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Review Article
Criticism and the Truths of Literature

Instaurations: Essays in and out of literature, Pindar to Pound. By D.S. Carne-Ross. (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1979). Pp. 287; \$17.50.

Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust (Yale University Press: New Haven, 1979). Pp. 305, \$19.50.

Literary criticism has never been anything but problematic to itself. There is, unless one is an artist for whom criticism is an off-shoot of the creative process itself, something fundamentally egoistic in expecting anyone to read one's writings about one's reading of others' writings. Writing about literature is fundamentally tautological. And yet the business flourishes. It feeds on its own inflation, so that it is not uncommon to discover, as I did recently, that there are half a dozen critical books available on a particular author (Ford Madox Ford, in fact) and only two of his novels in print. Explication is more saleable than the primary literary experiences it is intended to explicate. The professionalisation of literary studies within the higher education system has resulted in a situation in which teachers and students spend more time reading criticism than reading literature, to such an extent, indeed, that criticism has ceased to see itself as a parasitic activity, but has begun to claim for itself the true originality, the true genius of the literary world. Critics used to feel compelled to make self-deprecating gestures before the transcendental power of the creative imagination: no longer—the work of literature has not come into its full existence until it is *realised* by the critic; the literary work has become a footnote to the critical theories which represent the true

creative endeavour of our times. Thus it is the critics who now constitute the avant-garde—our Robbe-Grilletts following in the tracks of our Roland Barthes.

And yet we can hardly regard the academy in which this criticism is conducted as contributing centrally to our culture. At the point at which reading criticism seems to have become the primary pleasure for many literary students, criticism finds itself, both institutionally and intellectually, in a blind alley. Literature had offered itself the place as the centre of humane studies within the universities in the period after the Second War, a replacement for the lost centre of the classics, but we have not found any way forward from the crisis of the '60s. The challenge to the system—a challenge, essentially, to the systematising of literature—has not been met; it dissolved and left us with a set of conventional poses, empty gestures, and the hope that no one will have the energy—literal and metaphorical—to force the issues of how and why and what we teach as literature again. Intellectually, the blind alley is our discovery that we can no longer read. Reading has become the impossible absolute which is always disappearing before the intensity of our critical awareness. Paul de Man writes of Rousseau's *Profession de foi* that it 'can literally be called "unreadable" in that it leads to a set of assertions that radically exclude each other They compel us to choose while destroying the foundations of choice One sees from this that the impossibility of reading should not be taken too lightly.'(245) If reading is impossible the role of criticism is either primary—we should only read critics, not literary works—or redundant. The critics go on teaching and writing, but to what end is no longer clear, since institutionally and intellectually their subject has been displaced, or misplaced.

Academic criticism emerged in conjunction with the modernist movement: the connection is perhaps not accidental. Whether the two are causally connected or not, however, the effect of the conjunction was to give criticism a specific task, which was the elucidation of texts whose 'difficulty' was essential to their being regarded as serious literature. Works which deliberately sought to be available only to the few had to be made readable by the many, by the ever welling number of the student body. The modes which characterized the literature of modernism: ambiguity, irony, self-reflexiveness, doubleness, became the primary concern of the critic, and were found to be the essence of all literature of whatever period. At bottom, they were expressions of the principle of secrecy. The aura of the secret society, that had been such an integral part of modernism's inheritance from

symbolism, the principle of authorial concealment—Arthur Symons thought the highest praise of Mallarmé was that he might say, 'I have kept my secret, I have not betrayed myself to the multitude'—were the fundamental bases of the critical enterprise. The critic's function was revelation, the unveiling of the secret code that lurked behind every line, image, metaphor, character of the literary work.

What is interesting in the way that criticism developed, however, is that the relativising irony of modernist literature, its concern with the limitedness of the conscious mind, the barbarity of the imagination, the failure of historical progress and of the rationality on which bourgeois civilization prided itself, never transferred themselves to criticism. The authors might see themselves as trapped between the dead world of middle class values and some unborn civilization, might see themselves confined by the structuring devices of their literary conventions and the forms of their historical awareness, but not so the critic. The critic stood above the dilemmas which he analyzed, blithely confident in his ability to unveil, to reveal, to look (as Lionel Trilling put it) into the abyss and find the abyss waving cheerily back at him. Criticism, like the positivist science on which it was modelled, stood outside its field of study, and its own position as observer did not need to enter into its analyses. It was to save the civilization of which the writers had despaired.

That confidence collapsed in the '50s and '60s. On one side there was the challenge which, whether it described itself as marxist, freudian, liberationist, was fundamentally existential: it demanded that criticism deal with literature as essentially a process of self-discovery and self-development. Criticism had to be engaged in the present. The professional critic who could regard his business as scholarship or as the study of 'objective' systems of meanings on the page, was revealed as refusing commitment, as living in bad faith. The engaged criticism which was produced, however, led to the depressing thought that works of literature could be made to say whatever accorded with the critic's underlying principles. The marxian reading, the freudian reading, the plain personal reading of works of the past, making them relevant, could lead only to an endless proliferation of interpretations. The work became present only at the cost of being relevant to the few who shared the critic's preconceptions. The second challenge, initially at any rate, seemed like an answer to the proliferation of perspectival readings of the past: structuralism offered itself as a new monism, allowing the critic to recover his objective, scientific status by concentrating on the study of the 'codes', the grammar of

literary structures which made meaningfulness itself possible. The multiplicity of interpretations could continue unabated: they were the effect of what the structuralist critic could reveal as the true secret of literature: its deep structure, its binary oppositions, its grammar.

The recovery of a new scientism of literary criticism was no sooner achieved than challenged, however: structuralism has become post-structuralism, primarily under the influence of Jacques Derrida. What Derrida has done is to incorporate the self-reflexiveness, the self-doubt that characterised modernist literature into the critical awareness itself. Instead of seeing structuralism as an entry into the analyses of the codes which inform our structuring of the world, Derrida has turned structuralism on itself to ask how we can ever know anything except within the codes that organise our linguistic perceptions of the world. All writing is merely a revelation of the limits of its own language in the effort to come into contact with something that lies beyond language but which language can never incorporate. Criticism can only be the uncovering of the effort of writers—including the critic himself—to escape the consequences of the arbitrariness of language, for, as Saussure is generally claimed to have proved, there is no necessary connection between a sign and what it signifies. Any art which claims to connect with a real world beyond the system of its own codes and conventions is fundamentally in conflict with the nature of its medium, and, consequently, any criticism which strays from the level of the 'signifier' to the 'signified', from language to its referent, is a double denial of its status as writing about writing.

Trapped between the endless generation of new, ever renewable interpretations of what works of art are *really* about and the possibility that not only are they not about anything except themselves, their own language, but that that language cannot be read at all, literary criticism has succeeded, as an academic discipline, only to fail as a humane study.

2

Two books published in the last months of the decade just ended pose the problems of contemporary criticism and the institutions in which it works in ways that demand we consider the future purposes of criticism, if not, indeed, of literature. And both revolve around the issue which the original leader of academic criticism for the modern age, what we still call the New Criticism, put in abeyance: the issue of

truth. For I.A. Richards and those who followed him, literary works were, in one form or another, pseudo-statements. They existed for their emotive effects rather than their propositional validity; they resolve our psychological tensions rather than influence our cognitions. Unless, however, there is some form of 'truth' that literature is the appropriate vehicle for, the significance of literature cannot but remain in a kind of suspended animation, a perhaps necessary but regrettable regression of the human mind, vis-à-vis the 'truths' of science.

The first of these books is D.S. Carne-Ross's *Instaurations: Essays in and out of literature, Pindar to Pound*. The book consists of a series of studies of major literary figures and works from the ancient Greeks through Dante and Gongora to Leopardi and Pound, but the works studied are also an argument, an argument both about how you read literary works ('instauero' means to 'repeat, celebrate anew') and about the kind of institutions we need for the reading of them ('instauratio' means, as well as 'restoration, renewal', 'institution, founding, establishment'). The prevailing genius of the book is Pound and *Instaurations* is an attempt to fulfil, at the critical level, Pound's demand that literature should always be a matter of 'making it new', not of novelty alone, but of making the past new in the present. Criticism and interpretation are for Carne-Ross modes of translation, and his own translations, influenced by Pound, are one of the delights of the book. But his fundamental question is how the past exists in the present, what it can mean to us: 'what life in the world today, in America, does a classic text have?'(133) It is an argument about the role and value of traditions and it takes up, therefore, one of the primary elements in Anglo-American modernism, and sees literature essentially as a mode of memory:

Literature matters because, housing the living past as nothing else (except language) can, it remembers and keeps reminding us, at a time when everything else tells us to forget and be content with what we have, that we are living without something that humankind has always had. Literature matters because it teaches us to resist society's insistence that its reality holds the sum of all things possible.(23)

What he fears, however, is that our ways of reading literature have destroyed the possibility that literature will speak to us any more: a hermeneutics that sees all literature as divorced from its origins and in need of interpretation in the present, that sees all literature 'as so much plastic material to be reshaped and programmed'(108), makes

the past submissive before the present, makes the past absent itself rather than present itself to us. What we need is a way of reading that will allow us again to apprehend literature as 'not simply experience but knowledge'(24): it is not only to be remade in the present, it tells us, presents us with what *is*.

At the same time Carne-Ross accepts that literature will always be read from our present interests, and, fortunately for him, the literature he wants to insist upon as having some special value is a literature that he sees as intensely relevant to our present situation. In the ecological crisis of the '70s, he argues, the literature which can tell us the real nature of the world is not the Christian tradition upon which most of us have relied until now, but the truly classic world of Greece. The Greeks, living in that primal period of man's violation of nature in the establishment of the superiority of culture separated from agriculture, dramatize through their art man's dependence on the fundamental economy of the natural world. Violation of the natural brings retribution, and what we can encounter again, what we can relearn by returning to an earlier stage of our own cultural tradition, is what our society wishes us to forget: the demands of necessity, the retributive justice that the natural world exacts upon those who break faith with it. But the answer is not just to be sparing, and the answer is not to try to step into another culture, into Zen, or into Indian animism or whatever; according to Carne-Ross, it is to realize that our whole debate rests on a technology we learnt through the Greek experience, the technology of concepts, of rationality:

This thinking is radically anthropocentric, humanist. One side of man has unduly gained the upper hand, so let us, by a dialectical reversal that reverses nothing except our direction along the familiar tramlines, give a boost to the other side of man. We can understand our situation in no other way. And yet in the long reach of its memory the Western tradition preserves traces of a different kind of thinking which might introduce a real change of direction, if only we could let it address us, in a living communion, and not deaden it into an object of knowledge.(110)

Through the literature of Greece that harks back to Greece before the Enlightenment we can catch the possibility of another view of the world, one that might help save us in our present predicament.

That recapturing of a world-view is also, however, a transformation of the status of poetry. Carne-Ross's project is the project of modernist poetics as outlined by Yeats in his essay 'The Words Upon the Window-Pane': 'All about us there seems to start up a precise inex-

plicable teeming life, and the earth becomes once more, not in rhetorical metaphor, but in reality, sacred.' The recognition of the earth as sacred is also the recognition that the metaphors of poetry are not mere ornament, but realities, truths. The essays of this volume represent efforts to recapture the living reality of the sacred as it passes on, often unacknowledged, unaccepted, in the traditions of Western poetry. Through poetry a sense of the alternative view of how man should see his relation with nature has remained embedded in our language: learning to read properly is learning to read truly, seeing metaphors as realities rather than as plays of language in need of interpretation. It is a hermeneutics not of re-interpretation but of a recovery of origins in a new and higher awareness, a hermeneutics that Carne-Ross has learned from Paul Ricoeur:

Does this mean that we are to go back to a primitive naïveté, (Ricoeur) asks, and replies: 'Not at all. In every way, something has been lost, irremediably lost: immediacy of belief. But if we can no longer live the great symbolisms of the sacred in accordance with the original belief in them, we can, we modern men, aim at a second naïveté in and through criticism,' or hermeneutics . . . what I am trying to do, what I am aiming at throughout in my reading of the poets . . . (is) . . . to take what Ricoeur would certainly regard as an illicit short cut to something like this primitive naïveté.(240)

Recovering naïveté through criticism we make possible again the value of poetry, we recover, in Pound's words, 'a lost kind of experience', or, as Carne-Ross paraphrases it, 'a lost unity of experience within which the elements that have been separated come together again.'(216) The primary elements which have been separated are literature and nature, language and reality. By retracing our steps we can get back, Carne-Ross implies, to an unfallen linguistic condition, a world where man is still, and still in harmony with the world around him.

The readings of the poets that Carne-Ross deals with are beautiful, subtle and lucid; even the imitation of a seminar discussing Pound manages not to be utterly contrived and to say something interesting about the Cantos. And yet, in the end, the relation of Pound's (and Yeats') kind of modernism with regressive politics ('I don't think there's any doubt that he was following what he believed to be good. In any event, there is no use fighting yesterday's battles'(212)) is passed over too curtly and easily. The desire for a return to innocence is necessarily totalitarian, in the sense that it demands a total and not a partial solution of present dilemmas. Carne-Ross's model of a new

academy, a kind of cross between a monastery and Black Mountain, where teachers would labour to produce their own food, is a fine vision, but one can hardly see it resulting from anything but an apocalyptic collapse of Western economic life. Of course, apocalyptic desire is nothing new for modernism, and though the critic will hardly commit himself on the scale of the poet, he may still watch the world and hope that the collapse will also be a renovation of his own discipline. The Western world has proved all too invulnerable to the predictions of its end, however, and if we are going to find a way forward for literature and for criticism we probably cannot depend on a cataclysmic change in the world around us to effect it for us.

3

Names which recur regularly in Carne-Ross's study include Heidegger, Nietzsche, Gadamer as well as Ricoeur, names connected with a tradition in European thought which would not have been found in Anglo-American criticism before about ten years ago. The advent of structuralism, hermeneutics, the rediscovery of marxism, and of its offshoots in negative dialectics, the penetration, in effect, of Anglo-American thought by the European philosophical tradition: does it signify a new rapprochement between the English speaking world and the continental European tradition, or has it occurred—and occurred primarily in America—for less purely intellectual reasons? Is it, in fact, a function of the loss of confidence in their own intellectual traditions by American intellectuals, a loss of confidence that first manifested itself in the uprising of the '60s, but has been reinforced by the cynicism and despair of the '70s? Or is it really that the European tradition is fundamentally more exciting because it has had to reconstruct itself from the dislocations and the deprivations of the World War? However we account for the general phenomenon, the second book I want to look at is also heavily indebted to the tradition of Nietzsche and Heidegger, Paul de Man's *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke and Proust*. Carne-Ross's book will get some kindly criticism and some quizzical questioning of its recipe for a future academy, but de Man's will attract (indeed, as I write, has already had) much attention, not for what it is in itself but because it is symptomatic of (the metaphor of disease is intended) a movement, an intention in contemporary criticism: deconstructionism. De Man is quick to distance himself from the contemporary vogue, but nonetheless his book is a full-scale effort in the

deconstructionist mode. Where Carne-Ross, however, wishes to invoke the European tradition in order to find a way back to poetic truth, de Man's argument is precisely that literature is essentially falsification: literature's core is rhetoric, and rhetoric 'radically suspends logic and opens up vertiginous possibilities of referential aberration.'⁽¹⁰⁾ Referential aberration is fundamental to literature and therefore it can never be anything but a mystification of the real. The poet, as Socrates pointed out, is a liar and his work has to be undone by the critic; criticism is 'the deconstruction of literature, the reduction to the rigours of grammar of rhetorical mystifications.'⁽¹⁷⁾ What we are left with when this is done is not at all clear; presumably there is some kind of puritanical pleasure in being demystified even if what it means is that we have lost all that we ever read literature for.

For those not yet familiar with deconstructionism and with Derrida let me put the point as briefly as possible: language is a system which operates beyond the control of any individual and its meanings will always be in excess of any present use (meaning can never be a presence); any text will contain moments at which the author's desire to unify, to make coherent his meaning will conflict with the actual stresses (the traces of the past upon) language; at those points we can see the limitations of a writer's thought system, and from those points we can deconstruct the text, reveal its inner contradictions or paradoxes. The text is not treated, therefore, as a statement about the world to be tested against the world, but as a system of language to be tested against the workings of language. Deconstruction reveals the intent of the argument to be countered by the nature of its language: understanding can only be achieved by becoming conscious of the self-contradiction of all efforts at understanding. De Man's version of this in the present book is that all literary art necessarily involves the deconstruction of its own language, since it recognizes that its claims to truth are in conflict with the rhetorical nature of its procedures:

A literary text simultaneously asserts and denies the authority of its own rhetorical mode, and by reading the text as we did we were only trying to come closer to being as rigorous as the author had to be to write the sentence in the first place. Poetic writing is the most advanced and refined mode of deconstruction; it may differ from critical or discursive writing in the economy of its articulation, but not in kind.⁽¹⁷⁾

Since there is no difference between criticism and literature—except brevity—what goes for literature is true, *pari passu*, of criticism, which is therefore itself a sufferer from rhetorical mystification:

'deconstruction states the fallacy of reference in a necessarily referential mode. There is no escape from this, for the text also establishes that deconstruction is not something we can decide to do or not to do at will. It is co-extensive with any use of language, and this use is compulsive . . .'(125) If all writing is deconstructionist what is it that makes poetry more interesting than the prose of Paul de Man? only brevity? And if deconstruction is always present is it in any way an interesting or useful thing to follow through, does it tell us anything if what it tells us applies necessarily to everything? When a theory makes the distinction, as opposed to understanding, of differences between areas which we experience as entirely separate impossible, we begin to suspect that it has failed to grasp the point of the activity we are engaged in. Deconstruction may tell us a truth about the whole field of literature, but it is not therefore telling us anything particularly interesting about individual literary work. That all literature is language is not what we are concerned with, but what individual writers do uniquely with their language. And the unique, the particular, the pleasure of literature, is something de Man seems entirely innocent of. His own writing is based on the assumption that all writing is fundamentally unreadable, and, therefore, only the unreadable has the quality of being truly written: his prose only too adequately fulfills the equation. There is no pleasure of language to be gained from reading his prose: it is the piling up of abstraction upon abstraction, often without any explanation of the technical bases of the vocabulary in linguistics or philosophy. It is unreadable. Its effect is all too accurately described by de Man himself when he suggests that before all works of literature (and, therefore, one supposes, of criticism) what we ought to experience is the 'pathos of an anxiety (or bliss, depending on one's momentary mood or individual temperament) of ignorance.'(19) However, it is not, for this reader at any rate, anything akin to the anxiety or bliss I experience in reading *King Lear* or the *Duino Elegies* or even Frank Kermode or Lionel Trilling. One can only wish the unreadable could remain the unread.

Of course, de Man is enormously well read, exacerbatingly intelligent, an important critic who is obviously dealing with some of the fundamental issues we have inherited from modernism and from the linguistic revolution. One's temptation, and one that much of the criticism of the book has already resorted to, is to kick stones and utter refutations and ask that common readers stand up and be counted. And that kind of response is not inappropriate: there does come a point where any philosophical system, no matter how

coherent, conflicts with some ultimate sense of how the world is constructed and we carry on with our business on the assumption that even if we cannot point it out precisely there is, somewhere, a flaw in the premises of the argument. It is life's reconstruction, if you like, in despite of philosophy's deconstructions. And there is some justification, too, in looking at the circumstantial evidence and regarding it as less than flattering. Deconstruction is a mode, which, because it is at once difficult and all-embracing, is precisely suited to the conditions of literary 'research' in a graduate school: learn the technique, choose your author, follow out the deconstructions. A whole generation of graduate students do not need to find a new research topic, they merely need to find an undeconstructed author. As Gerald Graff has pointed out forcefully in his *Literature Against Itself* (1979), there is a sense in which such critical machines are very much in collusion with the machine institutions that our higher learning system has produced. Consumption of ideas just as much as consumption of cars demands an ever quickening pace of obsolescence, but at the same time demands that the latest idea be, for a while at any rate, sufficiently difficult to ensure that those who have it feel themselves to be an elect. And deconstructionism is very much, now, a processing machine through which any work of literature can be fed: it is not the engagement with the literary text that is complex, difficult and demanding, just the process by which the text is to be undone. As such it is the encouragement of a mandarin attitude to literature, denying the rights of all the naive readers who might sully the work by their failure to realize that it does not deal with people and experiences, with suffering, joy, fear and all those other bits of 'mire and blood' we usually call life, but that it has only to do with language. De Man and the other deconstructionists are attempting to thrust off the participatory criticism, the populism if you like, of their predecessors; they are trying to recreate through criticism that elite of readers that modernism sought through its creative works. What it seeks is to defuse the acceptability of modernism's difficulty that the new mass reading public who have been through higher educational institutions has achieved. What used to be 'difficult' in literature has now become so easy that the experimental techniques of sixty years ago are just play, pure fun, to the writers and readers of today. Only through the criticism that makes not only itself but all literature unreadable can the truly difficult, that which will distinguish the sophisticated from the naive, be maintained. Such attitudes cannot merely be taken at their own or on a purely intellectual reckoning; we

have to measure the value of their ideas not just in terms of coherence but in terms of their consequences for those values which we hold beyond the sphere of the literary, those values literature was once supposed to assert and support by virtue of its belonging to the humanities.

There are, however, elements entirely internal to de Man's argument that seem less than intellectually satisfying. Deconstructionism, as Derrida practises it, works by lighting on some previously unnoticed, apparently innocent sentence, and by scrupulous examination of its assumptions revealing the inner contradictions of the whole text. Derrida is working largely with texts whose logic and consistency, since they are philosophical, is their primary value. De Man uses the same technique with literary texts. He does not deal with poems or works as wholes: rather he analyzes at enormous length fragments and moments in a text, pitching the consequences of the fragment against the standard reading of the whole text. Such a procedure, however, is necessarily different when dealing with the deliberate richness of literary language rather than the attempted specificity of philosophical language. Decontextualizing a line or sentence from a literary work inevitably allows the critic to suspend the meaning of the piece between irreconcilable alternatives. The basis on which any conflict of meaning is resolvable, that of providing a sufficient context, is removed. The old New Criticism decontextualized whole poems, plays and novels and so produced infinite ambiguity, but de Man decontextualizes individual sentences and so produces unresolvable self-contradiction. Take, for example, his treatment of the rhetorical question at the end of Yeats' 'Among School Children', which he takes to be a paradigmatic example of a line which will generate two necessarily conflicting readings:

O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

This, says de Man, can be read either as a question implying the answer, 'We cannot because they are inextricably fused together', or the answer, 'Help me separate these two things and escape from the error in which I am caught.' The two readings are not suspended ambiguity, or bad poetry, but a deconstruction: 'the one reading is precisely the error (of identifying sign with referent) denounced by the other and has to be undone by it.'¹² De Man does not consider a) the possibility that this is a dramatic utterance, reflecting upon, if not reflecting, a state of mind for which the ambiguous form of the

rhetorical question is the appropriate expression; b) that Yeats' poem as well as being a development in itself is also part of a volume that is constructed as a debate between different positions and that the question here is being thrown forward for resolution in a later moment of the volume; c) that the dancer image is a common one in Yeats and not, without distortion, to be read as an image of the sign-referent relationship in language. I itemize these because they are typical of a threefold arbitrariness in de Man's treatment of literature: a) arbitrary treatment of questions relating to authorial intent; b) arbitrary use of meaning and of moments in a work's development and c) the consistent transformation of all literature into a commentary on language without reference to other evidence than the 'secret unveiling' of the critic himself. Let me illustrate these:

a) We are well used to having to do without authorial intent as a contextualizing for literary works, but de Man wants to deny that works can be in any way related to any set of psychological, emotional or intellectual problems at all. Commenting on an image of Rilke's which links together the rose window at Chartres, the oneness of God and the eye of a cat, he writes: 'The shock of the juxtaposition does not actually deepen our knowledge of reality and God, but it seduces the mind by the surprise of its precision.'(45) Whose mind? There are certainly ways in which Rilke's image offers *my* mind an awareness of God that may not be deeper than any I've had before (how do we measure such depth) but is worth my having as a way of focusing possibilities of God's nature that were before scattered perceptions. The emotional life, the intellectual problems that might require, since the mind is unique, the uniqueness of metaphor for its expression—and needs it precisely because language is trans-individual and has to be stressed, or instressed (to use Hopkins' term), to reach the particular and unique—are never seriously considered by de Man: 'all these themes fit Rilke's rhetoric so well, not because they are the expression of his own lived experience (whether they are or not is irrelevant) but because they allow the unfolding of his patterns of figuration.'(50) Why are the emotional problems, the lived experiences of the author irrelevant but not his (whose?) patterns of figuration, patterns introduced by reference to texts other than the poem itself? If these themes *do* fit Rilke's experience is it irrelevant to see the genesis of the figuration in the experiences rather than the experience as an outcome of the figuration? It is for de Man, because it may reveal a different context to that of language itself by which we can understand the imagery. The disappearance of the

author would be acceptable, perhaps, if de Man did not reintroduce him whenever in need of a buttress for feeble interpretations. Thus, again in the effort to reduce discussion of God to an allegory for poetic strategy, he writes,

The "God" that the poems circumscribe by a multitude of metaphors and changing stances corresponds to the ease that the poet has achieved in his techniques of rhyme and assonance. It is well known that these poems were written very quickly in a kind of euphoria which Rilke will remember when, more than twenty years later, he will write the *Sonnets to Orpheus* . . . (31)

The poems presumably wrote themselves (these poems were written), but Rilke's euphoria is introduced as biographical justification for reading God as an allegory of poetic control and facility, rather than the other way round. Similarly, he deconstructs Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* by reference to letters and to fragments not published at the time though, apparently, written in the same period. But if a text is not a text, if it doesn't deconstruct itself without the introduction of elements that can only be justified as relevant because of biographical information and statements of authorial intent (de Man quotes a letter by Nietzsche about a 'metaphysics of art, which serves as background') then why are we to refuse to see poems as the 'expression of the poet's own lived experience'? The intentional and expressive and biographical elements are used and abused with an arbitrariness that is designed to maintain the coherence of a deconstruction in the face of less totalizing modes of understanding.

b) de Man constantly chooses moments which reflect upon the nature of language in a work or oeuvre and then asserts them to be ultimate statements about the way the work is conceived; he never allows that concern about language might be a moment within a larger movement of thought or experience. The choice has been made by the critic of what counts as central and no counter evidence, even from the context of the whole work, is allowed to stand against it. Equally, there is no way of separating accidental from essential possibilities of meaning: all depends on the whim of the deconstructor in search of traces that will allow him to construct chiasmic reversals: 'The proper meaning converges with the connotation supplied, on the level of the signifier, by the "torride" ("hot") that one can choose to hear in "torrent". Heat is therefore inscribed in the text in an underhand, secretive manner, thus linking two antithetical series in one single chain that permits the exchange of incompatible

qualities.'(66) The secret is out—but whose secret? The text's of course. With such arbitrariness of double meaning anything can become anything, transformations endless and every argument equally valid and equally vacuous. (One could emphasize here the 'va' of the French ("go") that one could choose to hear in 'valid' and 'vacuous').

c) the primacy of the linguistic self-reference of works is never argued in terms of authorial concern, but rather against it, and with a constant, imperious imposition of its primacy without evidence except the critical assumption that all language must be a deconstruction of itself. The examples prove the case only by the assumption that the case is already watertight, and although this is typical of the hermeneutic circle which girdles all criticism now, it is a particularly vicious—because destructive of human(e) concerns and values—circle that de Man draws: 'The numerous successful poems that appear in the volume are primarily successes of language and rhetoric. This is hardly surprising, since it has been clear from the start that the Rilkean totalizations are the outcome of poetic skills directed towards the rhetorical potentialities of the signifier.'(45) How a successful poem can be anything else but successful by virtue of its language and rhetoric is hard to see: because it needs to be successful in its use of language does not, however, entail that it is only *about* its success as language. The 'hardly surprising' is only hardly surprising given the starting point of the critic, not of the poet. Equally, the constant transformation of poetic imagery into allegories of metaphor and referent or signifier and signified is done with a totalitarian (in its proper sense) zeal: 'There is little difficulty in matching the two mythological poles, Dionysos and Apollo, with the categories of appearance and its antithesis, or with the relationship between metaphorical and proper language'(91); 'The text indeed distinguishes the act of naming (tree A and tree B) which leads to the literal denomination of the proper noun, from the act of conceptualization. And conceptualization, conceived as an exchange or substitution of properties on the basis of resemblance, corresponds exactly to the classical definition of metaphor as it appears in theories of rhetoric from Aristotle to Roman Jakobson.'(146); 'The "moment" and the "narration" would be complementary and symmetrical By an act of memory or anticipation, the narrative can retrieve the full experience of the moment. We are back in the totalizing world of the metaphor. Narrative is the metaphor of the moment, as reading is the metaphor of writing.'(68) Metaphor has become a

catch-all by which even, in the second of these examples, the process of abstraction, which is usually considered antithetical to the concrete of metaphor, becomes, in essence, metaphorical. The unreadability of de Man's prose is protection against serious intellectual debate: I doubt though if it will protect us from a lot more of this kind of all-transforming, totally equalizing analysis of decontextualized, dehistoricized texts.

4

For Carne-Ross literary language could only be true if we returned to a lost sense of our relation with nature; for de Man literary language is always the falsification of its own most powerful statements, of its own 'truths'; that literature be true again Carne-Ross wants to undo the world, that we should never be deceived about the world de Man wants literature to undo itself. The issue which confronts us is the relation of literature to reality (a word much used but never analyzed in *Allegories of Reading*). There is a myth which abounds in contemporary criticism, the myth that once upon a time there was a thing called the realistic novel, the writers of which (like Balzac, according to Barthes) assumed that their work was reflecting the nature of reality, and that their language mirrored the dispositions of the world. In this mythic world people imagined that through language they could gain immediate access to the real, that their metaphors were 'a means towards a recovered presence that transcends language itself.' (de Man, 46) This historical straw man fits French literature better than it does English or Russian or German, since the delayed arrival of romanticism, and the hold of the French classical tradition over language and poetic structure, allow one to oppose to the naive realism of the novelists the self-conscious use of language of Flaubert and the poetry, culminating in Mallarmé, that recognized that language could not call up, could never fully encompass, the real. Even so this historical watershed is not as decisive as the myth wishes to maintain. Metaphorical language has always been a problem, as the time-scale that Carne-Ross has to employ in order to get back to an uncontested reality for his symbols testifies. And the problem of the arbitrary relation of language to reality is not only already present in Kant, though his concentration is on the mind's entrapment in forms of thought rather than its 'entrapment' in the figures of language, but has always been implicit in the empiricist theory of language based on the association of ideas. The realistic novel has

never been as naive about its relation to reality as some modern critics want to pretend (Dickens, for instance, is extremely self-conscious about language, as George Eliot is about authorial voice and the structuring of conventions), and has never assumed that the conventions of realism were based on the direct ability of words to reflect things—rather that the author's total use of words could amount to a depiction of the world, though rarely an unproblematic one.

The contemporary obsession with the self-reflexive, self-contained nature of literary language goes back, of course, through Barthes and Jakobson to Saussure, and, particularly, to Saussure's definition of the sign as being composed of a signifier (*signifiant*) and a signified (*signifié*). What is rarely discussed in relation to this division is that Saussure, for purely technical reasons, excludes from his theory any discussion of or incorporation of a referent. Language is a system operating on its establishment of differences between its internal elements and not in response to any external pressure from the nature of things. Language is a system of concepts whose meaning is never attached to referents, and the model of the system is not the word with its ostensive function, but a bunch of flowers, something with no meaning in nature (as a particular combination of sounds has no meaning), but which becomes meaningful with the convention system which is a social language. Words are arbitrary, for Saussure, both in their connecting a specific sound to a meaning, and in their division of the world into patterns that correspond to those meanings. In literature more than anywhere else, we are therefore entirely within the domain of the signifier, a domain where meaning is everything and the world nothing. Every object that a work of literature ostensibly refers to is itself only a signifier, part of a convention code which operates a system of language, which turns back upon the patterns of the system rather than out upon the world.

As Pierce pointed out, however, in an analysis of the sign that is much more all-embracing than Saussure's, not all signs are of the linguistically conventional kind, some have their signifying function by virtue of their causal connection with another object (smoke is a sign of fire) and others are what he called iconic, they represent something as a portrait represents a person. The decision to treat all literature as occurring at the level of the signifier is an arbitrary, but convenient, evasion of the complexity of Pierce's distinctions, and to treat the elements of a poem or novel as a code and opposing the awareness of codes to a naive realism, is entirely to evade the challenge, much closer to the actual beliefs of 'realistic' novelists, that

theirs is an iconic representation of the ways in which the world is coded by society. In other words, they are not trapped by the codes that obtain in their world; those codes are precisely the referents of their own language, but their language, because it refers, can question as well as embody the codes of their society. Any system of language we use will necessarily condition the kinds of truth, the kinds of reference we can make, but the desire that lurks behind deconstructionism, as it did behind structuralism, is that there should be no truth that is not an unconditioned truth.

Let me make this discussion more specific by reference to Barthes' famous example of the negro soldier saluting the French flag, a picture which, appearing on the cover of a French news magazine, Barthes 'reads' as a justification of French colonialism. Barthes, in other words, treats the picture not as a piece of neutral realism, but as a code operating within the system of French culture, and within its desire to maintain its imperialist role. But there is a dimension to the photograph which Barthes' kind of analysis doesn't bother to deal with: the soldier himself. He salutes, but what does he think? The photograph may wish to encode what Barthes insists it does, but because it is a photograph with a referent it can also imply something different; because we can demand more information than the photograph itself supplies about the person, about the referent, there is something to oppose the 'message' with. But for Barthes the referent is irrelevant: the photograph is only a piece of language, a signifier that equals 'imperiality', and the only opposition to it is to realize it as a piece of language, not to question the nature, the generalizability, the typicality of its reference. To deconstruct the code, to show it as code and not as reality, is as much a refusal of human beings and their lives as the imperialism which offers the code in the first place. Unless the revelation of an implied meaning challenges that meaning not merely by unmasking its intent but by engaging with its reference, we are left in a realm where gestures of negativity are our only positives. And this is precisely where deconstructionism leaves us, suspended in a self-negating world of language, waiting for a truth that will have none of the conditioning features that are a function of our being finite, historical language animals.

The final chapter of Carne-Ross's *Instaurations* is called 'The scandal of necessity' and its argument is that we need again to recognize the limits of human potential as the necessities of nature and the natural system. 'Necessity,' he writes, 'our old enemy, is coming to

look like a new friend, an ally against the monstrous man-made structure that balloons us round'(228), and that might be taken as a commentary on what has happened to criticism. Only when we see language itself again conditioned by necessity, rather than the world conditioned by the necessity of language will we be forced to confront fully a work of literature rather than a text, a meaningful use of language rather than a language endlessly meaningful, but empty of reference.