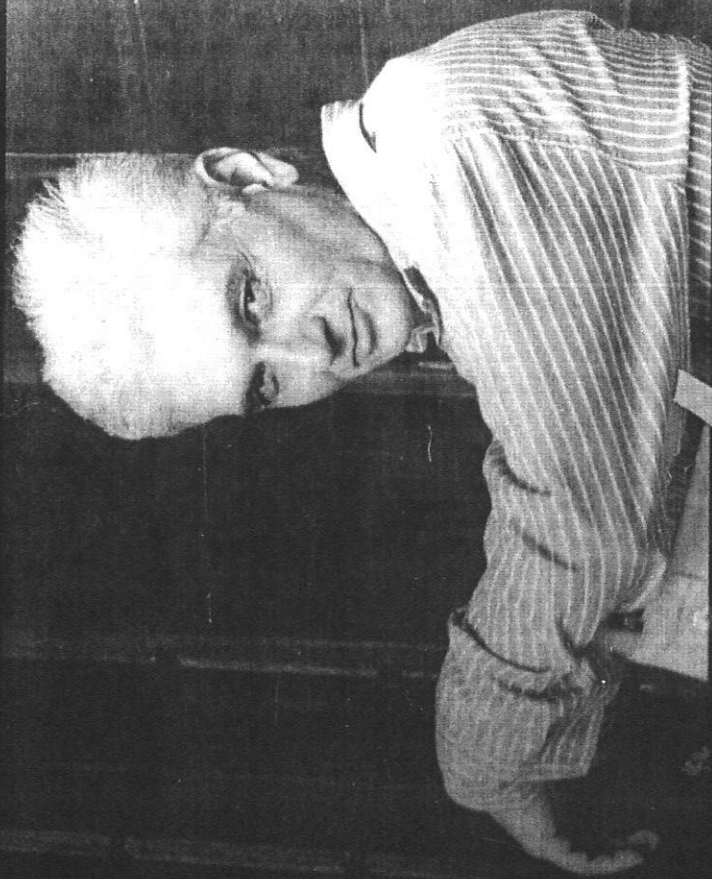


JACQUES DERRIDA



ACTS

LITERATURE

Jacques Derrida is one of the most influential figures in literary theory in the English-speaking world, yet much of his writing on literary texts and on the question of literature is not easily available in translation. *Acts of Literature* brings together for the first time a number of these works—on French, German, and English literary texts and figures—including Rousseau, Mallarmé, Joyce, Shakespeare, and Kafka. Also included is a substantial new interview with Derrida on questions of literature, deconstruction, politics, feminism, and history. For those unfamiliar with Derrida's writing, editor Derek Attridge provides an introductory essay on deconstruction and the question of literature, as well as suggestions for further reading.

Acts of Literature will serve as an excellent introduction to Derrida's remarkable contribution to literary studies, and will help refocus attention on the importance of literature, and on such topics as singularity, responsibility, and affirmation, in his work as a philosopher and critic of institutions.

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ROUTLEDGE

I

"THIS STRANGE INSTITUTION CALLED LITERATURE"

AN INTERVIEW WITH JACQUES DERRIDA

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Subsequently, philosophical training, the profession, the position of teacher were also a detour to come back to this question: "What is writing in general?" and, in the space of writing in general, to this other question which is more and other than a simple particular case:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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