CHAPTER 5

Derrida as Literary Reader

Derek Attridge

When Derrida's work started to appear in English translation in the 1970s and early 1980s, it spawned a sizeable brood of essays and books performing "deconstructive literary criticism." But this did not mean that Derrida's own readings of literary works were found to be a useful model; as Jonathan Culler explained in his influential *On Deconstruction* (1982):

> Derrida's own discussions of literary works draw attention to important problems, but they are not *deconstructions* as we have been using the term, and a deconstructive literary criticism will be primarily influenced by his readings of philosophical works.[1]

Such criticism aimed, in the words of Barbara Johnson, one of the most astute of its practitioners, at "the careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text," following Derrida's example in his readings of Saussure, Hegel, Rousseau, Lévi-Strauss, and many other writers in philosophical or allied disciplines.[2]

While this critical method resulted in some fine analyses of literary works (and a large quantity of rather less successful criticism), it sidelined that part of Derrida's writing that reflected the immense importance of literature to him, and thus failed to take on board the full measure of his originality.[3] And there can be no doubt of that importance. In 1980, for instance, in defending his *doctorat d'état* – a doctorate based on published work – Derrida explained that he had registered his first thesis topic around 1957 under the title "The Ideality of the Literary Object." "I have to remind you," he said to the distinguished jury, "somewhat bluntly and simply, that my most constant interest, coming even before my philosophical interest,

[1] Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), 213.

[2] Barbara Johnson, *The Critical Difference* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 5.

[3] It was this situation that led me in the mid-1980s to embark, with Derrida's cooperation, on a collection of English translations of his readings of literary texts. See Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1992).

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108539937.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

I would say, if this is possible, was directed toward literature, toward that writing that is called literary."[4] In an interview conducted in 1989, he stated, no doubt with a smile, that literature is "the most interesting thing in the world, maybe more interesting than the world."[5] And in 1995, he "confessed" – his word – at a conference in Louvain-la-Neuve,

> that the name, and the thing, called "literature" remain for me, to this day, endless enigmas, as much as they remain passions. . . . Nothing to this day remains as new and as incomprehensible to me, at once very near and very alien, as the thing called literature.[6]

This continuing fascination gave rise to a stream of essays engaging with the questions of literature and literariness and with particular literary works; these range in time from a 1963 review essay on the literary criticism of Jean Rousset[7] to a preface to Safaa Fathy's *Ordalie et Terreur* in the year of his death, 2004.[8] His subjects were predominately French, including Artaud, Mallarmé, Blanchot, Bataille, Ponge, Genet, Valéry, Cixous, Jabès, Baudelaire, Sollers, and La Fontaine, but he also devoted considerable attention to literature in English, notably Joyce and Shakespeare, and in German, especially Celan and Kafka. His preference was for poems and short stories (*récits*); readings of longer works often focused on short passages or even individual phrases – though always fragments revelatory of issues pertaining to the whole. His particular interest, he noted, was in works that

> bear within themselves, or we could 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?"[9]

[4] Jacques Derrida, "Punctuations: The Time of a Thesis," in *Eyes of the University: Right to Philosophy 2*, trans. Jan Puig et al. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 115.

[5] Jacques Derrida, "'This Strange Institution Called Literature': An Interview," in *Acts of Literature*, 47. The French original of the interview may be found in *Derrida d'ici, Derrida de là*, ed. Thomas Dutoit and Philippe Romanski (Paris: Galilée, 2009), 253–92.

[6] Maurice Blanchot, *The Instant of My Death*/Jacques Derrida, *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 20.

[7] See Jacques Derrida, "Force et signification," *Critique* 193 and 194 (1963): 483–99 and 619–36; reprinted in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 3–30.

[8] Jacques Derrida, "Son malin genie. Preparatifs pour l'infini," Preface to Safaa Fathy, *Ordalie et Terreur* (Brussels: Lansman, 2004).

[9] Derrida, "'This Strange Institution,'" 40. Not every engagement with a literary work is premised on an interest in literariness; occasionally Derrida turns to a text purely to follow its thematics, as with his discussion of D. H. Lawrence's "Snake" in one of the seminars recorded in *The Beast and the Sovereign*, vol. 1, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 236–49.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108539937.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Before we turn to some examples of Derrida's close reading of literary works, I want to ask what we can learn from his discussions of the practice itself. If literature remains an endless enigma, how does Derrida see the literary commentator going about his or her business?

We may start by unpacking some comments in the interview, "'This Strange Institution'":

> My law, the one to which I try to devote myself or to respond, is *the text of the other*, its very singularity, its idiom, its appeal which precedes me. But I can only respond to it in a responsible way . . . by putting in play, and in hock, my singularity, by signing, with another signature – for the countersignature signs by confirming the signature of the other – but also by signing in an absolutely new and inaugural way, both at once, like each time I confirm my own signature by signing afresh: each time in the same way and each time differently, one more time, at another date.[10]

This short passage brings together a number of the central ingredients of Derrida's understanding of literary reading. The literary work is a manifestation of "the other" (a term with strong ethical resonances that Derrida draws from Emmanuel Levinas), and the appeal of the other, in Levinasian thought, makes me responsible for it. In responding to the other, therefore, I have to take account of what its *particular* needs are; if I don't appreciate what makes it unique I'm not able to respond responsibly. Hence the importance of *singularity* in both the general field of ethics and in the particular situation of the reading of a literary work. But for Derrida, singularity is inseparable from *iterability*; that is to say, the work remains what it is only by being open to alteration in new contexts. Singularity is not a fixed and unchanging set of properties, but an identity (here is the "ideality" that interested Derrida from an early point in his career) that is produced, and produced "each time differently." And because of this, singularity is never simply "itself": it is constituted by the conditions that allow it to come into being, and, as Derrida says, "it takes *its part* in the genre, the type, the context, meaning, the conceptual generality of meaning, etc."[11] A responsible reading will entail "*giving oneself up* to the most idiomatic aspects of the work while also *taking account* of the historical context."[12]

Tied to the notion of singularity is the notion of the *signature*, a metaphor that helps to explain the apparent paradox of the former term and its link to iterability. On a given occasion my signature functions as such only if it is both the same as previous examples of my signature and

[10] Derrida, "'This Strange Institution,'" 66–67. Translation modified. [11] Ibid., 68. [12] Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108539937.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

different from them: a rubber stamp producing an identical image won't do. In discussing the task of the literary reader, Derrida appeals to the concept of the *countersignature*: the signature that confirms another signature. Those who remember travelers' checks will recall that you had to sign them once when you bought them and then again when you used them: the two signatures had to match, the second one confirming that the first one was genuine. But once more, the second signature had to be different from the first, not a mechanical copy. (In fact, it is only through repetition, as both same and different, that a written-out name *becomes* a signature; every time I sign I confirm that this is my signature.) Not only is the literary work singular, then, but it can also be understood as a signature – the writer's signature in the first place, but also that of her time and place; and the critical reading, attempting a responsible response to the literary work, will confirm that signature by means of the critic's signature, itself both different ("absolutely new and inaugural") and yet recognizably the same as other signatures by the same hand. Such a reading, says Derrida, will put the reader's own singularity "*en jeu, et en gage*" – staked, we might say, as in a game of cards or a pawnshop.

Derrida's readings of literary works conform to this model: they are strikingly different, yet they are all recognizably "Derridean," part of a lifelong enterprise. The former property is why, in contrast to his readings of philosophical works, which display a certain measure of repeatable methodology (although the model of signature and countersignature is not irrelevant), his literary responses have not produced a school of "Derridean criticism." In responding to what is singular in each work he read, and in doing so in a singular way, he produced a series of readings that operate in very different ways. One feature is constant, however, a suspension of what Derrida calls the "naïve belief in meaning or referent." (We've already noted his interest in works that question the nature of literature itself.)

This conceptualization of literary reading arises, of course, from Derrida's understanding of the literary work. He makes clear that, for him, literariness is not a property that inheres straightforwardly in some texts and not in others: "There is no text which is literary *in itself*."[13] Only when read in a certain way do texts present themselves as literary works, though Derrida acknowledges that even "[i]f one can re-read everything as literature, some textual events lend themselves to this better than others, their potentialities are richer and denser."[14] Poetry, which clearly invites a literary reading, is discussed by Derrida in terms of a curious metaphor:

[13] Ibid., 44. [14] Ibid., 48.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108539937.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the hedgehog rolled up on the highway, both protected by its spines and vulnerable to being run over.[15] The poem, that is, both resists and demands translation and paraphrase (another version of iterability). It's important, too, that for Derrida "literature" names not some transcendent category but an institution with a history, an institution that is codified in a set of laws and conventions. It is a strange institution, however, because the works it apparently controls are constituted by their ability to unsettle or challenge it – each in its own singular way.

Derrida's critical practice does not align easily with the major schools of literary criticism. As he observes in "'This Strange Institution,'" "Literary criticism is very philosophical in its form, even if the professionals in the matter haven't been trained as philosophers, or if they declare their suspicion of philosophy." And he adds, "What I am saying here is not necessarily a compliment."[16] His own readings, by contrast, do not follow philosophical principles; they are not necessarily characterized by linear arguments or the weighing up of evidence.

A long footnote in Derrida's essay "Passions" comes at the question of literature from another angle. Derrida comments as follows:

> Something of literature will have begun when it is not possible to decide whether, when I speak of something, I am indeed speaking of something (of the thing itself, this one, for itself) or if I am giving an example, an example of something or an example of the fact that I can speak of something, of my way of speaking of something, of the possibility of speaking in general of something in general, or again of writing these words, etc.[17]

This is another way of explaining literature's suspension of the usual move from language to meaning or referent: it isn't that the language of literature is divorced from that to which it refers, but that the relation is undecidable. Derrida connects this property of literary writing to the question of the *secret*; literature "always is, says, does something other, something other than itself, an itself which moreover is only that, something other than itself."[18]

Turning to Derrida's practice, there is space to look at only three examples of his responses to literary works, a prose piece, a play, and a poem, each from a different century. To start with, Derrida's discussion

[15] See Derrida, "*Che cos'è la poesia?*" in *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, ed. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 322–37.
[16] Derrida, "'This Strange Institution,'" 53.
[17] Jacques Derrida, "Passions: 'An Oblique Offering,'" in *On the Name*, ed. Thomas Dutoit, trans. David Wood (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 142–43.
[18] Ibid., 144.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108539937.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of Baudelaire's prose poem "Counterfeit Money" will enable us to consider further the question of the secret.[19] This text of Baudelaire's, written in the first person, relates a brief episode involving the narrator and a friend: the friend is seen separating out, with careful scrutiny, a two-franc coin from the rest of his money, and when they encounter a beggar, it is this coin that he gives the man; when the narrator comments on his generosity, the friend replies, "It was the counterfeit coin." The narrator is shocked to realize that his friend has made a calculated move to gain moral credit at no monetary expense.

Derrida's discussion of this text forms the larger part of a book dealing with the notion of the gift, a topic that, as he explains in his Foreword, had preoccupied him for a long time. Although there are many pages on Marcel Mauss's famous sociological study of this issue, it is to literature that Derrida turns to enable him to explore the topic with a depth and subtlety unavailable in the discourse of sociology. There is no sense in which he is trying to "deconstruct" Baudelaire's work; on the contrary, he is learning from it, following up on its strangenesses, its challenges to conventional, and philosophical, thought.

The first thing to note, perhaps, is the length of Derrida's commentary. "Counterfeit Money" is one page in length; Derrida's discussion takes up around ninety pages. And it clearly could have been longer: Derrida says, having raised the subject of tobacco, "If we yielded to temptation, often an irresistible one, of letting this reading expand without limits, we would enter here into a discourse on tobacco."[20] Later we read, "But this is not the place to go off into an endless discourse, however necessary it may be, on alms and begging,"[21] and later still, "One could speculate *ad infinitum* about the narrator's interrupted 'reverie' on this subject, and on the word 'reverie' at this point."[22] What are we to make of this drive toward longer and longer commentary? We can see it as one aspect of Derrida's signature as literary reader, especially in the latter part of his career: he is willing to pursue the implications of textual details well beyond the norms of conventional literary criticism, venturing into matters of biographical, historical, linguistic, bibliographic, and philosophical import – though always with a sharp sense of what may be relevant to a responsible reading. (Derrida's late style is also characterized, it must be admitted, by a fair amount of repetition.) But this is not mere self-indulgence: as the quoted

[19] Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
[20] Ibid., 103. [21] Ibid., 137. [22] Ibid., 157.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108539937.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

comments suggest, effecting closure in this discourse about the significance of a literary text is always a violent act, enforcing a limit upon what could go on endlessly. This feature of literary commentary stems, of course, from what we have already noted about the literary work's undecidability: if no final conclusion is possible, if the secrecy of literature is absolute, coming to a halt will always have a certain arbitrariness about it.

Derrida begins his full discussion of "Counterfeit Money" by announcing, "We will take it at its word and I would say almost word for word," and he does just that.[23] It's striking that, although the reason for the text's inclusion is the centrality of gift-giving to its narrative, Derrida has no hesitation in following the implications of Baudelaire's words wherever they take him. Thus we are quickly deep in a discussion of titles and their double reference, to the verbal text that follows the title and to its subject. But the title "Counterfeit Money" has a further reference: it describes the story itself, which, being fiction, is counterfeit ("*fausse*" in the original). This is only the beginning of the dizzying path Derrida invites us to follow him on. Let me give one example:

> It is a little as if the narrator were speaking of the "author's intentions," namely Baudelaire's, as if Baudelaire were the narrator's friend, as if he presented "himself," in effect, without showing himself, disguised in the traits of the friend of the narrator whom he makes speak, as if he let the narrator (in the place of the reader or the critic) analyze the possible motifs and effects of the counterfeit money that is the text, the possible effects of "Counterfeit Money."[24]

Now, Derrida knows that Baudelaire is not to be found in the guise of the "friend"; he himself is presenting a fiction, and doing so tentatively: "It is a little as if . . . " This too can be thought of as an aspect of Derrida's signature as a literary reader: as a response to literature's unsettling of the modes of rational accounting, he is prepared to advance readings that, if they work, do so more as thought experiments than as arguments. The narrator's uncertainties about his friend's motivation are rather like our own uncertainties about Baudelaire's intentions – and like Baudelaire's intentions, they remain unknowable.

This takes us back to the secret. There is no space here to describe the many other paths Derrida pursues as he tracks the implications of Baudelaire's words – tobacco (in spite of the claim to be refusing the possible discourse on this subject), writing as giving, the gift and narrative, masculine bonding, confession, the event, nature and naturalization,

[23] Ibid., 84. [24] Ibid., 95.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108539937.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

fortune, begging (another topic he lets us know he is holding back on), dogs, and much more – in a discourse that weaves it way backward and forward through the story as well as bringing in evidence from Baudelaire's other writings. At an early part in the discussion, Derrida asks a question he says he will come back to: "Ought one, as the narrator still seems to do, take [the friend] at his word when he says 'It was the counterfeit coin'? What if he were an even greater counterfeiter than the narrator thinks? What if, with the simulacrum of a confession, he were passing off true money as false?"[25] This suggestion probably strikes most readers as unwarranted; after all, there is nothing in the narrator's statements to suggest that he suspects his friend's veracity, and having nothing else to go on, we simply accept his view. But this is Derrida's point: our acceptance is based on an assumption, no more. "It is," he says, "and always will be possible that the friend is lying."[26] The literary text preserves its absolute secrecy on this matter.

Literature's secrecy, it must be stressed, is not a matter of a concealed truth; it is a *structural* secrecy, and it pertains to all fiction. As Derrida says:

> If the secret remains undetectable, unbreakable, in this case, if we have no chance of ever knowing whether counterfeit money was actually given to the beggar, it is first of all because there is no sense in wondering what actually happened, what was the true intention of the narrator's friend and the meaning hidden "behind" his utterances. No more, incidentally, than behind the utterances of the narrator.[27]

And it is not a matter of a secret known to the author:

> What are we saying when we say that a character in fiction forever takes his secret with him? . . . That the readability of the text is structured by the unreadability of the secret, that is, by the inaccessibility of a certain intentional meaning or of a wanting-to-say in the consciousness of the characters and *a fortiori* that of the author, who remains, *in this regard*, in a situation analogous to the reader? Baudelaire does not know, cannot know, any more than we do, what can be going on "through the mind" of the friend.[28]

Bringing the discussion back to the theme of the story, Derrida observes that literature is like money in this respect: as long as counterfeit money passes for genuine money, "it is simply not different from the money that, perhaps, it counterfeits."[29]

Derrida's reading of "Counterfeit Money," ostensibly part of his exploration of the gift, thus exemplifies his interest in literary texts that

[25] Ibid., 96. [26] Ibid., 151. [27] Ibid., 153. [28] Ibid., 152. [29] Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108539937.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

"put to work" the question "What is literature?" Baudelaire's prose poem, with its investigation of the difference between counterfeit and genuine and its highlighting of the inaccessibility of others' intentions, allows him to demonstrate the complexity of these questions and to offer, through the notion of the secret, a fruitful way of thinking about it.

As a contrast to the expansive commentary of *Given Time*, we may turn to Derrida's reading of *Romeo and Juliet* in the essay "Aphorism Countertime" ("L'aphorisme à contretemps") for another example of his singular response to literature.[30] Here Derrida has imposed on himself a formal constraint that makes for a very different reading experience: the essay is presented in the form of thirty-nine aphorisms, ranging from single short sentences to paragraphs more than a page in length. Derrida wrote this piece at the request of Daniel Mesguich, who was directing a production of Shakespeare's play, but as he notes in "'This Strange Institution,'" it was a work that he had already wanted to "countersign."[31]

It has become something of a cliché about "deconstructive reading" that it latches onto a hitherto unnoticed detail and uses it to overturn the dominant logic of the piece being read. Whatever validity this characterization may have for Derrida's reading of philosophical texts, it's far from true of his literary readings. Any highlighting of peripheral details – such as his disquisition on tobacco in "Counterfeit Money," which is based solely on the brief opening statement that the two men have left a tobacconist's – is balanced by an interest in what is in the foreground. Examples include the "thing" in Ponge, the "yes" in Joyce's *Ulysses*, mimesis in Mallarmé's "Mimique," and the law in Kafka's "Before the Law." In *Romeo and Juliet*, Derrida is concerned with questions of desire, death, the name, and unhappy coincidences, among other things; the passage he focuses on is the most famous of all: the balcony scene.

Derrida quotes the well-known exchange about names between the two main characters, and follows this with several paragraphs unpacking the (paradoxical) logic that it exposes. Romeo is and is not "Romeo"; he will die because he is not detachable from his name, and yet his name will live on after him and thus can be said to have carried the inevitability of his death within it. Derrida quotes and comments on the famous line:

> "O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?" She does not say to him: why are you called Romeo, why do you bear this name (like an article of clothing, an ornament, a detachable sign)? She says to him: why *are you* Romeo? She knows it: detachable and dissociable, aphoristic though it be

[30] See Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, 416–33. [31] Derrida, "'This Strange Institution,'" 66.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108539937.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> [*aphorism* derives from *aphorizein*, "to mark off, divide"], his name is his essence. Inseparable from his being.[32]

But, as Derrida points out, "for a while, Juliet makes out as if Romeo would lose nothing in losing his name: like the rose."[33] However, the name "Montague" condemns him, and she knows this:

> The terrible lucidity of Juliet. She knows the two bonds of the law, the *double bind*, which ties a son to the name of his father. He can live only if he asserts himself in a singular fashion, without his inherited name. But the writing of this name . . . constitutes him in his very being, without naming anything of him, and by denying it he can only wipe himself out.[34]

There is much more to Derrida's analysis of this scene, but this will be sufficient to show how closely Derrida traces the logic worked out between the lovers.

The fateful mismatch of names and therefore of persons played out in the balcony scene is, as Derrida shows, a concentrated version of the plot of mischance and bad timing that constitutes the drama. *Contretemps* in French can convey a similar meaning to that which it carries in English, but it is also a technical term in music referring to a non-coincidence between metrical position and stress. Thus Derrida can say, aphoristically, "Non-coincidence between my name and me, between the experience according to which I am named or hear myself named and my 'living present.' Rendezvous with my name. *Untimely*, bad timing, at the wrong moment."[35] Romeo and Juliet both fall in love with another who bears the wrong name; Juliet's letter to Romeo fails to reach him in time; Romeo dies before Juliet wakes up. But Derrida emphasizes that the desire of the lovers is born in the heart of the possibility of *contretemps*, as is the play: "There would have been no love, the pledge would not have taken place, nor time, nor its theater, without discordance."[36]

Why does Derrida present this reading as a series of aphorisms? We recall his insistence on the singularity of the response to a singular work: rather than follow any prescribed pattern of critical analysis, he produces a unique text as his counter-signature to Shakespeare's signature. Struck by the role of the proper name as divided and dividing in the play, he eschews the traditional continuous discourse of the critic and conveys something of the connections and disconnections through his choice of form.

[32] Derrida, "Aphorism Countertime," in *Acts of Literature*, 426. [33] Ibid., 427. [34] Ibid., 430.
[35] Ibid., 432. [36] Derrida, "Aphorism Countertime," 420.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108539937.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

It's not difficult to see what drew Derrida to Francis Ponge's short poem "Fable" in an essay on *invention*: from its first line it challenges the norms whereby language and logic are usually taken to operate:

> **FABLE**
> *With the word* with *commences then this text*
> *Of which the first line states the truth,*
> *But this silvering under the one and the other*
> *Can it be tolerated?*
> *Dear reader already you judge*
> *There as to our difficulties . . .*
> (AFTER seven years of misfortune She broke her mirror).[37]

One thing Derrida doesn't do is convert this mystifying little set of lines into a comprehensible sequence: the poem's singularity lies in part in its refusal of straightforward meaning. What he does do is tease out exactly how its challenge to logical thought works.

As often in his reading of literary works, Derrida starts with the title; as with "Counterfeit Money," "Fable" has a triple reference: it refers to an entity – a genre of storytelling – in the world that the poem is about, to the verbal text that succeeds it, and to the nature of that text, since it is itself a fable. But it's the first line in which the poem's inventiveness is most marked; it is, observes Derrida, both constative and performative at once. In particular, it is the "and" in that statement that needs to be explored:

> That line's inventiveness results from the single act of enunciation that performs *and* describes, operates *and* states. Here the conjunction "and" does not link two different activities. The constative statement is the performative itself since it points out nothing that is prior or foreign to itself. Its performance consists in the "constatation" of the constative – and nothing else.[38]

What this demonstrates is the paradoxical status of all language: it can and it cannot speak of itself. Putting it differently, there is no metalanguage, but there is only metalanguage.[39] In other words, when it attempts to speak of itself, language succeeds only in producing more speech; on the other hand, it never speaks without presenting itself as a medium that can be inspected as such.

Derrida's interpretation of the rest of the poem includes telling us that the "silvering" or tain of the mirror – the unreflective underside that is required to make it reflect – is language, and suggesting that we give the

[37] Derrida, "Psyche: Invention of the Other," in *Acts of Literature*, 320. [38] Ibid., 324.
[39] Ibid., 325.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108539937.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

name "Psyche" (the title of his essay and the name for a kind of mirror) to "She" in the last line; one might complain that these are impositions on the poem, but equally one might take Derrida to be offering a fable of his own.[40] Then, in a gesture we have seen is characteristic, he says, "The analysis of this fable would be endless. I abandon it here."[41] What he goes on to do instead is to examine the notion of invention that the poem instantiates, pointing out that the same act that brings into being something unprecedented compromises that uniqueness: it makes possible the creation of imitations and variations (such as "*At the word* at *this poem commences*"). Just like the inventive singularity of the literary response, it is divided and shared out as soon as it appears – or, more accurately, self-division is a condition of its appearing at all.

Invention is always the invention of the other (a phrase that can be understood in two ways), and as we've seen, for Derrida ethics is a matter of responding responsibly to the other. Ponge's "Fable," then, as invention, calls for an inventive response, which is also a responsible response.

Each of these readings has operated in a different way, each demonstrating the literary work's staging of large issues that extend beyond its explicit thematic concerns. All Derrida's responses to literary works function in this manner. His discussion of Mallarmé's short prose piece "Mimique" allows him to demonstrate the complexity of the notion of mimesis (and much more);[42] his account of Kafka's "Before the Law" allows the tale to unfold its profound investigation of the relation between the singularity of the individual (including the individual literary work) and the generality of the law;[43] and "The Law of Genre" finds in Blanchot's *récit*, "The Madness of the Day," an exploration of what it means to belong to a genre – and, more generally, to belong. Derrida wrote two essays on Joyce (as well as referring to his work in several other places), "Ulysses Gramophone: Hear Say Yes in Joyce" on *Ulysses* and "Two Words for Joyce" on *Finnegans Wake*;[44] these essays bear witness to the considerable importance to him of Joyce's writing. The long piece on *Ulysses*, in particular, is extraordinarily rich, weaving together an account of its own composition, a meditation on the fact of Derrida's addressing an audience of Joyce "experts," and an

[40] Ibid., 333. [41] Ibid.

[42] See Derrida, "The Double Session," in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 173–285.

[43] See Derrida, "Before the Law," in *Acts of Literature*, 183–220.

[44] See Derrida, "Ulysses Gramophone: Hear Say Yes in Joyce," in *Acts of Literature*, 256–310; and "Two Words for Joyce," *Post-structuralist Joyce: Essays from the French*, ed. Derek Attridge and Daniel Ferrer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 145–59.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108539937.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

analysis of the occurrences of the word "yes" in the novel. The result is a series of insights into – among other things – the operations of coincidence, the implications of recording, the dividedness of the self, and the modalities of laughter.

Responses to Celan's staging of the encounter,[45] Ponge's signature-effects,[46] Blanchot's problematization of the "instant" and of testimony,[47] and many other singular counter-signatures to literary works issued from Derrida's pen. Many were the result of invitations, but others made their demands on him unbidden; he says of "Before the Law," "In truth, it was Kafka's story which laid siege to my attempt at a discourse on moral law" while preparing his seminar on Kant.[48] To follow Derrida as literary reader is not to mimic any of these essays or books; it is to emulate – if this is possible – the inventiveness with which he exercises his responsibility in responding to what is singular and inventive about the works he reads, alert always to the manifold ways in which these works test the limits of thinking. If most literary criticism "is very philosophical in its form," Derrida's readings, by contrast, are designed to bring out literature's capacity to enter realms barred to philosophy – except when it operates like literature.

Works Cited

Blanchot, Maurice, and Jacques Derrida. *The Instant of My Death/Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*. Translated by Elizabeth Rottenberg. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998.

Culler, Jonathan. *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982.

Derrida, Jacques. "Force et signification." *Critique* 193 and 194 (1963): 483–99 and 619–36. Reprinted in *Writing and Difference*. Translated by Alan Bass, 3–30. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.

Signéponge/Signsponge. Translated by Richard Rand. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984.

"Two Words for Joyce." In *Post-structuralist Joyce: Essays from the French*. Edited by Derek Attridge and Daniel Ferrer, 145–59. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984.

"*Che cos'è la poesia?*" In *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*. Edited by Peggy Kamuf, 322–37. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.

[45] See Derrida, *Sovereignties in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, ed. Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).

[46] See Derrida, *Signéponge/Signsponge*, trans. Richard Rand (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

[47] See Blanchot and Derrida, *The Instant of My Death/Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*.

[48] Derrida, "'This Strange Institution,'" 190.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108539937.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

"The Double Session." In *Dissemination*. Translated by Barbara Johnson, 173–285. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.
Acts of Literature. Edited by Derek Attridge. New York: Routledge, 1992.
"Aphorism Countertime" ("L'aphorisme à contretemps")." In *Acts of Literature*. Edited by Derek Attridge, 416–33. New York: Routledge, 1992.
"Before the Law." In *Acts of Literature*. Edited by Derek Attridge, 183–220. New York: Routledge, 1992.
Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money. Translated by Peggy Kamuf. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.
"Psyche: Invention of the Other." In *Acts of Literature*. Edited by Derek Attridge, 310–43. New York: Routledge, 1992.
"'This Strange Institution Called Literature': An Interview." In *Acts of Literature*. Edited by Derek Attridge, 33–75. New York: Routledge, 1992.
"Ulysses Gramophone: Hear Say Yes in Joyce." In *Acts of Literature*. Edited by Derek Attridge, 256–310. New York: Routledge, 1992.
"Passions: 'An Oblique Offering.'" In *On the Name*. Edited by Thomas Dutoit and translated by David Wood, 3–34. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995.
"Punctuations: The Time of a Thesis." In *Eyes of the University: Right to Philosophy 2*. Translated by Jan Puig and others, 113–28. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004.
"Son malin génie. Préparatifs pour l'infini." Preface to Safaa Fathy, *Ordalie et Terreur* Brussels: Lansman, 2004.
Sovereignties in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan. Edited by Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen. New York: Fordham University Press, 2005.
The Beast and the Sovereign. Translated by Geoff Bennington. Volume 1. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009.
Derrida d'ici, Derrida de là. Edited by Thomas Dutoit and Philippe Romanski, 253–92. Paris: Galilée, 2009.
Johnson, Barbara. *The Critical Difference*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108539937.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press