We can very well grant, with Hayden White, that all the varieties of discourse are similarly constituted by their guiding tropes. We have already observed that, in theorists like White, the egalitarian principle works to claim, not that no discourse is art, but that all discourse is art. Each discourse is at its source creative: each creates its own tropological fiction; even discourse which pretends to deal “objectively” or “empirically” with its data from the outset “emplots” that data in accordance with the fiction permitted by the trope. What place, then, can there be for a “literature” which has a peculiar tropological functioning of its own?

According to the tropological universalism of White, discourse (poetic or otherwise) as it comes under analysis may be seen generally as tracing similar figurative patterns. And all such examples are then

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10 For the following discussion, see the introductory chapter to Tropics of Discourse (note 7, above).

11 In a recent essay (“The Epistemology of Metaphor,” Critical Inquiry 5 [1978]: 13–30), Paul de Man shows an interest in making common cause with those like White who see figuration as a discursive necessity which, at the epistemological level, breaks down our attempts to put up barriers between poetry and philosophy as kinds of discourse.
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equally literary as they present themselves for analysis by the critic of tropes. Each is seen as moving from metaphor to metonymy to synecdoche to irony, although there is some ambiguity about whether, as observed in discourse, these are analytic coordinates or (as in Vico) progressive stages. The sequence of figures surely leads from the primitive to the sophisticated, from the instinctual to the cerebral, from the naive to the self-conscious, in what seems to be a common romantic and post-romantic pattern of the fall of man, usually the fortunate fall.\(^\text{12}\) The sequence seems to move from an immediate, prediscursive, subjective identity (metaphor) to the particularizing differentiation, as of items in a contiguous series (metonymy), to the totalizing of particulars into generalizations (synecdoche) to the self-consciously subversive reflection upon the entire process (irony). We seem here to be dealing with modalities of consciousness as much as with linguistic tropes (or is the first utterly reducible to the second?), and we seem to have a series marked by cumulative progression even though there is a temptation to valorize each stage on its own.

(This pattern of discourse is seen as a reflection of the psychic history of the individual human consciousness as well as the collective history of Western consciousness. So, besides being an instrument for understanding discursive structure, it seems to propose a way of accounting for human development, both individual and collective, and in an identical sequence which suggests the principle that phylogeny reproduces ontogeny. No wonder, if all private consciousness and public history reveal these structures, that they invade all our varied discourses equally, or at least similarly. Of course, such structural analogies may reflect our own monomyth based on a privileged plot we have invented and projected onto discourse, consciousness, and history alike. White's own radical skepticism allows us to doubt that the ubiquitous pattern [like the pattern of the fall on which it appears to be based] is seen because the tropology reflects a true state of universal structuration [of consciousness as well as language, or of consciousness because of language]; it rather allows us to suspect that the pattern is seen because of a romantic and post-romantic convention of thought of which this tropological claim is no more than a recent version. From this perspective the pattern accounts for so many poets and thinkers of the past two centuries not because we have unlocked the secret of their common discursive structures, but because

their conventional mythologies of emplotment have invaded our own
discursive habits, turning our own work into just another historically
controlled example of an influential tropological habit of writing.)

In this series of the four tropes, the crucial movement—at least for
going discourse started—is from the first to the second, from meta-
phor to metonymy. The metaphorical world of similitudes and analo-
gies must dissolve its unity of a universally mirrorized sameness,
dissolve it into a differentiated sequence of separated entities, so that
language and rational science may begin. From individual verbal
boundaries, carefully demarcated and observed, words can then be
marshaled into the generality of propositions, a new unity in synec-
docne, but now safely arrived at through the observance of the rational
law of verbal differentiation upon which the very beginning of dis-
course in metonymy was predicated. Beyond this would-be scientific
security, nothing is left except the occasional reminder, by an ironic
wisdom, that this has all been a movement only in the world of tropes,
and that the clean scientific objective has been a deceptive one in
that the continual urge for differentiation, in depriving language of
its metaphorical moment with its urge for sameness, has also deprived
itself of its content, has in effect emptied itself. Yet our skeptical
awareness of the tropological bent which diverted the referential pre-
tensions of the discourse reminds us of its figurative basis, so that
structuralist analysis reveals it to be more literary than scientific.

It is here, in this universal model for the tropes of all discou-
rase—the model which for all practical purposes is to turn all the varieties of
discourse into literature, that we find a unique characteristic of litera-
ture as distinguished from non-literature. It rests—as we should have
remembered from Jakobson—on literature's special relation to meta-
phor, on its need to overcome the normally differential character of
language. We must note, in White's scheme (whose elements seem
to be as much borrowed from Piaget as they are applied to Piaget),
that prior to the differentiating action of metonymy, the metaphoric
stage—with its commitment to identity—was essentially pre-linguistic.
What I mean to suggest is that, if discourse normally must find its
nature by making its way from identity (metaphor) to difference
(metonymy), literature has the role of earning its way back to
identity from the differential nature of normal discourse from
which it deviates. Thus literature has the peculiar task of becoming a
kind of discourse which, as discourse, can yet appear to occupy the
normally non-discursive metarhorical stage.

As I conceive it, literature performs this feat, not by struggling
toward an impossible return to naiveté in a romantic search for the
origins of language, but by borrowing the appearance of a discourse of
identity through an ironic self-consciousness which knows the metaphorical indulgence to be an illusion. Once we think beyond the nostalgic notion of literature as primal metaphor, like that of a Vico or a Shelley, we recognize that literature is not an innocent: it cannot be defined in terms of naive metaphorical identity because it has already known metonymy, springing as it does from the ordinary uses of language such as metonymy creates. An advantage of White's tropological model is that it permits us to see literature as an ironic discourse, transcending and transforming both metonymy and synecdoche, though it does so in the guise of metaphor. Seen thus, literature is a sophisticate, a beyond-metonymy, rather than a before-metonymy, discourse.

I prefer White's enumeration of the four traditional tropes to Jakobson's reduction to two because a binary distinction between metaphor and metonymy restricts poetry within the former, thereby failing to account for the post-metonymic character of poetry which masks itself as metaphor. The romantic opposition between metaphor and metonymy thus tends to leave poetry as pre-discursive, pre-rational, and pre-realistic, so that it takes other complicating elements (additional tropes) to account for poetry's metaphorical nature as post-metonymic. To see poetry as a literal return to—or as an original beginning in—the pre-discursive state of metaphor is to fail to do justice to its sophisticated nature. Now it is true that the twofold scheme furnishes a distinct place for poetry, however romantically irrationalist it may be, while the fourfold scheme may seem to tie poetry to other discourse as being similarly tropological. But the latter scheme permits any distinction between poetry and other discourse to reflect the duplicitous relation poetry has to metaphor.

Although the ironic is seen by White as the final trope for all discourse, it is different for literature from what it is for non-literature in that it permits literature an illusionary return to metaphor under a show of identity that comes out of a full sense of difference as the essential principle behind words. Non-literary discourse may well attain the reflexive air of self-consciousness which irony permits, but in literature such a reflexive self-consciousness becomes a precise verbal device which momentarily alters the nature of our perception of language, reopening us to a vision of verbal identity, though it requires us to hold it as an illusion only. Consequently I object—in White as well as Jakobson—to the use of terms like similitude or analogy to characterize metaphor as if they were interchangeable with identity. It is my point that the special character of the poetic device which achieves the show of identity is marked by its distinction from similitude or analogy, since either of the latter two terms reminds us of the
commitment of language to difference. I recall John Crowe Ransom's important claim that the fully earned metaphor finds itself only where similarity and analogy end, where utter identity is achieved, achieved in the teeth of language's differential habits. According to this view, similarity and analogy both acknowledge the wide range of differences between the two items being compared because of—perhaps—only a single common element or structure. The poet's task is precisely to move from such similarities or analogies as non-poetry affords us, to the illusionary miracle—in violation of language habits—which shows us the two as utterly become one (except that, as the poem may also remind us, our metonymic memory knows better).

We can say, then, what the peculiarly poetic illusion is: that there is in the poem the collapse of verbal difference into the receptive capacity of a corporealized word which has achieved its fullness as a spatialized entity. It is an attempt to use language to return it and us to the primal identity which metaphor alone affords. But it is an ironic attempt which acknowledges that the world of linguistic difference is not only the world from which it springs but also one that, though paradoxically, coexists even in the illusionary metaphor itself, denying the metaphor even as that metaphor affirms itself.

This duplicitous relationship between the identity and difference of originally distinct linguistic entities is like that which I have some time ago noted (or rather noted Shakespeare as noting) between us and our mirror image. The image in the mirror, as our double, seems to match our reality with its own, except that, as an illusion, it is without substance and not ourselves at all. Further, I saw the magical nature of glass as permitting the unsubstantiality of the mirror image to open outward—through the mirror become window—onto a separate reality of its own. In a recent essay, Geoffrey Hartman finds a similar double that yet has its own life in the mirror—"the specular name"—and defines literature by its unique "nominating" capacity to

13 The passage occurs in "Poetry: A Note in Ontology," The World's Body (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938), pp. 139-40. He finds a special "miraculism" in the poem "when the poet discovers by analogy an identity between objects which is partial, though it should be considerable, and proceeds to an identification which is complete. It is to be contrasted with the simile, which says 'as if' or 'like,' and is scrupulous to keep the identification partial." Ransom blunts my point a bit by speaking of "partial identification" when I would prefer "similarity" (with its implication that the one moment or area of likeness is surrounded by moments or areas of difference), reserving "identification" for the completeness which the poet has forced. Still, Ransom makes the point tellingly for us even now.

establish a paradoxical sense of its reality and to create a language to speak it.15

The mirror plays a major self-referential role in Jan van Eyck’s famous wedding portrait of Arnolfini and his wife. In the painting, hanging on the far wall behind the couple being married, a mirror re­­reflects the scene already being mirrored in the picture. In that second-order reflection, we can make out the artist himself seated before the couple and painting the picture we are looking at, thereby corroborating visually the statement he has written on the painting, which testi­­fies to his witnessing of the marriage: “Johannes de eyck fuit hic.” There are here several orders of illusion and reality, of art and life, being collapsed into an identity for all the differences that are mutely acknowledged. They thus reveal the several kinds of paradoxical relationships I have been observing in literary language.

As with poetic metaphor, whatever reality the illusion persuades us to confer upon that double in the mirror, we must remind ourselves that the mirror never stops being an illusion even if—like van Eyck—the artist also was here, breaking through his created reality to our living reality. So too, despite his ironic reflexivity that puts us off, the poet asserts his presence and with it the presence of his poem; and he means—at least momentarily—to overwhelm our anti-metaphorical skepticism with such presence. Confronted by his fully charged literary work, for the occasion we become—for all our metaphysical disclaimers—magic-worshipers once again.