

Deconstruction: Undermining, Overreaching

As a mode of textual theory and analysis, contemporary *deconstruction* subverts almost everything in the tradition, putting in question received ideas of the sign and language, the text, the context, the author, the reader, the role of history, the work of interpretation, and the forms of critical writing. V. Leitch¹

Let it work,
For 'tis the sport to have the enginer
Hoist with his own petar, an't shall go hard
But I will delve one yard below their mines,
And blow them at the moon. *Hamlet*, 3.4.205-9

I

The term deconstruction was coined by Derrida in the 1960s, and to a generation of critics who have been brought up to identify that term, with all its vague connotations of subverting existing order, with Derrida himself, it evidently seems as if he had originated all the critical attitudes that are conveniently summed up in the first epigraph above. One of my concerns in this book is to restore some order into the history of contemporary literary theory, to identify sets of attitudes and beliefs while also tracing their filiation, the thinkers or groups who formulated them at a specific time for a specific purpose. Because it is so recent, contemporary attitudes are sometimes thought not to have any history, just existing as the expression of some profound need in our situation, here and now. In fact, the conglomerate of subversive attitudes identified in that quotation all go back to the structuralism of Lévi-Strauss and Barthes, to the Paris of the 1950s and 60s.

Since then, of course, deconstruction has been institutionalised, largely in America; has been taken up by a number of prominent academics, has been a source of bitter controversy and even journalistic scandal following the revelation that one of its leading advocates, Paul de Man, had written pro-Nazi journalism during the second world war. My dissatisfaction with deconstruction long antedated these disclosures and has been unaffected by them, although the ways in which some of its proponents reacted to these unpleasant truths showed a sad lack of balance and integrity. (Anyone who

doubts this should read David Lehman's thoroughly documented history of the episode.)²

Although strikingly successful in American universities, moving within a decade 'from an anti-establishment insurgency to an entrenched institutional power' (Lehman 1991, p. 53) — a success which seems to its more radical exponents to show the academy's sinister ability to absorb, and so neutralise whatever challenges it — deconstruction has been very sharply evaluated by a formidable array of literary critics and historians of criticism. These include, in the first phase, between 1977 and 1984, M.H. Abrams, in three trenchant essays,³ Gerald Graff in his book *Literature Against Itself* and other review essays,⁴ Denis Donoghue in his book *Ferocious Alphabets* and in some essay-reviews,⁵ and — in many ways its most devastating critic — the philosopher of language John Searle in two celebrated (or notorious) essays.⁶ So far all the critics of deconstruction were either American or working in America. The solitary full-length English study in this period was Christopher Butler's *Interpretation, Deconstruction, and Ideology*,⁷ which was particularly helpful in not only evaluating deconstruction but in outlining some reasoned alternative approaches to language and literature.

All these writers were critical of deconstruction from the outset. In others we can trace a movement from excited acceptance to a rather sour disappointment. Frank Lentricchia, in *After the New Criticism* (1980), accepted without demur almost all the theories of Derrida and Foucault, but attacked their American disciples.⁸ In *Criticism and Social Change* (1983), however, deconstruction itself is attacked as 'that passive kind of conservatism called quietism', and de Man is found chiefly guilty in that both his mode of reading and his attitude to politics produce a sense of paralysis that encourages resigned acceptance of the political and social status quo. Later, in *Ariel and the Police* (1988), Lentricchia made a very sharp analysis of 'Michel Foucault's Fantasy for Humanists', including some sardonic comments on the so-called American 'New Historicism'. Edward Said's enthusiastic espousal of the new continental critics in 1971 gave way to a rather ambivalent view in 1978, culminating in substantial disillusionment by 1983.⁹ Finally, in the second half of the decade, four complementary book-length studies appeared, by Michael Fischer, Wendell V. Harris, Raymond Tallis, and John M. Ellis, which between them delivered some decisive blows.¹⁰

At the same time critiques of deconstruction were being produced by writers working in the history of contemporary thought. These include a number of books that I have drawn on in my first two chapters. Two Marxist critics made penetrating evaluations of structuralism and post-structuralism while defending a materialist concept of history and society in the face of the French 1960s elevation of language to a suzerainty in human knowledge. Sebastiano Timpanaro, in *Sul Materialismo* (1970; English tr. 1975) wrote a long essay on 'Structuralism and its Successors'

(Timpanaro 1975, pp. 135–219), giving perceptive accounts of Saussure, Lévi-Strauss, Chomsky, and Althusser, while Perry Anderson, in his Wellek lectures, *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism* (1983), made a brief evaluation of the debate over 'Structure and Subject' (pp. 32–55) which combines remarkable insight with trenchant criticism.¹¹ The philosopher and historian of philosophy Vincent Descombes, in *Le Même et l'autre: quarante-cinq ans de philosophie française 1933–1978* (1979; English tr. 1981) and *Grammaire d'Objets en tous genres* (1983; English tr. 1986), made some patient, witty, but highly critical evaluations of Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, Foucault, and Derrida.¹² Simon Clarke, an English sociologist, in *The Foundations of Structuralism. A Critique of Lévi-Strauss and the Structuralist Movement*, produced one of the best studies of that movement in any language, while J.G. Merquior, a Brazilian who studied anthropology with Lévi-Strauss for several years, wrote from first-hand experience *A Critique of Structuralist and Post-Structuralist Thought*, the sub-title of a book called *From Prague to Paris*, and a shorter but extremely acute study of Foucault.¹³ The hermeneutic philosopher Manfred Frank, in *Was ist Neostrukturalismus?* (1984; tr. 1989), evaluated this French movement from a German viewpoint, avowedly working for a rapprochement between the two traditions: the cumulative effect of his book, however, is rather devastating for the philosophical reputations of Derrida, Lacan, and Foucault.¹⁴ An English critic, Peter Dews, with a rare and refreshingly wide first-hand knowledge of continental philosophy, in *Logics of Disintegration. Post-structuralist Thought and the Claims of Critical Theory*, gave a no less devastating evaluation of the philosophical and political incoherences of this movement, judged to have already lost its vitality ('no longer . . . a living force in France': Dews 1987, p. xii).¹⁵ Finally (from my knowledge, that is), Thomas G. Pavel, with a detailed knowledge of contemporary linguistics and French philosophy, described *Le Mirage linguistique* (1988), translated as *The Feud of Language. A History of Structuralist Thought*,¹⁶ which begins 'My generation witnessed the rise and, one might safely add, the fall of one of the most influential yet perplexing trends in this century — French structuralism and poststructuralism' (Pavel 1989, p. 1). News of the fall has yet to reach some places.

I have briefly listed these studies to show that deconstruction has been much discussed as a theoretical system, and that the balance of opinion has shifted, I believe decisively, to the critical side. My own evaluation of its theories of language and literature in the first two chapters was certainly not encouraging. In this chapter I want to analyse its value when used for practical criticism, especially when applied to Shakespeare. Originally, however, deconstruction was not intended as literary criticism. The goals of deconstruction, as defined by Derrida, were philosophical. They were directed in particular against metaphysics, but were enlarged to attack what Derrida denounced as the 'logocentrism' of 'the whole of Western philosophy since Plato'. Many of Derrida's exponents in America have

echoed this resounding phrase. Thus J. Hillis Miller: 'A deconstructionist is not a parasite but a patricide. He is a bad son demolishing beyond hope and repair the machine of Western metaphysics' (Miller 1979, p. 251). (Parricide or Luddite?) Actually, as Vincent Descombes has shown, all that deconstruction can 'undermine' are the 'descriptive ambitions' of phenomenology, in particular 'Husserlian descriptions', that is, merely 'the descriptive facade of phenomenology' (Descombes 1986, p. 62). Phenomenology has survived; one doubts if deconstruction will.

At times, it sounds as if deconstructionists are trying to emulate Herostratus, who set out to become the most famous man in the world by destroying the temple of Artemis at Ephesus. (He at least succeeded.) But although its first orientation was against philosophy, deconstruction has been taken up neither by philosophers, nor linguists — a significant rejection, as John Searle observed (Searle 1983, pp. 78–9) — but by literary critics. Deconstruction may have attracted them initially with its scepticism about language, but they accepted without demur Derrida's claim that all the weaknesses he diagnosed in language must, perforce, hold for literature. An older type of philosophical approach to language would treat it as primarily propositional, having a truth-content that could be analysed by conventional means. A more recent school would analyse actual language-usage. Derrida, however, scorned both logical analysis and empirical observation, merely proclaiming in his uniquely evasive style that language could not convey a single determinate meaning. As we have seen, he depends on semantics while simultaneously rejecting it, invoking the identification of meaning only to deny that it can ever be identified with certainty. So the deconstructionist following Derrida's lead will locate key words in the text he reads, draw attention to their ambivalence or indeterminacy, and thereby not just 'call that text into question' but — always as ever also already — language itself.¹⁷ This is a rather easy activity, as Wendell Harris observes: 'if one surveys either an extended text or several texts by the same author, it is almost always possible, by lifting out sentences from here and there, to show that an author has used the same word in incompatible senses' (Harris 1988, p. 145). But I have a more pressing objection to this procedure, which obviously assumes from the outset that the coherence of literary works stands or falls on the referential firmness of its organising concepts. This might well be true of certain philosophical works (Hobbes's *Leviathan*, for instance, with its scrupulous care over accurate definitions), but it cannot be true of works of literature, which do not rely on language in this way. As we saw in Chapter 2, novels and plays are representations of human behaviour, their language embodies the utterances and actions of the characters involved, and, in fiction, those of the narrator. These words and utterances do not have a propositional value; and cannot be analysed as if belonging to philosophical discourse. If ambivalence is found, then, as we know from the work of William Empson and the New Criticism, that can produce

an enrichment of their literary substance. A different, functionally or rhetorically oriented approach, might want to enquire whether the ambivalences were intended by any of the characters, and if so, who used them, and for what purpose. Ambivalence in itself is not particularly damaging, being an unavoidable feature of human communication, as we saw in Chapter 1, and which can usually be cleared up by further speech acts. To Derrida's followers, however, ambivalence in a literary work is neither a virtue nor a facet of character, but proof of the innate weakness of language.

Forcefully uttered and endlessly repeated, the deconstructionist campaign is rather naïve, to start with, in assuming (despite their rejection of objectivity) that ambivalence is an objectively detectable or absolute quality of a word or phrase. Detecting ambiguity is not an objective, automatic reflex of the reader or listener, but is itself an interpretive act, and one which depends on lexical knowledge, subject to historical evidence. Most of the so-called 'New Criticism' of the 1940s and 50s, with its concern with ambiguity in older literary texts, would have been impossible without the existence of the *Oxford English Dictionary* 'on Historical Principles', which made a pioneering attempt (the inevitable limitations of which are becoming apparent)¹⁸ to identify the date at which a particular sense of a word came into, and went out of, usage. Accurate lexical knowledge tells us what meanings were available at any stage of history, and is an important tool in the history of ideas.¹⁹ But the critic using it still has to show its relevance in the text under discussion, and the interpretive acts that follow are subject, of course, to argument and counter-argument — Empson being a notorious example. The sense of any word is governed by its context, syntactically defined and delimited.²⁰ Not all possible meanings are simultaneously present. It is therefore rather simple-minded of deconstructionists to imagine that the detection of ambivalences, however frequent, in any way threatens language, or philosophy, or literature, for detecting them is not an innocent act. Deconstruction begs the question it sets out to prove, and offers no independent evaluation of the evidence.

A 'deconstructive reading', then, is one bent on locating ambivalence or indeterminacy in a text, and drawing the most absolute conclusions from it. As Edward Said describes the method, 'What each of Derrida's works tries to do is to reveal the *entame* — tear, incision — in every one of the solid structures built up by philosophy, an *entame* already inscribed in written language itself by its persistent desire to point outside itself...' (Said 1983, p. 207). Derrida has claimed that a text, insofar as it relies on words having "a double, contradictory, undecidable value, ... plays a *double scene* upon a double stage" (*cit. ibid.*, p. 206). So he evolved a notion of '*écriture double*' which derives, in Said's words, from the 'undecideable fold (*pil*) [*sic*!] in his work between the description of a text, which he deconstructs, and the enactment of a new one, with which his

reader must now reckon' (Said 1983, pp. 185–6). However, as M.H. Abrams showed in two classic analyses, this process involves Derrida in an ongoing contradiction, making him 'on principle a double-dealer in language, working ambidextrously with two semantic orders — the standard and the deconstructed'. That is, in deconstructing what he describes as 'logocentric' language Derrida 'assumes the stance that this language works, that he can adequately understand what other speakers and writers mean' (Abrams 1979, p. 277). This is to concede a point that he will subsequently deny.

Developing his account of how Derrida first construes, according to normal uses of language, but then deconstructs what he has construed, Abrams helpfully distinguishes 'reading₁', in which Derrida makes out 'the determinate meanings of the sentences he cites', from 'reading₂', which — Derrida claims — 'disseminates' (disintegrates) those meanings (Abrams 1986, p. 304). Thus, in *Of Grammatology*, Derrida performs readings of selected passages from Rousseau's *Essay on the Origin of Language* in which he first 'construes these passages as conveying determinate meanings', attributes the authorship to an individual named Rousseau, happily reporting 'what "Rousseau affirms . . . unambiguously", or what "Rousseau says"' here and elsewhere (*ibid.*, p. 305). Then Derrida finds 'strata, or "strands" in Rousseau's text which, when read determinately, turn out to be mutually contradictory', and instead of concluding (as readers not bent on forcing this thesis might do) that Rousseau's arguments are incoherent, he takes this fact as proving the existence of what he calls logocentrism (p. 306; my italics). So, practising a 'determinate reading', he 'repeatedly uncovers an opposition of meanings between what Rousseau "wishes to say" and what "he says without wishing to say it"' (p. 307) — Paul de Man quickly absorbed this trick — in particular the 'duplicitous word *supplement*', one of the Janus-faced terms in which Derrida delights (p. 308).

This double-reading produces two texts which are left, so to speak, standing side by side. Derrida emphasises that the deconstructive reading₂ 'does not cancel the role of intention' or the other conventions that 'operate in a determinate reading of a limited text, but merely "reinscribes" them . . . in an alternative system of *différance*' as 'no more than "effects" of the differential play' (*ibid.*, pp. 310, 312). This is a considerably less violent and imperialistic goal for deconstruction than other pronouncements of Derrida. But it is still based on a strangely 'deliberate anomaly', as Abrams shows:

He cannot demonstrate the impossibility of a standard reading except by going through the stage of manifesting its possibility; a text must be read determinately in order to be disseminated into an undecidability that never strikes completely free of its initial determination; deconstruction can only subvert the meanings of a text that has always already been construed. (p. 310)

This is a penetrating diagnosis of the most damaging contradiction at the heart of deconstruction, that it is parasitic on a system which it violently assaults yet never transcends. The limitations of this subversive but conservative approach have been well exposed by John Ellis, who shows that Derrida's refusal to work out an alternative to the attitudes he attacks under the name of logocentrism (a bogus concept, in any case), negates any forward movement, preserving the status quo but also the deconstructionist's assertions of superiority to that which he has denounced (Ellis 1989, pp. 29–30, 41, 70–71, 80–81). Derrida, we may conclude, remains the *enfant terrible*, cocking a snook at his predecessors, demonstrating a precocious cleverness but unconcerned to provide a coherent alternative to the system he mocks, and finally embodying many of its faults in his own construct, inverted, negated, but still preserved.

II

The philosopher who has had the vanity of the logos revealed to him will not rest until he has made the empty labyrinths echo his discovery.

Thomas Pavel²¹

Most of the Shakespeare critics who have so far flirted with deconstruction owe their knowledge of it not to Derrida's sibylline texts but to the writings of Paul de Man and his friend and disciple J. Hillis Miller, who jointly played the main role in institutionalising deconstruction within American universities.²² The literature discussing both writers is already vast; all I need to do here is to indicate the ways in which they domesticated Derrida, made him reusable, reduced his endless self-exegesis to a set of easily graspable attitudes, in short, a method.

De Man's debts to structuralism and its successor are evident. He believed that 'contemporary literary theory comes into its own in such events as the application of Saussurian linguistics to literary texts' (de Man 1986, p. 8); that is, after Lévi-Strauss and Barthes. He loyally followed those leaders in fragmenting the sign in order to deny its power to function, affirming — there is never any attempt at argument — a deep-rooted 'discrepancy . . . in everyday language, . . . the impossibility of making the actual expression coincide with what has to be expressed, of making the actual sign coincide with what it signifies' (de Man 1971, p. 11). It is 'the distinctive curse of all language', de Man announced, that the simplest wish cannot be expressed 'without hiding behind a screen of language that constitutes a world of intricate intersubjective relationships, all of them potentially inauthentic', for — and here the debt to Lacan becomes obvious — 'the other is always free to make what he wants differ from what he says he wants' (*ibid.*). The 'task of structuralist literary critics', then, naturally

desiring to 'eliminate the constitutive subject' of discourse, is 'to show that the discrepancy between sign and meaning (*signifiant* and *signifié*)' — another misreading of Saussure — 'prevails in literature in the same manner as in everyday language' (p. 12). De Man in effect aligned himself with structuralism with this assertion:

For the statement about language that sign and meaning can never coincide, is what is precisely taken for granted in the kind of language we call literary. Literature, unlike everyday language, begins on the far side of this knowledge; it is the only form of language free from the fallacy of unmediated expression. (p. 17)

But, as several critics have pointed out,²³ this confuses Saussure's categories while making an assertion that depends, for its understanding, on its own refutation — for if sign and meaning 'never' coincide, how can we even understand what de Man has written? In a later book de Man freely distorts Saussure in the vein of Lévi-Strauss, Lacan, Barthes, and others, in phrases like 'the seductive plays of the signifier', or 'a free signifier', or 'the arbitrary power play of the signifier' (de Man 1979a, pp. 207, 288, 296). A German critic complained that these were 'Unbegriffe' ('nonsense concepts'), quite falsely attributed to Saussure, and that de Man not only split off the signifier, destroying its function, but also reified it, thus turning an 'epistemological distinction' into 'an ontological, substantial one' (cit. Ellis 1989, p. 65). But in so doing he was only following a pattern established in France for over three decades.

Given this by now traditional background of questioning the sign, de Man set out to undermine works of literature insofar as they depend on language. In his interpretation of Shelley's *The Triumph of Life* — an interpretation that distorts the poem's obvious meaning by a combination of selective quotation and misreading²⁴ — de Man asserts, with a deadly seriousness quite different to Derrida's cheerful insouciance,²⁵ the impotence of language. Developing an obscure theory about 'the figurality of all signification', which is somehow 'posited by an arbitrary act of language', reified now into an agent of unquestionable power — language's 'positing power' being both arbitrary and inexorable (de Man 1979b, p. 62) — de Man then asserts that we human beings

impose, in our turn, on the senseless power of propositional language the authority of sense and meaning. But this is radically inconsistent: language posits and language means (since it articulates) but language cannot posit meaning; it can only reiterate (or reflect) it in its reconfirmed falsehood. (p. 64)

I find this sequence (and I am not alone)²⁶ deeply confused but typical of much of de Man's thinking in obeying obscure patterns of flow and counter-flow, a simultaneous asserting and negating, always turning against itself. Shelley's poem is unfinished, a fragment, to de Man an accident but

also a profound if obscure allegory: 'this mutilated textual model exposes the wound of a fracture that lies hidden in all texts' (p. 67).

All texts are fractured; the act of criticism consists in reading them until we locate their fissures. But this is *la condition humaine*, too, for literary criticism merely imitates life — or rather, death. Shelley's poem, one amazingly nihilistic sentence affirms,

warns us that nothing, whether deed, word, thought, or text, ever happens in relation, positive or negative, to anything that precedes, follows or exists elsewhere, but only as a random event whose power, like the power of death, is due to the randomness of its occurrence. (p. 69)

This fascination with nothingness pervades de Man's writing. In reading Proust, where other critics he quotes describe the "powerful unity" of *La recherche du temps perdu*, or the 'solidity of the text', de Man closes his specimen analysis of a passage from the novel — a reading several times refuted²⁷ — on a typically unresolved note:

The question remains whether by thus allowing the text to deconstruct its own metaphor one recaptures the actual movement of the novel and comes closer to the *negative epistemology* that would reveal its *hidden meaning*. Is this novel the allegorical narrative of its own *deconstruction*? (de Man 1979a, p. 72; my italics)

The italicised words there bring out the peculiarly inverted or divided form that reading takes in de Man's theory. As observant readers will have noticed, a hidden meaning is after all a meaning, and to invoke a negative is also to make it parasitic on the positive. Commenting on Rilke (the actual occasions for de Man's comments soon become irrelevant, mere pretexts), de Man categorically asserts that 'only negative experiences can be poetically useful' (*ibid.*, p. 50). In Nietzsche, he affirms, the concept of representation 'functions . . . with a negative value-emphasis' (p. 94), and 'the negative thrust of the deconstruction remains unimpaired' (pp. 125–6). At one point in Rousseau (the ostensible subject) the language of passion is restored by the 'unproblematic figurality of the metaphor' — whatever that might mean — 'albeit in the form of a negative power that prevents any specific meaning from coming into being' (p. 198). The language of this book is dense with images of the 'vertiginous' (p. 10), the 'whirlpool' (p. 203), elimination (p. 32), annihilation (p. 37), failure (pp. 147, 205), meanings that fight each other (p. 76), selves that 'remain confronted in a paralyzing inequality' (p. 185), states in which something 'undoes' itself (pp. 161, 173, 187), or is subverted (p. 269), or reduced to impotence (p. 294). R.M. Adams, for many years a colleague of de Man, recalls 'the intense interior dialectic that went into his thought, as well as the dark negativity that kept him from bringing that dialectic to unequivocal conclusions'.²⁸ That sense of paralysis seems to lie very deep. To me it

recalls James Thomson's *The City of Dreadful Night* (1874), presided over by a Queen — 'Melencolia', in Dürer's engraving — whose presence emanates 'A sense more tragic than defeat and blight':

The sense that every struggle brings defeat
 Because Fate holds no prize to crown success;
 That all the oracles are dumb or cheat
 Because they have no secret to express;
 That none can pierce the vast black veil uncertain
 Because there is no light beyond the curtain;
 That all is vanity and nothingness.

Her subjects often 'gaze up to her there', to drink 'renewed assurance / And confirmation of the old despair' (part XXI).

De Man may have had good reasons for his 'dark negativity', and I shall not pursue them. What disturbs me is that his enormous reputation in the 1970s and 80s has influenced many teachers and students, including Shakespeareans, and is likely to go on doing so, such being the conservative nature of institutionalised literary practices. These readers take from de Man a critical model in which literature is found to be riven by fissures, aporias (doubts, uncertainties). In an essay on Rousseau, for instance, de Man identifies the meanings of Rousseau's texts as 'ethical, religious, or eudaimonic', but then declares that 'each of these thematic categories is torn apart by the aporia that constitutes it, thus making the categories effective to the precise extent that they eliminate the value system in which their classification is grounded' (de Man 1979a, p. 247). That is a typical de Man sequence, detecting a profound and contradictory split ('torn apart by [what] constitutes it'), then resting happily in its consequences — 'from fissure to impasse', as it were. As a result of his reading of Proust, he claims with some satisfaction, we 'end up in a mode of negative assurance that is highly productive of critical discourse' (*ibid.*, p. 137). The role of the deconstructive critic is to frustrate, to spoil, to deny authors and texts fulfilment: 'again and again', it has been said, de Man 'deprives writers of the goals for which they appear to be striving' (Butler 1984, p. 71). Transitivity, that fundamental property of language rejected by Barthes, is assumed never to have existed. In his first book, *Blindness & Insight* (1971), rapidly reprocessing Derrida's exposition (in 1967) of the discrepancy between what Rousseau 'wishes to say' and 'what he says without wishing to say it', de Man diagnosed in a whole group of contemporary critics 'a paradoxical discrepancy' between their general statements about literature and their interpretations; 'their findings about the structure of texts contradict' their general conceptions (de Man 1971, p. ix). In an essay called 'The Rhetoric of Blindness: Jacques Derrida's Reading of Rousseau', de Man was inspired by Derrida's example (but also Lacan, who described the subject as signifying 'something entirely different from what it says'), to find Lukács, Blanchot, Poulet, and the American

New Critics as a group all 'curiously doomed to say something quite different from what they meant to say', their critical stance being 'defeated by their own critical results' (pp. 105–106, e.g.). Not just critics, above all texts are made to negate themselves, to disclose their fissures, as deconstruction successfully reveals what de Man claimed to be the 'hidden articulations and fragmentations within assumedly monadic totalities' (de Man 1979, p. 249). There again critical theory has had to erect a straw man to topple, since few if any readers have imagined that a literary work was a 'monadic totality'.

De Man practised an extremely negative form of criticism, but his literary theory still depended on the ancient and honourable concept of *mimesis*, the representation of human existence. When coupled with his nihilism, however, this requirement gave literature the difficult task of representing nothingness. Commenting on a letter by Rousseau describing the 'unexplainable void' that he felt as a result of having unfulfillable desires, de Man (emulating Barthes in such moves) suddenly leaps from describing Rousseau's idiosyncratic consciousness to making a general and categorical statement about literature:

here, the consciousness . . . consists of the presence of a nothingness. Poetic language names this void with ever-renewed understanding and, like Rousseau's longing, it never tires of naming it again. This persistent naming is what we call literature. (de Man 1971, p. 18)

Not only poetry, but 'the work of fiction', too, 'invents fictional subjects to create the illusion of the reality of others' — note the unargued assumption behind that binary category of illusion and reality — simply in order 'to avoid facing "the nothingness of human matters"' (*ibid.*). Imitation, then, is of the void, and the 'imaginary source of fiction' only shows that 'the human self has experienced the void within itself and the invented fiction, far from filling the void, asserts itself as pure nothingness, *our* nothingness . . .' (p. 19). De Man regularly took over an extreme position from an individual writer and made an absolute, categorical literary-critical or philosophical law out of it. Thus Mallarmé's poetry expresses 'a persistent negative movement that resides in being. We try to protect ourselves against this negative power by inventing stratagems, ruses of language . . .', but 'the existence of these strategies reveals the supremacy of the negative power they are trying to circumvent' (p. 73). Literature is not only the space of 'negative knowledge about the reliability of linguistic utterance', he wrote in 1982, but even of its own 'aesthetic function': 'Literature involves the voiding, rather than the affirmation, of aesthetic categories' (de Man 1986, p. 10). This recurring imagery of the void defines the 'moralistic nihilism' often noted in de Man (e.g., Lehman 1991, p. 201), and to me it recalls Schopenhauer.²⁹ Increasingly de Man made propaganda for deconstruction as being the mode of criticism perfectly suited to express the sense of impasse, hollowness, void and darkness that his work expressed

during the 1970s. In *Allegories of Reading* there are many statements of the negation and self-negation involved in deconstructive criticism (e.g., pp. 125, 187, 205, 212, 234, 235, 242, 243, 249), but the prize specimen must be this account of Rousseau's *Julie*, as read by de Man:

The readability of the first part is obscured by a more radical indeterminacy that projects its shadow backwards and forwards over the entire text. Deconstructions of figural texts engender lucid narratives which produce, in their turn and as it were within their own texture, a darkness more redoubtable than the error they dispel. (de Man 1979a, p. 217)

Such a model for criticism hardly seems auspicious for Shakespeare. Woe betide any writer approached with these expectations of fissure and *Finsternis!*

De Man is occasionally criticised for having taken Derrida's thought and 'reduced it for practical purposes to a series of formulas and a method' (McFadden 1981, p. 338). However, credit (or blame) for the routinisation of Derridian theory within the university is equally due to J. Hillis Miller, who has crusaded tirelessly on behalf of deconstruction, and used many opportunities — including the prestigious lecture given as President of the Modern Language Association — to press the claims of deconstruction as a form of reading to be taught in both the undergraduate and graduate curricula.³⁰ Miller stands to de Man in much the same relationship as Quintilian, the school-teacher, stood to Cicero, the man of public affairs. De Man, you feel, really lived with a void, confronted nothingness as an existential fact, yet felt comforted to have 'confirmation of the old despair' regularly provided by literature. Miller, by contrast, has not lived in the abyss, but knows how to expound it as a technique in literary criticism. The formulaic phrase he did so much to popularise (Lentricchia 1980, pp. 162, 179), the *mise en abyme* which the deconstructionist discovers being performed by textuality, is for him a literary-critical manoeuvre rather than a psychological experience. Although in one place Miller clearly echoes de Man in describing how the deconstructive method can lead us to glimpse the abyss itself in a 'vertigo of the underlying nothingness' (Miller 1976a, pp. 11–12), that is a rare excursion into nihilism. Otherwise Miller's gaze is comfortably fixed on the fissures he claims to find in texts, not to what may lie behind them.

Miller's writing professes its indebtedness to both Derrida and de Man, taking over the assertiveness of both. The categorical assertion has become a trade-mark of deconstructionists, who can be seen both 'undermining' works of literature while 'overreaching' in their own arguments. Their hyperbolic affirmations remind me of George Puttenham's anglicising of the rhetorical figure *hyperbole* as the 'Over reacher', that is, 'when we speake in the superlative and beyond the limites of credit'.³¹ Where the earlier Hillis Miller, author of a number of studies of poetry and fiction

which I recall with gratitude from my undergraduate days,³² combined sensitive reading and argument supported by reference to the text, the later Miller makes *ex cathedra* pronouncements (in a newly provocative manner oddly untypical of such a courteous critic), which are *a priori* statements of faith in deconstruction rather than reasoned argument. In his later writings we frequently find an enormous gap between the claims he is making and the text cited in support. His interpretation of Wordsworth's 'A slumber did my spirit seal', for instance, has been accused of wilfully misreading and negating the poem, treating it as an allegory of the non-functioning of the *logos*, and violating his own professed method in order to drag in irrelevant lexical information not only from outside the poem but from outside the English language, or any cultural context that one could reasonably ascribe to Wordsworth. The myth of deconstructionist critics as responsible close readers of a text will not survive the examination of what Derrida did to Saussure, de Man to Shelley, or Miller to Wordsworth and Pater, among others.³³

Hillis Miller, in his later career, has been more influential as a theorist than a practical critic (reversing his earlier skills); yet having said this we must qualify what weight we give to the word 'theory'. If we mean by it a patient exploration of the nature of language, literary form, genres, the reading process, the workings of evaluation, a sustained analysis which takes into account alternative views, then we will be disappointed. We find, rather, a large number of essays, published in all the leading 'theory' journals, which re-affirm the deconstructionist credo in the light of one or more texts, briefly alluded to rather than analysed, forming the kind of utterance sometimes called a 'position statement'. It is statement rather than argument, affirmation rather than enquiry, even if delivered in an elegant and lucid style distinct from either Derrida's trapeze-work or de Man's burrowing into the darkness. It is usually easy to understand what Hillis Miller is saying, and his utterances are eminently quotable: but, we must ask, what good are they as a model for readers of literary texts, in particular drama?

Miller frequently reiterates the motifs of fissure, negation, especially self-negation, taken from his two heroes. But he vacillates uneasily between attributing this divisive quality to the texts themselves or to the activity of the deconstructionist critic.³⁴ Sometimes the text is said to subvert, or deconstruct itself. (However many times I read this claim, it still seems to me unproven. By what independent criteria, outside the deconstructor's negative hermeneutics, could a text of any length or complexity negate itself? What would the evidence for such a claim look like?) Nietzsche is cited as the model for this topos (Miller 1979, p. 229), but it is obviously Derrida who lies behind the pronouncement of 'a regular law which can be demonstrated, . . . the self-subversion of all the great texts of Western metaphysics from Plato onwards' (*ibid.*, p. 228). Miller asserts as a categorical fact about literature that 'the text performs on itself the act of

deconstruction without any help from the critic. The text expresses its own aporia' (Miller 1975, p. 31). Another borrowing from Derrida, the presence of incompatible meanings in a text, is now said to reveal 'the heterogeneity of a text (and so its vulnerability to deconstruction)... the fact that it says two entirely incompatible things at the same time' (Miller 1975, p. 30). In another place, however, it is 'deconstructive criticism' that uncovers an 'oscillation' in literary texts (a revealingly scientific metaphor), in which 'two genuine insights into literature in general inhibit, subvert, and undercut one another', such oppositions as 'idealism and scepticism', or a referentiality which does not refer, or 'performatives which do not perform' (Miller 1979, p. 252). So, the impatient reader might object, who does the deconstructing, the text or the critic?

Several abruptly categorical assertions locate the act of negation in the text itself: 'Any literary text... already misreads itself' (Miller 1976b, p. 333); 'every literary text performs... its own self-dismantling' (*ibid.*, p. 330). Other, longer sequences, situate the critic in a dramatic encounter with the text, often described as a labyrinth. The writings of Walter Pater, for instance

are at once open to interpretation and ultimately indecipherable, unreadable. His texts lead the critic deeper and deeper into a labyrinth until he confronts a final aporia... Only by going all the way into the labyrinth, following the thread of a given clue, can the critic reach the blind alley, vacant of any Minotaur, that impasse which is the end-point of interpretation. (Miller 1976c, p. 112)

As M.H. Abrams rightly observes, that passage implies that 'the deconstructive critic's act of interpretation has a beginning and an end; that it begins as an intentional, goal-orientated quest; and that this quest is to end in an impasse' (Abrams 1977, p. 248). It is, in effect, a perfect account of the progress of so many of de Man's essays; except that de Man always knew that the goal was an impasse.

Miller's favourite metaphor of the labyrinth gives deconstructionist activity a narrative line, rather like an episode from a medieval or Renaissance chivalric epic, say, 'The Quest for the Impasse'. It can also be combined with the root metaphor of 'deconstruction' itself — which Derrida derived from Heidegger's *Destruktion* of the metaphysics of ontology³⁵ — leading to deconstruction being conceived of as the dismantling of a structure, or even, as in this instance, a building:

The deconstructive critic seeks to find, by this process of retracing [each textual labyrinth], the element in the system studied which is alogical, the thread in the text in question which will unravel it all, or the loose stone which will pull down the whole building. The deconstruction, rather, annihilates the ground on which the building stands by showing that the text has already annihilated that ground, knowingly or

unknowingly. Deconstruction is not a dismantling of the structure of a text but a demonstration that it has already dismantled itself. (Miller 1976b, p. 341)

Such a clinical description has lost any of de Man's nihilist undertones, and is oddly reassuring in its assurance that the method will work. To misapply a Biblical text: 'seek and ye shall find, knock and' — the whole structure will magically collapse. I am reminded of Astolfo, the English paladin in Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, who has only to blow his magic horn — 'to which he always resorted in desperate situations' — to set the earth quaking and strike terror into all oppressors. Thanks to its help Astolfo destroys the enchanted palace of the evil magician Atlas, driving away its wicked spirits before 'smashing everything... The palace dissolved into smoke and mist':

*e di strugger quello incanto vago,
... fece fraccasso,
... e si sciolse il palazzo in fumo e in nebbia.*³⁶

But Astolfo can distinguish between good and evil, helpers and harmers: J. Hillis Miller's horn brings down all texts indifferently.

If that brief account, using their own words, may serve as an adequate outline of de Man and Hillis Miller as re-workers of the Derridian heritage, then we can now answer the question, what use is deconstruction as a model for literary criticism. My answer, and that of a number of other independent observers (we are not dealing here with assertions and counter-assertions by rival groupies, each bent on advancing their own school), has to be: not much. Deconstruction might be a useful propaedeutic exercise in philosophy classes, like the training in Renaissance logic and rhetoric courses in how to identify and refute sophisms. But as a model for literary criticism it is seriously defective. For one thing, the critic always knows in advance what he will find. Gerald Graff has shown that Hillis Miller's reading of Dickens's *Sketches by Boz*, 'for all its heavy documentation, ... rests not on textual evidence from the work itself but on a theory that tells him in advance what this evidence must be evidence for'. Since Miller 'forecloses the very possibility of language's referring to the world', he 'can read all texts without fail as self-deconstructing' — that is, calling attention to 'their inability to refer to external reality' — and so 'the method he employs establishes his case by default' (Graff 1979, pp. 176–7). This is to make life very easy for yourself, perhaps one of the attractions of this school of criticism. As M.H. Abrams says, 'the deconstructive method works, because it can't help working, it's a can't-fail enterprise', but — or 'alas' — one in which the critic finds that all 'the texts to which he applies his strategies... reduce to one thing and one thing only' (Abrams 1977, p. 241). As Miller himself admits, each deconstructive reading, 'performed on any literary, philosophical, or critical text... reaches, in the particular way

the given text allows it, the "same" moment of an aporia. . . . The reading comes back again and again, with different texts, to the "same" impasse' (Miller 1975, p. 30; my italics).

To the deconstructionist, this security, the guarantee of arriving where you aimed at, may be reassuring, and pedagogically useful; to others it will seem frightfully monotonous. Surely there must be something wrong with a critical method that produces the same reading of every text it comes upon? It 'reduces', or 'dissolves' its objects in the same way that the bath which Dr. Crippen filled with sulphuric acid dissolved his victims' bodies, bone, flesh, organs, all to the same indeterminate flux (textuality?). Abrams comments that the first few such readings may produce the desired feeling of vertigo, the 'uncanny *frisson* at teetering on the brink of the abyss', but the excitement will soon be 'dulled by its expected and invariable recurrence' (Abrams 1977, p. 249; Abrams 1986, p. 332). The fact that anyone can use the method — as Miller assures us, the 'ultimate justification for this mode of criticism . . . is that it works' (Miller 1979, p. 252) — that anyone can reduce *Middlemarch*, *King Lear*, or 'any literary, philosophical, or critical text' to a pile of rubble, or dispel it '*in fumo e in nebbia*', is not, to my mind, a recommendation. It may satisfy the critic's desire for power, especially as a surrogate for political action,³⁷ but its effect on works of literature, and on the whole practice of criticism, seems potentially disastrous.

III

Shakespeareans were rather late in noticing the deconstructive revolution. The first reference to it in the analytical index to *Shakespeare Quarterly's* annual bibliography was for 1985 (vol. 37, p. 890): by 1987 there were eight references (vol. 39, p. 940). If slow in catching on, those promoting the deconstruction of Shakespeare have also been rather parochial, ignorant of the vigorous and wide-ranging debates it has provoked. In 1985 Terence Hawkes, a solidly established middle-man for the cultural avant-garde (editor of the Methuen (now Routledge) New Accents series, editor of the journal *Textual Practice*), expounding 'new critical approaches' in a widely sold student handbook, could declare that 'the implications' of deconstruction for the Shakespearean critic 'are vast'.³⁸ It means, Hawkes announces, that we must abandon 'Bradley's notion of reading poetry as a pathway to the final "presence" of the author's mind. Bradley's sense of the capacity of the text to reveal "character" is also doomed by it' (p. 292). The fact that Hawkes keeps dragging in Bradley, whose book on the tragedies dates back to 1904, shows again how modern critical theory needs straw men, however ancient, against whom to measure its superiority. Against Bradley, and twenty years after Derrida, Hawkes sets out the new dogma with effusive, not to say, pompous emphasis:

Precisely because of its tropes, its metaphors, its images, language cannot be reduced to a series of unified, graspable, 'readable' and authorially validated meanings. *It certainly cannot accurately depict character.* Texts are never accurate or finished or concluded. They are endlessly, like language itself, in free play . . . , referring to other texts, other uses of language, rather than to a limited range of referents imposed from outside themselves. The kind of reduced 'readability' presupposed by 'old' Shakespearean criticism is not genuinely available. As Hillis Miller puts it, all texts are unreadable, if by 'readable' one means a single definitive interpretation. (p. 292; my italics)

There we meet many of the familiar characteristics of deconstruction: the categorical assertions (Precisely . . . cannot . . . certainly cannot . . . are never . . . not genuinely . . . all . . . unreadable), the proliferation of inverted commas to mark suspected words or concepts, the caricature of opposed critical practices in an attempt to legitimate its own (the 'old' criticism is rebuked for being reductive, while deconstruction is about to impose on texts a degree of reduction undreamed of till now), and above all the false oppositions. We are offered the choice, either the 'free play' of language or 'a limited range of referents imposed from outside themselves'. But what does this phrase actually describe? How can 'referents' be 'imposed' on texts 'from outside themselves'? And who would ever be so silly as to attempt it? Texts are actually built out of referents, utterances that discriminate one character from another, one motive from another, one social group, institution, or landscape from another. If language could not perform these functions, life, let alone literature, would be impossible. Finally Hawkes gives us, once again, the old threadbare alternative (the excluded middle yawning open, with all the other possibilities inviting discussion) of either 'unreadable' texts or 'a single definitive interpretation'. This is presented as a dilemma, but it has long lost its horns. As for the sentence I have italicised, it totally misses the point that the complexities of human behaviour — for which 'character' is the starting-concept in literature — can only be adequately registered in language. No other medium of comparable accuracy or subtlety exists. Music and dance can achieve remarkably powerful presentations of character in their own media, but it can only be analysed, criticised, reflected on in language.

Coming to the actual critical practice of deconstructing Shakespeare, Hawkes predicts it demonstrating that

no such limited 'readability' exists. By running the readability film backwards, by unpicking or 'deconstructing' the carefully woven strands which make up the text's sense-making surface, by focusing attention on its contradictory features which the writer — unwittingly — is unable to control . . .

the deconstructive critic will show that literature privileges

the free play of language over meaning. As Geoffrey Hartman expresses it, deconstruction . . . recognizes that words offer, not the restriction of presence, but the freedom of 'a certain absence or indeterminacy of meaning'.

The fact that Hawkes quotes Miller and Hartman but none of the twenty or more critiques of deconstruction available at the time he wrote means either that he was ignorant of them or else deliberately disdained to acknowledge them. Readers of this guide (republished unaltered in 1991) deserve better. They also deserve some more appropriate literary model than Hawkes's horrible metaphor of a 'readability film', as if the experience of drama could be fragmented into various mechanised processes (and surely, spooling backwards would only reverse the reading, not prove that reading is impossible!). The other metaphor of 'unpicking the carefully woven strands' of meaning gives an unintentionally appropriate account of deconstruction as a process which deliberately destroys the integrity of texts, breaks up precisely those areas where meanings are located, creating fissures or voids which it then claims were inherent. This new mode is then set against its ancient and purely mythical rivals, 'logocentric or incarnationist' views of language, in order to collapse into Hartman's equally vacuous claims that the text has a 'potentially endless proliferation of meaning', and that 'writing covertly resists its own reduction to unitary "meaning"' — resists, that is, until the deconstructionist imposes his greater weight to prise open the text, reveal or create the gaps euphemistically known as 'aporias'. And this is called 'freedom'.

Hawkes was writing, as he pointed out, before the deconstruction of Shakespeare had really got going, but his account of what it would look like turns out to be uncannily accurate (or would be uncanny if the critical method were not so predictable). From what must probably be described as the 'first wave' of criticism since then I have picked out a number of essays published in two collections, *Alternative Shakespeares* (1985),³⁹ and *Shakespeare and Deconstruction* (1988),⁴⁰ together with Howard Felperin's collected essays announcing his conversion to deconstruction, *The Uses of the Canon* (1990).⁴¹ My selection is intended to be representative, not definitive, and may be premature. But certain trends are already visible: loyalty to the founding fathers, especially the American clan; studious avoidance of the ever-increasing number of critiques of deconstruction (either in ignorance or self-protective knowledge); and the assumption, with no historical discussion, that this idiosyncratic late twentieth-century critical theory is an appropriate tool for discussing drama, and particularly drama written some four centuries ago. The assumption seems to be: 'these famous contemporary critics say that language and reference undermine themselves and all works of literature: let us see how we can apply their ideas to Shakespeare'. Or, as an actual editor of *Shakespeare and Deconstruction* puts it, 'Attempting to link a current literary critical theory

with the greatest English writer seemed a goal worthy in and of itself' (Atkins and Bergeron 1988, p. vii). But handsome is as handsome does.

Shakespearian deconstructionists inherit a system, in the language of antiquarian booksellers, 'with all faults'. They, too, find themselves caught in false oppositions, as between single readings/ininitely multiple and indeterminate ones; rigidly bound and determinate/wholly free and unrestrained interpretation; viciously subjective/aridly objective; and so on. An interesting example is Howard Felperin. In his preface Felperin re-erects on the one hand that straw man of modern critical theory, pressed into service again but always reliable, 'the pseudo-objective "facts" of an older historical empiricism' (Felperin 1990, p. vii) — who are these purveyors of facts? Where can their graves be found? On the other, he puts the 'new "conventionalist" historical hermeneutics consisting only of "texts" and "discourses"' (he is just as profligate with quotation marks as Hawkes, often for obscure reasons). This second pole may seem the promised land to post-structuralists, but Felperin finds it unsettling, since it offers 'nothing solid to fall back on when its "knowledge" is relativized'. (What, exactly, is the force of the inverted commas around 'knowledge'? Is this now a dubious concept, in need of decontamination? If so, good night all human intellectual pursuits!) Despite the ontological nostalgia for 'something solid to fall back on' — like Derrida's 'transcendental signified' — Felperin must know that there never was any such comforting support. Literary judgments and interpretations have always been personal, not merely subjective but intersubjective — that is, open to discussion, counter-argument, appeal to a text, amendment. Felperin's dilemma, caught between 'interpretive realism' and the 'opposed and no less vitiating charge of interpretive relativism', is imaginary, though much sought after by deconstructionists. ('Comfortable impasse to rent, near all main services; good view of the abyss.') All that he can think of doing is to acknowledge the impasse, even if that means 'revisiting . . . the dreaded state of aporia⁴² now and again . . .', and admit 'the incapacity of my readings to tell the truth about the texts they take up' by foregrounding 'their [sc. his readings] "writerly" play' (pp. viii–ix), a limp — perhaps designedly exemplary? — admission of failure.

The deconstructionists' false oppositions do not always result in self-paralysis. They can be invoked to dismiss other readings, legitimise their own, or even suggest that their work, while manifesting 'writerly play', has somehow come into being independently of the reading process. So Felperin 'comes out' with this statement:

What a deconstructionist like myself . . . increasingly values is the resistance the great text throws up against my efforts to impose my preconceptions upon it, to make it say what I want to hear. I confess I have come to enjoy being led by the text, by its train of signifiers, in directions I could not have predicted and might not initially have

wanted to go — even if the outcome of being led, indeed 'read', in this way is to end up in the state of aporia without a visa. (p. x)

This passage deploys another specious antithesis, between an active and a passive reading, leading or being led by. But the act of reading involves an active energising of the system of signs and meanings embodied in writing, and no reader can abandon his or her minimum responsibility for intellectual involvement. To allegorise the text as somehow 'reading' you is merely to push the problem on to another plane, where it is harder to reach — in plain language, a cop-out.

In taking over deconstructionist concepts and methods Shakespeare critics further the domestication of an originally disruptive system. Paul de Man gave the impression of really having confronted the void, but the academic impresarios hail his achievement in terms more appropriate to a guided tour: he 'led the way in revealing the power of figural language to mask the abyss over which human being constantly hovers' (Atkins 1988, p. 9; I am reminded of a Victorian's comment on Carlyle: he 'led [us] all out into the desert and . . . left [us] there').⁴³ The deconstructive *frisson*, that sense of teetering on the edge of a huge abyss, has wholly disappeared as Gary Waller cheerfully sets about 'Decentering the Bard'. Deconstruction, he reports, has 'most successfully attacked' the notion of the unified text, showing that 'texts are always riddled by abysses, closed only by repression' — as if a writer 'repressed' his novel or poem by pronouncing it completed, or a critic-reader 'repressed' it by ending his commentary — there being, 'as Derrida puts it, no texts, only an infinite textuality always on the move' (Waller 1988, p. 32). On the move, easy rider, Waller promises a 'peculiar excitement' in deconstructing Shakespeare, running together in one breath a whole series of one time radical propositions, now just part of the scene viewed from the driver's seat. The bardic deconstructor will inevitably focus on

the disruptiveness of textuality, on the infinite deferral of meaning, on the real emptiness of language and the insistence that textual practices always operate in contradiction to their own intended existence. (p. 22)

Waller's list turns these originally anarchic ideas into glib counters, showing an easy, comfortable acceptance of the deconstructive goal, to make 'his plays unravel our (and Shakespeare's) attempts to fix meaning in words' (p. 23). This is, after all, only being true to the 'inherent deconstructive nature of the Shakespearean script' itself, for as every student knows, 'as the text ravel[s] itself together at one end, it is always unravelling at the other . . .' (pp. 34–5). Where the generation of Derrida had to detonate or undermine, and that of Hawkes had to unpick the text, the latest metaphors give a much easier role to the critic: just sit back and let the text unwind for you. Penelope is invisibly at work.

The sense we have here of a once-flourishing intellectual movement

being increasingly diluted while being transmitted down the cultural hierarchy is confirmed by these critics' treatment of Saussure. In Hawkes's allusions to 'the free play of language over meaning', to the endless 'free play of differences', and to 'referents imposed from outside', we find an uncritical endorsement of Derrida which extends to Derrida's attack on, and perversion of Saussure (but Hawkes has been often enough rebuked for misreading Saussure).⁴⁴ In Felperin we find the same distortions in his account of being 'led by the text's train of signifiers' (Felperin 1990, p. x), and in a later definition of language as a 'self-contained system of arbitrary signs' (p. 51). Catherine Belsey begins her essay on 'Disrupting sexual difference' with the bold statement: 'Meaning, Saussure argued, is an effect of difference' (Belsey 1985, p. 166). But no, he said that the relations between the signified (concept) and other signifieds, just like that between the signifier (sound-image) and other signifiers, was established differentially; whole signs were distinguished by opposition; and he said almost nothing about meaning.

What is new, and depressing about Shakespearians appropriating Saussure in the 1980s and 90s is that his ideas are not only reified and torn out of context but are vulgarised, treated in a literal-minded way. Thus Geraldo U. de Sousa, starting an essay on *Richard II* with the easy-to-use slogan of Derrida — 'from the moment that there is meaning there are nothing but signs' — invokes Saussure's 'radical view' of the linguistic sign 'as a two-faced structure containing the signified and the signifier, which, however, can never be contemporaneous' (De Sousa 1988, p. 173). Once past the inept formulation 'two-faced' (recalling Iago's god Janus), the reader is left wondering what on earth the critic means by 'never . . . contemporaneous', since everything Saussure says implies that their mental association is simultaneous. (The linearity of the sign means that it, like language in general, unrolls in time, but comprehension moves with it.) Perhaps de Sousa has, as a Derridian might say, 'spatialised' the sign, or 'subjected it to deconstructive violence'. Equally bizarre is Jonathan Goldberg's comment on the fact that in *King Lear* Dover Cliff is mentioned only by Edgar (disguised as Poor Tom, as Gloucester contemplates suicide). To Goldberg this absence is significant:

The refusal to allow the word *Dover* to arrive at the place it (apparently) names, the failure, in other words, for signifier to reach signified — the failure of the sign — establishes the place that *Dover* occupies in the text. It is the place of illusion. . . . (Goldberg 1988, p. 247)

This is to literalise an abstract concept to the point of some primitive form of drama, in which actual signs were hung up giving the theatrical location.

Not only is Saussure falsified and de Man tamed, but Derrida's endlessly self-explicating system is trivialised, as in Gary Waller's fateful proposal to apply deconstruction to the very performance of drama. Waller sees

theatrical production as 'the quintessential deconstructive act — unravelling not only a tyrannous origin' — Shakespeare is now a 'tyrant' since he wrote or originated the play! — 'but undoing its own action as it proceeds' (p. 28): just watch it unravel! Waller quotes from an undergraduate textbook that he has joint-authored, which tells students that "there is, in one sense, [1] no such thing as a Shakespeare play — at least there is [2] no original meaning or [3] single authentic way" of producing it. . . . The Shakespearean text is [4] a script that decomposes as it is performed' (p. 27; my numbering). Those four assertions mimic the deconstructive categorically-assertive style but expose its emptiness: who would ever claim that there *was* an 'original meaning' or 'single authentic way'? The door that they are trying to batter down does not exist; their enemies are ghosts, manufactured simpletons. (As for the text 'decomposing', as if it were organic matter, the falseness of the metaphor displays the vagueness of thought.) But Waller joins hands with another Derridian (David Macdonald) to labour the point of these fatal reversals:

the play is there in the beginning to be done, one [sic] once it is performed or read, it is undone. Productions are 'struck'; sets and costumes are 'deconstructed'. The cast departs, lines are forgotten. The work of art disappears, and all of this deconstructive activity appears as an essential method and mode of the art form.

To which Waller adds: 'there is no performance or reading that can capture the absent origin; presence is something that tantalizes but can never be materialized' (Waller 1988, p. 28).

It is not difficult to spot the faults of logic in that argument, which makes drama and theatre meaningless by leaving out altogether the performance, the actor's art, and the audience's reactions (not to mention all the begged questions of an 'absent origin'). Loyal Derridians will have been more disturbed at the banalisation of the master's ideas that has taken place, for whatever he meant by 'presence' and 'absence' it was certainly nothing as literal-minded as Waller's conceptions (ideology, he tells us later, is an 'ever-changing absence': p. 39). Just as Saussure's concept of the sign was literalised, so Derrida's distortion of Saussure (in which the 'play of the signifier' results in an infinite 'deferral' of meaning) is reified and banalised. Messrs Waller and Macdonald join forces to suggest that

the Derridean category of 'deferral' is at the necessarily absent heart of *Hamlet*, in which the hero, 'putting off until later what is presently impossible', may be said to deconstruct the possibility of himself attaining full presence. Thus the traditional reading of *Hamlet* as a tragedy of delay may be related to deconstructive deferral. (p. 26)

And thus the antiquated Romantic theory of Hamlet as a man who could not make up his mind — now due to his 'decentered presence' — is given a

new lease of life by being dressed in a hand-me-down Paris outfit of the 1960s.

That absurdly literal-minded understanding of what Derrida meant by *différance* is matched by G. Douglas Atkins, who derives from James Calderwood's book on *Hamlet* (which got it in turn from René Girard) the insight that the play's hero has to overcome 'the evaporation of differences and the consequent blurring of identities' created by Claudius's usurpation (Atkins 1988, pp. 10–11). (We can only be puzzled as to what sense of 'difference' is implied here — abstract? concrete? somewhere in between?) Says Atkins (says Calderwood [says Girard]): Hamlet's solution to his crisis lies in overcoming 'torturous [sic] self-difference' to achieve identity. 'Hamlet must, in other words, establish his legitimate difference from Claudius (and Laertes), rather than, by proclaiming his difference, merely ensure his doubleness'. (If readers wait a while, the sense of blur will disappear.) Atkins catches one of his authorities out, seeing that Girard 'acknowledges . . . that "differences never really disappear" . . . an admission that effectively deconstructs his argument' (p. 12). What that does to Atkins's argument we can only wonder. He goes on to use the term 'difference' in this literalising fashion another twenty times in the next two pages, before taking refuge in a still greater authority, albeit at two removes, Barbara Johnson's exposition of Derrida's notion of *différance*. Atkins concludes with a crassly literal-minded summary of Derrida that will have all true devotees groaning in frustration:

It is precisely this notion of *différance* that opens up important, if vertiginous, new vistas for understanding the *relationship* between entities, whether they be supposed oppositions such as time/space, body/soul . . . ; the differences between peoples, for example Christians/Jews; or even the way one person is situated vis-à-vis another. (pp. 14–15)

By now Derrida's term has completely lost its distinctive, idiosyncratic meaning (whatever it was).

* * *

Although Shakespearean deconstructionists treat Derrida and his sources in a banalisingly literal way, they faithfully follow him in reducing everything to the level of language. G. Douglas Atkins claims that deconstructionists read with 'closeness and rigor', 'attending closely to tropes or to concepts, following the de Manian or the Derridian emphasis' by 'intensely pressuring texts' (Atkins 1988, p. 6). But this claim, as we have seen, is mythical. Deconstructionists only read selectively, small texts or small bits of texts, only those bits that will allow them to exercise their method or prove its assumptions. Shakespearean deconstructionists, although perhaps old-fashioned in preserving the notion of 'texts', specific poems, plays, or genres (not yet willing to collapse everything Shakespeare wrote into

undifferentiated 'textuality'), within the text discussed dutifully focus on language as a Derridian, non-functioning system. Gary Waller, for instance, declares that Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, 'like the Petrarchan lyric generally; . . . articulate the frustration of language's indeterminacy. The desire for signification leads only to a lack, as trope piles on trope, ending inevitably in the repressive silence or frustration of closure' (*ibid.*, p. 25). An innocent reader faced with those statements would never imagine that Shakespeare's *Sonnets* are not at all like the Petrarchan lyric; that they are remarkably eloquent and inventive, handling a limited range of subject-matter in always changing forms; that their language is highly significant and determinate (if it were not, it could hardly use a trope, which by definition involves the turning of a word to another signification); that they actually use tropes less frequently than rhetorical schemes or figures;⁴⁵ and that since the standard English sonnet is a fourteen-line poem it regularly reaches 'closure', which represents, however, neither 'repression' nor 'frustration' but the literary convention of prescribed forms. (Have the deconstructionists really no other way of dealing with fixed literary forms than to protest about closure? That seems an extraordinarily primitive category choice, 'endless play' or 'premature enforced close-down'.)

Waller's description of the *Sonnets* as articulating 'language's indeterminacy' is, of course, just another glib recycling of the clichés of 'post-structuralist criticism', but it is representative of what Derridian methods do to works of literature. To return to Geraldo U. de Sousa on *Richard II* for a moment, is to find another critic literalising Saussure and Derrida while bringing all issues down to language. To the characters in the play, he writes, 'the king — a power broker — is a sign that depends on the play of differences in order to signify'. A sign, not a person, Richard is still able to exert his rule: however, 'when the king wields his power in an arbitrary way, the political and linguistic equilibrium collapses' (de Sousa 1988, pp. 176–7). But if the sign is arbitrary in the first place, we might ask, caught between reifying the sign and de-reifying the person, what's the difference? When this happens in a play, apparently, 'signifier and signified break apart', as witnessed by the Welsh captain's list of omens:

The bay-trees in our country are all wither'd,
And meteors fright the fixed stars of heaven. . . .
These signs forerun the death or fall of kings. (2.4.7ff)

To most readers of the play so far these signs have been perfectly clear omens of unnatural disasters, but de Sousa claims they 'have lost their usual meanings. No longer meaning the death and fall of kings, *because the king is still alive*, these signs fluctuate haphazardly. . . .' (p. 178; my italics). This is an extraordinarily myopic comment, ignoring the immediately following speech by Salisbury ('Ah, Richard! . . . I see thy glory like a shooting star. . .'), and indeed the whole movement of the play through its second half, in which all the omens are validated. De Sousa's comment

is, once again, linguistic, not dramatic: 'ironically [in what way?], the play establishes that the sign, however arbitrary it may be, is the only way to signification'. This is surely a truism on any count, and a strangely thin and abstract judgment on a play. Once you reduce characters to signs ('the king, the sign of signs, proves himself to be a sign breaker'), you soon reach allegory. De Sousa shortly takes this final step to abstraction, saying that 'if . . . York *stands for* the feudal system, John of Gaunt ironically [in what way?] *speaks for* the ideology of the Divine Substitute' (p. 179; my italics).

This is an easy, but fatal step in deconstructionist reading, from seeing drama as language only, to seeing it as in some way allegorical. A prime instance of this reduction of drama to allegory is an often-cited essay by J. Hillis Miller, 'Ariachne's Broken Woof' (Miller 1977), which takes its title from the scene in *Troilus and Cressida* (5.2) where Troilus, having managed to get into the Greek camp, has seen Cressida (who has been swapped for the return of a Trojan prisoner, Antenor) meet alone for the first time her new wooer, Diomedes. It is obviously a painful experience for Troilus, and once the spied-on couple has left he releases his feelings in sixty lines of highly rhetorical, contorted, Latinate language (using such rare words as 'recordation, credence, esperance, attest, deceptious, calumniat, bi-fold, perdition, conduce, inseparate, orifex, constring'd. . .'). Striking a rather affected pose — 'Was Cressid here? . . . She was not, sure. . . . Rather think this not Cressid. . . . No, this is Diomed's Cressida' — he tries to refuse to believe his eyes, only to come back to the contradiction between what he has seen and what he had believed Cressida to be:

This is, and is not, Cressid.
Within my soul there doth conduce a fight
Of this strange nature, that a thing inseparate
Divides more wider than the sky and earth,
And yet the spacious breadth of this division
Admits no orifex for a point as subtle
As Ariachne's broken woof to enter. (5.2.150ff)

Editorial opinion is divided as to the meaning of the 'thing inseparate' (line 152): David Bevington's edition glosses it as 'Cressida, an indivisible entity'; Hillis Miller states that it 'is Troilus's soul' (Miller 1977, p. 53). No great critical issue is at stake here, the real crux being 'Ariachne'. Most contemporary editors see it as an odd spelling for Arachne, another of those unfortunate humans in classical myth who challenged a god in some skill. This one engaged Athene in a weaving contest, which ended in the goddess becoming angry, tearing up Arachne's work, and turning her into a spider. But Miller, in company with many commentators since the eighteenth century,⁴⁶ prefers to see in the spelling a conflation of 'Arachne' with 'Ariadne', another mythological heroine involved with weaving — or at least with a thread, with which she helped Theseus escape from the

Cretan labyrinth. It is perfectly possible, of course, that Shakespeare conflated the two stories, since in some versions at least, each heroine hangs herself. But it could also be a printer's error, or even a deliberate alteration for the sake of the meter. The dominant allusion is obviously to Arachne, since she alone had a woof that was broken,⁴⁷ but it may well be that Shakespeare confused the two (as others confuse Plutus and Pluto, or the virgin birth with the immaculate conception). To Miller the deconstructionist, however, all Shakespeare readers can be categorised according to whether they accept the portmanteau form: those that do are 'dialogical', those that don't are 'monological' — 'learned gentlemen', he tells us, but sadly limited (pp. 45–6). This binary opposition is then linked to what Miller has said this speech is all about, namely as showing 'the division of the mind into two when the single narrative line of monologue becomes the doubled line of dialogue. When one *logos* becomes two, . . . all the gatherings or bindings of Western logocentrism are untied or cut' (p. 44). Enter Derrida — but when did he ever leave?

The first of Montaigne's essays has the thoughtful title, 'How, by various ways, one can arrive at the same goal' (Book I, Chap. 1: 'Par divers moyens on arrive à pareille fin'). From whatever remote position the deconstructionist starts, his path will soon join one of Derrida's, and the old targets will be hunted down again. Troilus' speech is said to call in question 'the "whole shebang" of Occidental metaphysics' (p. 47), showing 'that *dialogue*, in the sense of a division of one mind against itself, is ultimately a matter of language or manifests itself as a subversive possibility of language' (*ibid.*; my italics). Troilus' speech explores 'the metaphysical implications of the possibility of dialogue', a word that Miller repeatedly refuses to take in its normal sense of 'speech between two people', but pronounces (against all the etymological evidence, when it suits him) to mean 'the dividing of a single mind against itself'. Thus dialogue, defined in his way, 'puts in question the notions of the mind [a tautology, given the definition: now we see its rhetorical purpose] and of the self and sees them as linguistic fictions, as functions in a system of words without base in the *logos* of any substantial mind. When the monological becomes dialogical, the dialogical loses its *logoi* and becomes alogical' (p. 51). Miller is a great one for citing etymologies (e.g., pp. 53, 57), but in this sequence he has given in to a form of Derridian doublespeak, the assertion-with-denial, which gives with one hand and takes away ('becomes . . . loses', 'dialogical . . . alogical') with the other. Miller has taken this text as a pretext for another crash course in deconstructionist thought-processes. The 'dialogical' form, Ariachne, is said to fit 'the wider context of Occidental discourse . . . in which the coherence of the monological has all along been undermined by the presence within it . . . of that other non-system, . . . the absence of unifying authority' (p. 55). These are familiar elements of deconstructionist belief: what have they got to do with Troilus?

This freewheeling deconstructionist discourse bases itself on one passage

in Troilus' speech, but in doing so it ignores the intentionality behind Troilus' words; it ignores the unique dramatic situation — since onstage at this time, having observed Diomedes' encounter with Cressida, are not only Troilus and Ulysses, but also Thersites; and it ignores the fact that we, the audience or readers, have seen Cressida independently of Troilus, and know one or two things about her that he does not. Typically enough for a deconstructionist, Miller ignores the specifically dramatic or theatrical elements of this passage, and treats Troilus' words as if they were contributions to a philosophic debate, about metaphysics or logic, as if Troilus were qualified to talk about these things, as if his words were addressed, with consequence, to an abstract issue, and not the outpourings of immediate suffering.

The take-off point for Miller is Troilus' attempt to link Cressida's betrayal to the forces governing the universe. Using the rhetorical linking-figure *anadiplosis* (in which the last word of one clause becomes the first word of the clause following), Troilus verbally links Cressida to the gods:

If beauty have a soul, this is not she;
 If souls guide vows, if vows be sanctimonies,
 If sanctimony be the gods' delight,
 If there be rule in unity itself,
 This was not she. (142ff)

He and Cressida had sworn vows of constancy to each other (3.2.136–193), with Pandarus holding their hands in a mock ceremony of solemnisation — I call it mock, not serious, since Pandarus brings the exchange down to prose and is given a retrospective irony which sounds like a prophecy, an illocutionary act of swearing that, 'if ever you prove false one to another . . . let all pitiful goers-between be call'd to the world's end after my name; call them all Pandars' (195–9: we do, we will). But in retrospect Troilus now sees that prelude to their one and only love-night together as having been some kind of divinely sanctioned ceremony:

Instance, O instance, strong as Pluto's gates,
 Cressid is mine, tied with the bonds of heaven;
 Instance, O instance, strong as heaven itself,
 The bonds of heaven are slipp'd, dissolv'd, and loos'd,
 And with another knot, five-finger-tied,
 The fractions of her faith, orts of her love,
 The fragments, scraps, the bits and greasy relics
 Of her o'er-eaten faith, are bound to Diomed. (157ff)

But there never were any 'bonds of heaven'. Pandarus is no priest, and this was no legal ceremony. Cressida's father, Calchas, is a priest, however, a Trojan serving on the Greek side, to whom she is returned in recognition of parental claims (4.5). Troilus invokes canons of legitimacy to which he is in no way entitled.

Miller, however, takes Troilus' attempt to invoke logic ('If there be rule in unity itself' — the principle that an entity can only be indivisibly equal to itself) as alluding to 'the basic assumption of monological metaphysics', now said to be underwriting the whole order of the universe, 'the religious, metaphysical, or cosmological links binding earth to heaven', and — the deconstructionist credo — the order of language itself (p. 47). To the reader or theatregoer aware of Troilus's intentionality, of the pain motivating the eloquence, it is no more surprising that our young hero should invoke Aristotle on his side than the gods. But Miller takes Troilus' words *au pied de la lettre*, endorsing them while lining up another deconstructionist target:

Cressida's faithlessness, the possibility that her original vows to Troilus were *not grounded on her substantial self* in its ties to the rest of the ethical, political, and cosmic order all the way up to God, puts in question that whole order. Cressida's lying makes it possible to conceive that the story of that order, as it is told by the reasonable discourse of Western metaphysics, is itself a lie . . . (p. 48; my italics)

Derrida's well-known theses return from the ante-room: 'the possibility that language may be cut off from any source in the mind, human or divine'; 'In Western metaphysics a linguistic principle has been externalized and made the basis of the cosmic order, as Christ is the *Logos*, the *Word*' (p. 49; what's Christ doing here?). Cressida is at least granted 'a substantial self', unusually enough after the post-1960s attack on the subject, yet because her vows were not 'grounded' and she betrayed Troilus, then 'the whole structure of Western culture is broken, fragmented, doubled and redoubled' (p. 50), reduced to the nauseating metaphors of scraps and leftovers with which Troilus ends his harangue, or diatribe, or *vituperatio* (whichever rhetorical form seems appropriate). Yet, Miller adds, 'out of these fragments a new non-system . . . is created. . . . It is the non-system made of the remnants of an act of deconstruction, like a meal of distasteful leftovers . . .' (p. 54: for those who have wondered how a work of literature looks, or tastes, after it has been deconstructed).

Miller's deconstructionist commentary, riding on the back of this speech, is absurdly overblown, calling up attitudes and positions from the Derridian repertoire which are simply overlaid on the Shakespearian text with the flimsiest connection. His concepts of monological, dialogical, metaphysical and logocentric discourse are forced on the play from outside (perhaps this is what Hawkes meant by referents being imposed on texts from outside themselves). More serious, perhaps, he ignores crucial evidence from the text which would call in question all his assumptions, starting from his passive endorsement of Troilus' utterances as if they were meant to be taken wholly sympathetically. But Troilus' use of language, as Shakespeare has been careful — and marvellously inventive — to show

from the beginning of the play, is excessive, exorbitant, anguished in its frustration (1.1.1–110), and agonising just before the fulfilment:

I am giddy; expectation whirls me round.
Th'imaginary relish is so sweet
That it enchants my sense. What will it be,
When that the wat'ry palates taste indeed
Love's thrice repured nectar? Death, I fear me . . .

(3.2.7–27)

Aristotle said that the speech of young men was characterised by hyperbole:⁴⁸ Troilus exemplifies that figure. In debate among his peers Troilus is nothing but hyperbolic (2.2.25–32, 46–50, 76–83, 199–207), outdoing even Marlowe:

Why, she is a pearl
Whose price hath launch'd above a thousand ships.

In flytings with the enemy he is even more reckless (4.4.123ff, 5.4.19f, 5.10.12–32). Shakespeare gives to Ulysses a formal *laudatio* of Troilus: 'a true knight, / Not yet mature, yet matchless. . . / Not soon provok'd, nor being provok'd soon calm'd' (4.5.96–112), a non-partisan description which must be given some weight.

In the scene where Troilus observes Cressida's conversation with Diomedes, we are not surprised that he should burst out in such fury — 'nor being provok'd soon calm'd'. The excess of hyperbole is rant and bombast, and if those terms would be too harsh for a balanced judgment of Troilus they are still deliberately invoked by Shakespeare in his decision to have onstage throughout this overhearing scene not only Ulysses but Thersites, two reference points that permit a triangulation of our attitudes. Thersites the coarse-mouthed reduces all love to lechery — 'A juggling trick — to be secretly open' — 'How the devil Luxury, with his fat rump and potato-finger, tickles these together! Fry, lechery, fry!' (5.2.25, 57f). We do not simply endorse Thersites' worm's eye view, but Shakespeare's intentional interposition of him as a commentator appealing directly to the audience (in asides and soliloquies), so placing him between the potentially heroic-romantic action and our experience of it, has, cumulatively, a distinctly sobering or disillusioning effect. We never fully accept what Thersites says, but his saying it illuminates the action from an angle that Shakespeare does not want to leave unexplored. So when Troilus strikes his pose of doubting whether he has actually seen Cressida or not (5.2.121–36), Thersites' comment — 'Will a' swagger himself out on's own eyes?' (139) — is coarse, but not wholly unjust. And when Troilus inflates himself for his final bombastic threat of how he will, on the field of battle next day, smash Diomedes' helm bearing Troilus' favour, which Cressida has just given away —

Not the dreadful spout
Which shipmen do the hurricano call,
Constring'd in mass by the almighty sun
Shall dizzy with more clamour Neptune's ear
In his descent than shall my prompted sword
Falling on Diomed. (172ff)

— Thersites deflates this resounding hyperbole with his unique vulgarity: 'He'll tickle it for his concupy'. The point being that Shakespeare has put Thersites there for a purpose, a purpose that is certainly not conducive to sympathy with Troilus. (Hillis Miller never mentions Thersites.)

Even more telling, because more balanced, are the comments of Ulysses, especially after we have seen his unprompted admiration of Troilus. Having managed with difficulty to restrain the Trojan from betraying their hiding place, he is eager to go, but Troilus wishes to stay in order 'To make a recordation to my soul' of all that he has heard, another self-conscious pose. After his first speech we move from monologue to dialogue (in the word's normal sense):

TROILUS. Was Cressid here?
 ULYSSES. I cannot conjure, Trojan.
 TROILUS. She was not, sure.
 ULYSSES. Most sure she was.
 TROILUS. Why, my negation hath no taste of madness.
 ULYSSES. Nor mine, my lord. Cressid was here but now.
 TROILUS. Let it not be believed for womanhood!
 Think, we had mothers.

Ulysses' cool detachment, his refusal to play along with Troilus' language-game, the sardonic denial ('I'm no magician'), all this establishes a perspective from which we can see and judge Troilus's pose-striking. When Troilus falls into a generalised misogyny — a reaction Shakespeare often shows as the pique of a man who thinks he has been deceived by a woman (Ford, Leontes, Posthumus) — 'Think, we had mothers', so showing himself indeed ready 'to square the general sex / By Cressid's rule', Ulysses has the absolutely just, and deflating counter:

What hath she done, Prince, that can soil our mothers?

And after Troilus' anguished speech invoking 'the bonds of heaven' only to collapse into 'greasy relics', Ulysses sarcastically enquires,

May worthy Troilus be half attach'd
With that which here his passion doth express? (165f)

Even reducing his words to half their import would still leave Troilus resounding his anger and sense of hurt. A man who, 'being provok'd' is not 'soon calm'd', whose passion, expressing itself in hyperbole and vitupera-

tion, nevertheless claims to have the gods and logic on his side, Troilus is hardly the character I would pick as expressing a philosophic point of view to be taken seriously. Shakespeare, at all events, deliberately places two non-sympathetic commentators to suggest that we should not take Troilus at his own evaluation.

We, as audience or readers, have yet a third point of view by which we can judge Troilus, since we have seen Cressida's reaction to being traded off, like a hostage or prisoner of war. When she receives the news from Pandarus that she is to be handed over to the Greeks (4.2.95–110), her anguish is moving, the accents of a true love that 'admits no qualifying dross' of moderation (4.4.1–10). Troilus does not see her spontaneous reactions in these two scenes, so that his injunctions to her at their parting to be 'true of heart' (4.4.58–97) can seem unloving, unnecessarily suspicious, Polonius-like. (But of course he can also be serving a proleptic function, anticipating the betrayal that is soon to take place.) In the overhearing scene, even, although perforce having to negotiate with Diomedes — being one of the spoils of war, she truly has no choice — Cressida is full of regrets, giving Troilus' sleeve to her new 'guardian' but imagining her first love lying 'thinking on his bed / Of thee and me', bestowing 'memorial dainty kisses' on the glove she has given him (5.2.71–95). She calls herself 'false wench!', wants the sleeve back, resolves to break off with Diomedes — 'I will not keep my word' — and only gives in when he threatens to leave her. After Diomedes has gone, and she is left alone (she thinks), her thoughts are still with Troilus: 'farewell! One eye yet looks on thee: / But with my heart the other eye doth see' (119ff). All told, this is a sympathetic but realistic account of what it means to be traded off like a commodity, subject to the fortunes of war. Shakespeare, who has put Thersites and Ulysses on one side of Troilus, puts Cressida on the other side, these three characters giving us a perspective from which to judge his words. Nothing in Cressida's behaviour as we have seen it would justify Troilus' vituperative reduction of her faith to 'fragments, scraps, . . . bits and greasy relics', truly a 'filthy simile', as one of the interlocutors in a Pope satire objects.

Hillis Miller's distinguished example shows that it is not enough to pick out one passage from a play as the text for a deconstructionist sermon. To do so is to risk endorsing the speaker's intentionality in all its egoism, all its self-justifying appeals to right and wrong, all the incoherences of its self-vindicating arguments. To be fair, Hillis Miller does note Troilus' incoherence, but he fails to see that it should make us qualify the seriousness or sympathy with which we respond. He describes 'Troilus's all-or-nothing rhetoric' as leading to the 'universalizing' statement (misogynistic might be the appropriate epithet), 'Let it not be believed for womanhood!', but he then finds the universalising (and not the misogyny?) 'justified, for if one exception to the law of self-identity can be found', then this law is revealed to be merely 'a human positing' (p. 50). But laws are only ever

human positings, never transcendental absolutes, and neither Troilus' misogyny nor Cressida's transfer to the Greeks calls in question the law of self-identity. She is still the same woman; he is still the same eloquent speaker, excelling in epideictic rhetoric, the branch devoted to praise (*laus*) and blame (*vituperatio*). Commenting on the 'fractions . . . orts . . . scraps' sequence of the speech, Miller notes 'the incoherence of the syntax', but the deconstructionist (as with de Man's concept of poetry) can always see language in mimetic terms when it suits him. So Miller describes Troilus' incoherent syntax as enacting 'the fragmentation, the suspension of logical order', that 'metaphysical order which Cressida's vows to Troilus implied' (p. 54). Similarly, 'the syntactical and figurative incoherence of Troilus's speech' forms an anacoluthon which is present not only in grammar, but also — *mimesis* again! — in 'the anacoluthon of Troilus's divided mind, the narrative discontinuity of the entire play, and so on up to the immense anacoluthon of Western literature, philosophy, and history as a "whole"' (p. 56). The stylistic peculiarities, the 'mind-twisting or mind-disintegrating' rhetoric of Troilus (pp. 56–7), instead of being taken — along with many other dramatic emphases pointing in the same direction — as a sign of the speaker's emotional and rational imbalance, another instance of the hyperbole or verbal excess that has marked him throughout, these concrete and carefully worked details of language become grist to the deconstructionist mill, which only attends to those elements of a play which can fit its theory.

Miller ends his essay, as he did so many essays in the 1970s, with a reminder of the Grand Theory: the materials of 'Occidental Culture', as 'this interpretation of one passage in *Troilus and Cressida* has implied, are fundamentally heterogeneous. They contain both logocentric metaphysics and its subversion'. Like the closing passages of a Bach fugue, the key notes recur: 'dialogical not monological . . . ; dialogical heterogeneity . . . ; Deconstruction . . . attempts to reverse the implicit hierarchy . . . ; the logocentric as a derived effect of the dialogical . . . ; Deconstruction attempts a . . . displacement of the whole system of Western metaphysics . . . That this attempt always fails, so that it has to be performed again and again, interminably . . .' (pp. 59–60). If we wanted one text to show how deconstructionist doctrine imposes itself on works of literature in an act of appropriation that ruthlessly picks out those parts that can be consumed and rejects the rest (as the macho lover parodied(?) in one of Donne's love-poems says: 'And when hee hath the kernell eate / Who doth not fling away the shell?'), then Hillis Miller's ingestion and recycling of Troilus's speech would be the ideal exhibit.

* * *

Deconstruction obviously cannot cope with the fundamental nature of drama as the interaction, concordant and discordant, between characters

who have clearly defined and differentiated goals, values, thought-habits, and styles. Unable to read the words of the characters as utterances designed to achieve a personal goal, or deflect someone else's, they have to twist the drama towards a metaphysical or anti-metaphysical level, or reduce the characters to some abstract principle. So John M. Kopper, expounding 'Subjectivity and the Duplicity of Discourse' in *Troilus and Cressida*, categorically asserts, without even the pretence of discussion, that 'Pandarus is the principle of autology, and Cressida of heterology, of the cleavage inherent in the sign' (Kopper 1988, p. 158; any puns on 'hetaira' and 'cleavage' probably unintended). That binary category (later absorbed into the opposition between tragedy and comedy, and Lacan's 'Symbolic' and 'Imaginary' realms: pp. 161–2) leaves the ordinary reader wondering what other function those characters might have, if any, outside the linguistic domain. Again, this play is said to be really about language (this is truly the 'monological', monocausal slant of deconstruction). Kopper follows Miller, and many more, in discussing Troilus's angry speech on Cressida's betrayal, but finds its main significance to concern the 'understanding of proper names'. That is, he informs us, the 'word "Cressid" should denote one person', and the fact that it does not 'function in this way', calls in question — would you believe it? — the power of language to refer to reality. Kopper is blind to the obvious point in the dramatic context that it does indeed denote one person, but one who has just been seen transferring her allegiance away from the man she swore to love, he being understandably confused about the discrepancy between promise and performance, and indulging in excesses of rhetoric in order to come to terms with it in his own fashion. But for Kopper this complex dramatic situation, reduced to being a purely grammatical (onomastic) phenomenon,

questions the very possibility that language can be referential. For the denotation of 'Cressid', as philosophers in the Frege tradition could have explained to the anguished Troilus, depends on activation of an amorphous aggregate of connotations, only a majority of which need hold for the members of a society in order for the name to function successfully as 'proper'. (pp. 151–2)

But this learned note is wholly beside the point: what is at issue in Troilus' speech is not a name but a person, a woman and her love — or rather, 'the orts of her love'. Nothing in his speech could undermine language's referential function, in any case. It is precisely through language's power to refer — to Cressida, to the bonds of heaven, to Ariachne's broken woof — that Troilus can express his sense of betrayal.

If Troilus is given low marks for his ignorance of Frege (to my knowledge, the first Shakespearian character to fail this test), he does rather better on the Saussure question. One of the 'persistent themes' of the play, says Kopper, using a strangely old-fashioned concept, 'is the attempt to establish the value of an object'. So, in the Trojans' debate over whether

to return Helen to the Greeks, Troilus accepts her 'arbitrary value', and in thus 'rejecting Hector's concept of intrinsic worth, he allies himself with a post-Saussurian attitude towards meaning. While Hector looks for a correspondence between sign and referent', Troilus 'splits the sign into signifier and signified'. This confuses several issues in Saussure, but at least seems to be leading in a new direction. However, Kopper jerks it back to the deconstructionist goal: 'the theme of valuation calls into question language's referential powers, thereby challenging the stability of language as a structure' (pp. 152–3), and so — hey presto! — validating once again the Derridian enterprise. Speeches or scenes in Shakespeare are singled out for comment only when they confirm what the deconstructionist already thinks. Any sense of criticism as discovery, an open-minded engagement with a text, has been lost. Commenting on Troilus' early, pre-coital imagery of Cressida as a 'pearl' in India, with himself as the merchant and Pandarus as 'our convoy' (1.1.94ff), Kopper gratuitously claims that the images recall Pluto's rape of Proserpina. She — allegory again! — 'exemplifies the duplicitous woman', but also, more importantly, 'that ambiguity in language' seen in Troilus' words, 'this is, and is not Cressid'. These words, in turn, show Troilus vainly trying to 'utter the original, absolute difference. Cressida is that difference, and . . . that difference is an unspeakable term' (pp. 159–60: see Derrida *passim*). Odd, then, that Troilus manages to speak it so often, some forty times according to the Concordance.

Unconcerned with what actually happens in them, deconstructionists read Shakespeare's plays in order to confirm their pre-existing theories and to validate their method, with its 'unravelling of the text'. So Kopper, having used two tiny passages in one play to call in question language and reference (is there not a slight discrepancy here?), can proudly assert that in this reading of the play 'I have created a logical confusion that is real and very important' — as if exclaiming 'heureka!', or 'Quod erat *deconstruendum!*' We see what he means by 'logical confusion' in his next sentence, which says that by acknowledging 'the "madness of discourse", Troilus undergoes a rite of initiation which is simultaneously impossible to undergo . . .' (p. 161). This is indeed a way of 'intensely pressurizing texts', or 'opening up' Shakespeare to the presence of the critic.

IV

The reduction of drama, a three-dimensional, two-way experience, first to the level of language and then to the validation of a Derridian theory, seems to be the unavoidable result of deconstruction. Howard Felperin, expounding 'The Deconstruction of Presence in *The Winter's Tale*' (Felperin 1990, pp. 35–55; previously in Parker and Hartman 1985, pp. 3–18), sets

out to call in question all the traditionally fixed points in that text, beginning — oddly enough — with the oracle scene (3.2.132ff). Before unwarily following his plunge *in medias res*, it may be helpful to remind ourselves of the dramatic situation at this point. Leontes, having himself urged Hermione to plead with Polixenes to extend his nine-month visit (1.2.27–108), falls into a sudden and irrational fit of jealousy, which has a disastrous outcome. First he convinces himself that the courtly behaviour between his wife and Polixenes is proof of an ongoing adultery (1.2.108–19, 137–46, 180–6, 216–19); then he suspects Mamillius not to be his legitimate son (1.2.119–36, 187–208); and, putting zero and zero together, reveals his jealous suspicions to his trusted courtier Camillo and tries to suborn him to poison Polixenes (211–349). Overwhelmed by Leontes' insistence, Camillo at first agrees, but as soon as the King has gone he feels revulsion at the plot, reveals it to Polixenes, and they leave the court of Sicilia in haste (351–464). Camillo's horrified disbelief, Polixenes' shock, Hermione's obedient and dignified behaviour on the one hand, and on the other Leontes' manic language, his metaphors running riot, his syntax disintegrating into incoherence — this extreme opposition within the play polarises reactions in a way that isolates Leontes. When he reveals his nasty imaginings to Hermione, accusing her of being an adulteress and a traitor before having her put in prison (2.1.33–125), the polarisation is intensified. Leontes is convinced that he is right — 'How blest am I / In my just censure, in my true opinion!' (36–7), while Hermione affirms her innocence in the confident hope that she will be vindicated:

How this will grieve you,
When you shall come to clearer knowledge, that
You thus have publish'd me!

Leontes' reaction is that of a tyrant: whoever speaks in her defence makes himself guilty by so doing (96–105).

Yet, in a reassuring demonstration of solidarity with the innocent party, no-one at Leontes' court is intimidated by him, no-one believes his jealous suspicions, all affirm their belief in Hermione. The First Lord and Antigonus forcefully wager their life and happiness on her innocence and his injustice (2.1.126–72), to which Leontes arrogantly replies that he is not asking their advice but only out of his 'natural goodness' telling them the truth of the matter (161–70). A ruler who rejects his counsellors and accuses everyone else of 'ignorant credulity' is self-isolated. Leontes' authority, however, seems to be crumbling, as we see from the courage of Paulina, Antigonus' wife, in standing up to the King, 'loyal servant' and 'most obedient counsellor' as she is, reaffirming Hermione's innocence, and presenting his new-born and legitimate baby daughter, her face 'the whole matter / And copy of the father' (2.3.26–130). Leontes' reactions are hysterically violent, but impotent. Having wished, at the beginning of this scene, in a speech of paranoid incoherence, to have Hermione 'Given to

the fire' (2.3.7–8), now he threatens Paulina: 'I'll ha'thee burnt' — 'I care not', she replies, challenging him to produce any evidence to justify his 'cruel usage' of Hermione other than 'your own weak-hinged fancy'. Leontes then impotently orders his courtiers to take 'the bastard' child and 'burn it' (131–57). They all refuse to do so, defending Antigonus from the charge of having provoked Paulina to her attack, and Leontes is reduced to a peevish accusation, 'You're liars all'. By this point in the play Leontes has reached a degree of inhumanity that makes him either disgusting or ridiculous.

Not content with his own suspicions, Leontes reveals that he has sent to the oracle 'for a greater confirmation' of his imaginings, 'whose spiritual counsel had / Shall stop, or spur me' (2.1.181–7). After he has made Antigonus swear on his life to take the 'female bastard' and leave it in 'some remote and desert place' (2.3.158–92), news arrives that the messengers sent to Delphos have returned (2.3.193–207; 3.1.1–22). The imminent disclosure of the oracle's response hangs over the scene in which Leontes gives Hermione what he calls 'A just and open trial', which, he thinks, will also clear him of the charge of being tyrannous, and will run its 'due course' for her, 'Even to the guilt or the purgation' (3.2.1–8). Hermione's dignified and eloquent defence of her integrity and virtue (22–123) is set against Leontes' snide sneers (54–7) and incoherent accusations, as he breaks the pretence of impartiality by threatening her with death (82–91). This is the dramatic situation, totally polarised — Leontes completely isolated in his manic suspicions and inhuman violence, everyone else in the play convinced of Hermione's innocence — in which the oracle's judgment confirms the judgment of the humane party:

'Hermione is chaste, Polixenes blameless, Camillo a true subject, Leontes a jealous tyrant, his innocent babe truly begotten . . .' (132–6)

The depths of dishonour and inhumanity to which Leontes' mania has brought him are displayed by his reaction. Although he has sworn that the oracle's 'spiritual counsel . . . shall stop, or spur me', and that the trial will run its course either 'to the guilt or the purgation', now, his destructive impulses unsatisfied, he breaks his word in a gesture of overweening arrogance:

There is no truth at all i'th'oracle.

The sessions shall proceed. This is mere falsehood. (140–41)

And at that point a messenger brings news that Mamillius, ill with anxiety over his mother's torment, has died.

Mamillius' death is the shock which brings Leontes back to his senses, to reason and virtue, and to linguistic coherence. First he interprets his son's death as a divine indictment of his guilt:

Apollo's angry, and the heavens themselves

Do strike at my injustice.

(146–7)

As Hermione faints, and he concernedly orders her to be cared for, the 'clearer knowledge' that she had predicted would come, makes Leontes denounce himself and vindicate everyone he has accused:

I have too much believ'd mine own suspicion. . . .

Apollo, pardon

My great profaneness 'gainst thine oracle!

I'll reconcile me to Polixenes,

New woo my queen, recall the good Camillo,

Whom I proclaim a man of truth, of mercy. . . .

'most humane / And fill'd with honour'. Consideration of Camillo's virtue makes Leontes see his own faults the more clearly, as he sums up the polarisation of reason and madness, good and evil, brought about in these five scenes:

How he glisters

Through my rust! And how his piety

Does my deeds make the blacker!

(151–72)

This full and frank confession vindicates the innocent, condemns the single source of viciousness, so re-establishing Leontes' virtue, which is put to a further test when Paulina brings news of Hermione's death. Leontes accepts Paulina's violent accusations of him (172–214): 'Thou canst not speak too much; I have deserved / All . . .', and orders that on the tomb of Hermione and Mamillius 'shall / The causes of their death appear, unto / Our shame perpetual', undertaking to visit the chapel where they are buried as a 'daily vow' (214–43). In his remorse and self-accusation Leontes regains our respect, although the disasters he has seemingly caused can never be righted.

There, in brief, I have summarised the dramatic structure of the first half of this play, reminding readers of what they already know in order to bring out the coherence and explicitness of Shakespeare's creation. We now see that Leontes was wrong from the first, Hermione and all those sided against him fully justified. Some such reconstruction of the play as an experience (whether in solitary reading or in the company of a theatre audience), as a totally polarised sequence in which we perceive false accusations exposed, true virtue upheld, would seem to me the starting-point for critical discussion. Returning to Howard Felperin, however, we find that a deconstructionist approach must once again ignore the sequential experience of drama, picking out passages here and there in order to disseminate doubt and uncertainty. Felperin begins with the oracle since (I imagine) he sees it as the key pronouncement which authenticates our judgment on Leontes' unjust and inhumane behaviour. And since such an explicit division of guilt and innocence would suit neither the deconstructionist project of seeking incoherence, nor its desire to subsume all texts to its theory of linguistic indeterminacy, he calls the oracle in question. First he

argues that the death of Mamillius is not necessarily related to the oracle, and *could* be 'the result of natural rather than supernatural causes', which would of course rupture the link between human and divine (Felperin 1990, pp. 38–41). But the person who most matters in this connection, the man who has called up the oracle as the embodiment of truth and then denied it, certainly sees the death as supernaturally caused. It is most regrettable that Felperin did not think it worth quoting either Leontes' lines affirming his sense of divine punishment (3.2.146–7), or his later prayer to Apollo to pardon his 'great profaneness' against his oracle (153–4). (Ignoring those passages in the play that do not fit your interpretation always seems suspicious when the reader notices it.)

The crucial point in this scene is that Leontes first affirms his belief in the oracle's omniscience and then denies it for not agreeing with him. The resulting religious guilt that Leontes feels should be seen as a recognition of his own blasphemy and arrogance, a deduction within a belief-system to which the modern reader must assent for the duration of the play at least. (Unwillingness to make this elementary suspension of disbelief would render all religious texts incomprehensible, deny any possibility of that imaginative co-operation which is the essence of involvement with works of art, in the absence of which aesthetic criticism becomes futile.) Felperin's motives for wishing to affirm a rationalist, non-religious explanation, denying the oracle the power which Leontes ascribes to it, emerge more clearly in his next 'demystifying' argument, that oracles were commonly seen in Renaissance literature as pagan and thus deceitful (pp. 38–9). But the fact that the witches in the Scottish tragedy are *ambiguous* in their pronouncements to Macbeth does not mean that they lie, and in any case their equivocations are to be seen in the specific context of common attitudes towards witchcraft in classical antiquity and in the Renaissance.⁴⁹ Witches are deceitful not because they are pagan but because they are controlled by the power which St. Paul attributes to 'your adversary the devil, [who] as a roaring lion walketh about, seeking whom he may devour' (1 Pet. 5.8).

Felperin then attempts to undermine the reliability of Apollo's oracle further by finding it significant that Apollo does not appear in person to deliver his oracle, especially since there are theophanies in the other late romances, notably *Pericles* and *Cymbeline*. That it is only reported here means that this oracle must be seen to be 'disturbingly difficult to verify or validate', so that 'Shakespeare's divorce of the god's words from the god's presence' leads us to another aporia (pp. 42–3), that abyss over which the deconstructionist comes to a satisfied rest, his task completed — rather like the chasm over which the priest of the Delphic oracle was supposed to sit, absorbing the fumes and illumination that arose from the earth. But if you wish to unravel the text this is a bad place to start. For one thing, no law compels Shakespeare to bring on a god in person every time the text he has written involves a divine communication. In this play, especially, he has a stunning revelation up his sleeve at the very end, in the statue scene, and

might reasonably not want to dull that effect by anticipation. For another, as Shakespeare or any other reader of classical texts (such as the Greek romances, newly popular in the Renaissance) would have known, in antiquity oracles were commonly fetched by ambassadors who journeyed to the sacred spot, paid the priests, and returned with the message.⁵⁰ No one expected Apollo to turn up in person to answer every query. Not even in Euripides' *Ion*, the most sustained examination of the reliability of oracles in classical drama, does Apollo appear in person: he sends Athene to represent him.⁵¹

If the oracles totally resist deconstruction, Felperin may do better with the play's language. In the Sicilian court he finds 'slipperiness and ambiguity' everywhere, also 'sexual innuendo', as in Polixenes' courtly statement of his debt of thanks for Leontes' hospitality:

And therefore, like a cipher
(Yet standing in rich place), I multiply
With one 'We thank you' many thousands more
That go before it. (1.2.6ff)

Rather than seeing 'a sniggering phallic allusion to his "standing-in" for Leontes' (p. 44), this is in fact a common Renaissance metaphor from numbers, and we would need rather more warrant before taking every use of the word 'stand' as referring to an erection.⁵² Felperin, in effect, here pursues the standard deconstructionist ploy of generalising a specific feature — the courtly language appropriate to such a milieu, made even more effusively circumlocutory in Shakespeare's late style (compare the poet and painter scenes in *Timon of Athens*, or the penultimate scene (5.2) of courtly dialogue in this play)⁵³ — into a thematic comment. It now supposedly represents the play's (or the court's) 'loss of verbal innocence' and its (or their) 'discovery of ubiquitous verbal duplicity' (p. 45) — 'ubiquitous', that is, *pace* Derrida and Co., not just in this milieu, but in language as such. Behaviour typical of one character — Leontes' ability, in his jealous fits, to see innuendos everywhere (a mark of extreme psychological imbalance, as in Othello's agonies over the verb 'lie' — 'Lie with her? on her? . . .') — is depersonalised and allegorised as a feature of language itself. These deconstructionist ploys are especially noticeable in Felperin's commentary on that notoriously difficult soliloquy of Leontes on the subjective reality of jealous feelings:

Affection! thy intention stabs the centre. . . .
With what's unreal thou coactive art,
And fellow'st nothing. . . . (1.2.138ff)

Felperin could have glossed the key words in their historical context, that is, Renaissance psychology ('Affection: *affectio*, a sudden, unexpected change in mind and body; here, jealousy'; 'intention: intensity'; 'fellow'st nothing': 'you associate yourself with what is non-existent').⁵⁴ Read in this

appropriate context we see Leontes simultaneously recognising the actual insubstantiality of his fears while experiencing their reality in maddeningly concrete, physiological terms ('I find it . . . to the infection of my brains / And hard'ning of my brows').

But, true to his *profession de foi déconstructionniste*, Felperin allegorises this unique and specifically Renaissance conception into a condition of language *per se*. 'Leontes grasps, as we have begun to grasp' — we twentieth-century readers, that is, anno Derridae 25 —

that the instability of meaning and uncertainty of reference he is experiencing first-hand — what I have termed linguistic indeterminacy — is not a function simply of expression but of interpretation as well. It arises . . . out of the radical subjectivity of the listener or interpreter. For this reason, it is doubly inescapable, a condition that prevents us from ever arriving at certain or complete communication in human affairs, not to mention final or definitive interpretations of literary texts. (p. 46)

That passage, which reads rather like a lay sermon, typifies the deconstructionist's subordination of the text discussed to the theory it supposedly supports. I recall an acute comment, that 'one of the many difficulties of de Man's work is that his practical criticism is written for the sake of the theoretical questions it provokes' (Donoghue 1981, p. 172). Where other critics develop a theory in order to challenge or improve their practice, the deconstructionist does the opposite. If you like the theory, you will like the criticism; if you prefer the play, you won't like the theory.

The skeleton of Derrida's system is visibly imposing itself on Shakespeare's romance. Felperin finds Leontes deluded by 'engrossing subjectivity' (p. 47), and claims that

in his very transition . . . from a *poetics of difference* to a *poetics of reference*, Leontes enacts in a mad, parodic form a characteristic drift of European literary criticism: a superstition of the word that endows it with the power to conjure its referent into being. (p. 48; my italics)

Such comments are no longer concerned with the play but with reiterating the credos of deconstruction. To attribute to Leontes a shift from a 'poetics of difference' to a 'poetics of reference' — truly, a grandiose achievement — is to pile on him a weight of pseudo-historical significance which no literary character could possibly sustain. In any case, since the former ('difference') is copyright Derrida, and the latter ('reference') belongs to Aristotle, and everyone since, to call this a 'drift' in European criticism is to run history backwards. And it is completely unfounded to accuse the standard view of language as capable of reference as being a 'superstition' that thinks it can 'conjure' a referent into being. This was (and still is, for all I know), the belief of magicians and other practitioners of the occult, that words had power over things, against which the standard tradition vigorously and consciously opposed itself.⁵⁵ Deconstructionists typically

misrepresent alternative approaches in order to 'dismantle' them, thus claiming an empirico-rational legitimacy by citing evidence yet at the same time perverting it. What matters is to push on to confirming another point in its credo, the belief that 'in its very nature as representation, as figurative language, the literary text is never really "there" or fully present, and the actions and transactions it generates are always . . . estranged by the linguistic medium in which it has its existence' (p. 51). That de Manian vein of complacent pessimism, the satisfaction of having fissurised drama into two incompatible halves, action and language, shows the habit-forming slide into the abyss — protective in its darkness, all need for decision infinitely deferred or declared impossible, safe from challenge, criticism, or development — to which deconstruction leads. It must be clear to the non-addicted, though, that to accept this fissurising of language from action would destroy drama itself — if that still matters.

This whole regurgitation of the Derrida-de Man anti-*fiat* ('Let it not be!' is their uncreating Word), was notionally sparked off by a Shakespeare play, and Felperin finally returns to it by conceding, to our great surprise, that the sign can still 'refer', can still 'constitute a world of reference . . .' — only to undermine that idea at source:

Yet this world of reference, as we have begun to see in *The Winter's Tale*, has finally no objective reality or ontological stability, but recedes into an infinite play of signs and deferral of affirmative or authoritative meaning. (p. 51)

— All this, we recall, just because Apollo did not appear in person, and because Leontes suspects his wife of adultery! — After still more deconstructionist dogma ('reference is never quite presence, yet it is not quite absence either'; 'this fall into textual instability') Felperin proceeds to unravel the whole text. *The Winter's Tale* 'dramatizes . . . the precariousness of its own linguistic enterprise', since 'validation is unavailable' for Leontes, there is no 'resting-point for reference repeatedly deferred and finally lost in the precariousness of language and the absence of an authoritative divine voice' (pp. 52–3). Once again we see the levelling, reductive effect of deconstructionist methodology: the special case of Leontes, his remarkable fit of jealousy, the *affectio* that overpowers his psyche and produces what seems to all the people around him (and to himself subsequently) a mental aberration or sickness, and which is rendered in a totally idiosyncratic style, a *ne plus ultra* even for Shakespeare of condensed metaphor, fragmented syntax, and insistent rhetoric — this completely realised idiolect, product of a temporary delusion, is now generalised into the deconstructionist's sentimental pathos of the instabilities of language, the 'endless process of deferral', and what else.

But readers of the play will protest: the validation is not lost! It is given by the horrified reactions of everyone else to Leontes, especially his nearest attendant Camillo; by the oracle's statement; by the death of Mamillius,

and the reported death of Hermione; by Leontes' psychological collapse and recovery; and by his sixteen years of remorse. Any critical method which has to blot out ninety percent of the play and to distort the rest to achieve its reading must be regarded with suspicion. Deconstruction, however, has a way of making everything prove its case. Felperin now presents the non-appearance of Apollo, one of the fixed points in his negation of the play, in a favourable — albeit allegorical — light, as showing Shakespeare referring to 'the fallen nature of human speech . . . the condition of secularity within which we all dwell (p. 53). And where almost every other critic known to me feels the play's ending to be a remarkably warm reunion and reconciliation, Felperin refuses this. The 'linguistic problems foregrounded in the opening act', he tells us sternly, 'are never, because they cannot be, solved' (pp. 53–4) — certainly not in a deconstructionist reading, we concede. He finds Paulina's language 'incommensurate and incompatible with the "nature" it attempts to define', and the 'faith [she] appeals to us to awaken' (this is her injunction to Leontes, not to us, before revealing that the 'statue' is his living wife: 'It is requir'd / You do awake your faith'), merely 'foregrounds' (Felperin's puzzling italics) 'the inescapable mediacy of language, the radical difference between presence and reference, and the ultimate subjectivity of all interpretation'.

That flat tone, the note of tired moralising, is far away from the excitement that deconstruction promised us. Felperin has only sententiousness left, though:

In sum, the fallen and incorrigible nature of language — of which the casual duplicity of the pun, Shakespeare's fatal Cleopatra, is only the most familiar symptom — paradoxically enables it in Shakespeare's hand to become the perfect medium for defining human reality. (pp. 54–5)

This sequence recycles yet again the deconstructionist repertory of false dichotomies (as if 'interpretation' could be objective), tautology (that language — 'fallen' — is suitable for fallen mankind is hardly surprising), and confusion. The fact that we can pun does not make language 'fallen'! Felperin seems to want an ideal language of non-ambivalence, of single and unmistakable denotation, but there never was such a thing. Deconstructionists commonly accuse their opponents — *nous autres* — of nostalgia for a language of presence, a 'paradise lost' that can be 'literally delivered' (p. 49). I have yet to come across anyone expressing this wish, apart — of course — from devotees of the occult, with their belief in a linguistic essentialism, where words could have power in the physical world.

Once we have absorbed and classified the deconstructive constituents in Felperin's twenty pages on *The Winter's Tale*, we might ask ourselves, what have we been reading? Have we learned anything new, or interesting about the play? Or have we learned anything new, or interesting about the critical method? In other forms of criticism a writer can bring something

fresh out of a play by using a new approach, or, confronted with what he finds in the play, be forced to revise his critical model. Here, though, and with due respect to Felperin, who shows much more sensitivity to language and literature than most of the critics of this school, his critical method has been imposed like a template on the play and has yielded utterly predictable results. Only a fragment of the text fitted the method, and even that only by ignoring the dramatic and psychological individuality of Leontes' frantic jealousy, and reducing it to the level of language. Everything else in the play had to be ignored, or forcibly adapted, unravelled, undermined, or whatever.

* * *

By now the sanguine expectations of an impresario summoning Shakespearian deconstructionists together — it 'seemed a goal worthy in and of itself' (Atkins and Bergeron 1988, p. vii) — may appear doubtful. The last effort of this kind I shall examine, Malcolm Evans's exercise in 'Deconstructing Shakespeare's Comedies' (Evans 1985) raises even more doubts. The fissure in Shakespeare that Evans wishes to create, from the first words of his essay, concerns the notion of imitation. He quotes from *Love's Labour's Lost* the disparaging comments of the schoolmaster Holofernes on the sonnet sent by Berowne to Rosaline:

Here are only numbers ratified, but for the elegancy, facility, and golden cadence of poesy, *caret*. Ovidius Naso was the man. And why indeed 'Naso', but for smelling out the odoriferous flowers of fancy, the jerks of invention? *Imitari* is nothing: so doth the hound his master, the ape his keeper, the tired horse his rider. (4.2.120ff)

Since Shakespeare is parodying the Elizabethan schoolmaster at his most ostentatious (Holofernes, alas for his *auctoritas*, has just misquoted the beginning of Mantuan's first eclogue, an extremely well-known grammar school text, saying *Facile* instead of *Fauste*), to understand this passage it is natural to refer to T.W. Baldwin's massive refutation of the myth that Shakespeare was ignorant of the classics.⁵⁶ (His book established beyond doubt that Shakespeare's writing habits were indelibly affected by the humanist methods adopted in English grammar schools during the sixteenth century.)

As Baldwin shows (II, 382), Latin verse-writing in the grammar school was based on two main models, elementary — Mantuan's *Bucolica*, and advanced — Ovid. Schoolboys worked, however, not from the original texts but from a collection of poetical excerpts, such as the *Flores Poëtarum* ('flowers of fancy', as Holofernes calls them, after his stale pun on Naso/nose), which included passages from Ovid, and then graduated to more advanced works in order to further the 'imitation of the best Poets' (II, 386–90). From these handbooks, as Baldwin shows, Shakespeare took the

technical term 'ratified', since 'the *ratio* of verse demanded that it be strictly bound in an exact and legitimate number of feet', as laid down by Rudolphus Gualtherus in *De Syllaborum et Carminum Ratione* (London, 1573) — a book bought for Philip Sidney at Shrewsbury School in 1566, aged eleven — who writes, 'numeri autem sine pedum & syllabarum ratione observari non possunt'. The erudite phrase 'ratified' is a deliberate Latinism (II, 392–3), one of several details invented by Shakespeare to display Holofernes' pedantry. Baldwin's detailed analysis of this scene shows that Shakespeare knew enough about the principles of verse-writing 'to enable him to satirize thus intelligently and tellingly the pedantic use of them' (II, 405). Holofernes dismisses Berowne's poem as prosodically correct but lacking 'the jerks of invention', so invoking the standard distinction between mere *imitatio* — '*Imitari* is nothing', as he says — and invention, in rhetoric the higher and essential part, thus performing what Erasmus would call a '*laus inventionis, quae praecipua pars est eloquentiae*' (407). Of course, in the Renaissance rhetorical system even *inventio* depended on a knowledge of other writers' style and thought, but one that had been properly digested. *Imitatio*, once fully absorbed or metabolised, could lead to the higher stage of invention; but undigested, unpractised, it could only be superficial, resulting at best in pastiche.⁵⁷ In Horace's famous diatribe, imitators were a 'slavish herd' (*O imitatores, servum pecus: Epist. I. xix. 19*).

In the Renaissance, as in antiquity, literary theory distinguished *mimesis*, the imitation proper to drama as a representation of human action, from *imitatio*, the copying of a verbal model. For a familiar instance of this distinction we can turn to Ben Jonson's notebook on literature (probably compiled with a view to publication as some kind of treatise), *Timber; or Discoveries*, which defines a poet as 'a Maker, or a fainer: His Art, an Art of imitation, or faining; expressing the life of man in fit measures, numbers, and harmony, according to Aristotle'. Outlining the qualities needed of a poet, and synthesising a number of sources, Jonson lists these as *ingenium* ('a goodness of naturall wit'), *exercitatio* ('Exercise of those parts, and frequent'), *lectio* ('an exactnesse of Studie, and multiplicity of reading'), and above all *imitatio*, that

requisite in our Poet, or Maker, . . . to bee able to convert the substance, or Ritches of an other Poet, to his owne use. To make choise of one excellent man above the rest, and so to follow him, till he grows very Hee: or, so like him, as the Copie may be mistaken for the Pricipall. Not as a Creature that swallowes what it takes in, crude, raw, or indigested; but that . . . hath a Stomacke to concoct, devide, and turne all into nourishment. Not to imitate servilely, as Horace saith, . . . but to draw forth out of the best and choisest flowers, with the Bee, and turne all into Honey, worke it into one relish and savour: make our Imitation sweet: observe how the best writers have imitated, and follow them.⁵⁸

Many other passages could be quoted to show that in Renaissance literary theory *imitatio* was a verbal training exercise, essential to a writer's development, which was subsumed under the primary process of *mimesis*. Malcolm Evans, however, unaware of this distinction, explains the passage thus:

Imitation, the pedant Holofernes suggests, is beneath human dignity. At best *mimesis* is for animals. But elsewhere in Shakespeare's comedies even the hound is in two minds about it. (Evans 1985, p. 67)

This last remark is a reference to the scene in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (4.4) where the clown Launce rebukes his dog for misbehaving in public ('when didst thou see me heave up my leg and make water against a gentlewoman's farthingale?'). That is, of course, a completely inappropriate text to serve as an example of *mimesis*, but it is enough for Evans to launch into full deconstructionist flow:

Already, in these early plays, the status of *mimesis* is problematic. Defined as fit only for animals then spurned even by them, this mimicry in crisis is a gift to deconstruction . . . (p. 68)

But the only 'crisis' here is the misunderstanding caused by Evans confusing *mimesis* with *imitatio*, repeated in his remark that Holofernes' 'insistence that imitation is only for apes, horses, and dogs contravenes Aristotle, for whom *mimesis* is proper . . . only to humanity' (p. 71). This mistaken and spurious opposition means that from the outset Evans's case rests on air.

But the Shakespeare text, as we now know, is only a means by which deconstruction can reassert its own mastery, deploy its own heady idiom. The comedies, Evans writes, are concerned with 'acting, representation and identity' — among other more important things, we might add, such as making the good society, establishing lasting human relationships, properly defining both work and play. But for Evans

the mirror that reflects deconstruction is always itself divided and already in more than one place — at the site of a mimetic sign or action, but also in the signifier released in the enactment of acting, the representation on the stage of the process of *mimesis* itself which may, as Holofernes maintains, be no more or less than 'nothing'. (p. 68)

Perhaps the reader would like a briefer or clearer restatement of that point? Read on:

In the Comedies the process of representation is never finally effaced from its product, leaving these categories themselves indistinct. This denigration of a 'represented' to which representation must always subordinate itself, or a 'meaning' which can be located beyond the play of signifiers, radically undermines from within those metaphorical constructions through which meaning is constituted. What Derridean deconstruction removes is this 'reassuring certitude, which is itself

beyond the reach of play' (Derrida 1978, p. 279), a certitude designated in metaphysical thought as simultaneously *part* of a total structure but not of it — a paradox which calls into question

— but 'enough, no more', I stop there.

What Evans gives us, with considerable *hwyl* (Welsh for 'eloquence' or 'possession'), is a fantasia on Derridian themes in which thought seems to coalesce, categories collapse, the repertory of available phrases being urgently redeployed in a confused tissue of on-going regression. This is much more than a question of style, where *de gustibus est disputandum*. Here thought is forced back on itself. The 'structure proposed by mimesis', Evans continues, 'is a structure only because it has a centre', but 'that centre must also always be outside — in the object or signified on which the structure is grounded', therefore 'in Derrida's terms "the center is not the center" and coherence is constituted in contradiction' (p. 68). Who will offer to make sense of this? John Searle once offered a parody of deconstructive argument (Searle 1983, p. 78), but I am reminded of that great satirist Karl Kraus, who in his journal *Die Fackel* thought it enough to satirise National Socialist newspapers by reprinting excerpts from them.

But in addition to this confusion of thought and language there is the overall incongruity of Derridian methods being employed for *Love's Labour's Lost*. Admittedly, the play includes a grotesque gallery of linguistic oddballs, who have 'been at a great feast of languages, and stol'n the scraps', as Moth judges (5.1.36–7), and it might well be given the subtitle *A Comedy of Grammars*. But the linguistic eccentricities it satirises are not endemic to language itself. They are well-known faults of style according to Renaissance literary theory, reprovingly catalogued by rhetoricians and grammarians in terms that now seem to us (perhaps they always were) as outlandish as the vices they describe. Holofernes is guilty, *inter alia*, of *cacozelia* (affected diction, especially coining fine words out of Latin), *soraismus* (mingling of sundry languages ignorantly or affectedly, what Puttenham calls 'mingle-mangle'), *cacemphaton* (an unpleasing combination of sounds, such as results from excessive alliteration).⁵⁹ Evans claims, in effect, that *these linguistic perversions prove Derrida's theory of language right*. Exhibit one is Holofernes' absurdly over-alliterated sonnet beginning 'The preyful Princess pierc'd and prick'd a pretty pleasing pricket', in which, Holofernes announces, he will 'affect the letter' (emphasise the initial letters) 'for it argues facility' — a gross error, evidently, since the 'facility and golden cadence of poesy' celebrated in Ovid is light-years away from his comically turgid doggerel. Evans, though, seizes on this sonnet as exemplifying 'the grammatological spacing of Derridean *différance*, the process in which semantic *differentiation* is caught up in a signified which is endlessly *deferred*' (p. 70). 'Would that it had been', we might feel! Exhibit two is the schoolboy trick by which Moth traps Holofernes into reversing the 'a, b' of his hornbook (the ABC), to declare himself a 'Ba, most silly

sheep' (5.1.46ff). This feeble joke is said by Evans, who obviously lacks any sense of humour or proportion, to reveal 'the randomness and play of what Derrida, in "White Mythology", describes as a "nonsense" which exceeds signification and in which "language is not yet born"' (p. 72). Doubts that Derridians may feel about this positive alignment of the master's theories with Shakespeare's comic anatomies of language perverted will come to a head in exhibit three, Evans' pronouncement that

Holofernes, who rejects imitation, also shares with Derrida the conviction that writing, far from being merely supplementary, in fact *precedes* speech, even 'thought',⁶⁰ and believes that those who refuse to speak words as they are written are prisoners of a phonocentric madness. . . . (p. 73)

To put Derrida on the same level as this pedant might offend those who know that Holofernes is here being satirised as a linguistic freak precisely for mocking standard pronunciation as practised by those he calls 'rackers of orthography' who pronounce 'doubt' or 'debt' with the 'b' silent. (Let Evans try to sound it!) In the play, at any rate, Holofernes is a laughing-stock, to be pitied, not emulated.

Deference to Derrida may do him an injustice, but it does Shakespeare a greater disservice. Like other deconstructionists, Evans reduces drama to language, and characters to mere signs. Indeed, in his topsy-turvy perspective,

the figures who speak and gesticulate on stage in the Comedies are *much more than imaginary people*. They are literally and ostentatiously 'characters' — hieroglyphs, letters, elements in a signifying system which flaunts its own abstractions. . . . (p. 72; my italics)

(Only a peculiarly academic mind could imagine that signs in a system which 'flaunts its own abstractions' are '*much more than imaginary people*'.) The loyal following-through of a Derridian paradigm can only reduce and falsify this or any other play. According to Evans, *Love's Labour's Lost*, 'were it not so impenetrable, would already be a classic of Western phonocentrism, ranked alongside Plato's *Phaedrus*. . .'. For here, he claims, 'as in the *Phaedrus*, writing is set against the *presence* and fecundity of speech', that is, in 'the Academe's edict *for* writing and *against* speech' (p. 78).

But this is a wholly false account of what happens in the text. The play begins with the King of Navarre's ill-conceived and soon-exploded attempt to live for three years in withdrawal from society, 'Still and contemplative in living art' (1.1.13–14) — that is, practising silence in the *vita contemplativa*, the most austere *ars vivendi*. The statutes that the king proposes includes an edict for this retired community (stricter than Little Gidding, even) prohibiting any woman coming within a mile of the court 'on pain of losing her tongue', and specifying punishments for any man

'seen to talk with a woman' (1.1.122, 129). Typically interested only in language, the deconstructionist fails to notice that the edicts are against 'conversation' in the old sense of intercourse, society, associating with people (especially women, dangerous distractions from chastity and asceticism), and are intended to ensure the courtiers' contemplative isolation. Communication by writing would be equally reprehensible, indeed within a short space of time, as Berowne has predicted, all four courtiers are unmasked having written love-poems to the ladies. The main operative distinction in *Love's Labour's Lost* is missed by Evans, but it is one that all deconstructionists should take to heart, namely the danger of valuing language or book-learning over life. Berowne utters this caveat in the first scene (1.1.59–93) and recurs to it in his remarkable speech ending Act 4, 'Have at you then, affection's men at arms' (4.3.286–362). But in the final scene the tables are turned on him, and as a punishment for his unfeeling verbal games at others' expense Berowne is made to work in a hospital for a year, to cheer 'the speechless sick' with his talk (5.2.841–71). Language, so often misused in this play, is finally put to serious social use, validating the ethos of rhetoric as a support to human virtue that extends from Cicero and Quintilian to Melancthon, Erasmus, and Vives.

Far be it from me to draw out this moral of setting language against life, but it is symptomatic of deconstruction's narrow range of interests that Malcolm Evans can apparently fail to notice so much else that goes on in Shakespeare's comedies. As a genre, he claims, they resist being related to life, society, human *mores*, or anything else:

The Comedies confront interpretation with surfaces that are concerned not so much with yielding textual depths as with reflecting other surfaces or deconstructing the surface-depth opposition. (p. 82)

Deconstructionist dogma, we appreciate, does not allow any 'truth about such texts' other than the 'conditional, inscribed in contradiction and absence' (p. 83). To other readers and playgoers, however, it is clear that the comedies have a purpose, that each achieves something in the course of the action, at the very minimum performing a process of selection, choosing some modes of being as likely to create and sustain social harmony, rejecting others as divisive and destructive. It is no accident that at the end of *As You Like It*, Hymen, the god of marriage appears, attended by 'Still music', to show that 'there is mirth in heaven, / When earthly things made even, / Atone together'. His task is to 'bar confusion, . . . make conclusion / Of these most strange events' (5.4.108ff). The musical harmony reinforces the physical reconciliations and unions performed on stage, with Rosalind — no longer disguised as the boy Ganymed, but a woman again — restoring herself to Duke Senior as a daughter, and to Orlando as a wife-to-be. Both men accept her identity, 'If there be truth in sight', — there is! — and by the same token, 'If sight and shape be true', — they are! — Phebe realises that she can no longer think of wooing

Ganymed, but had better accept Sylvius. Using the same grammatical form, a seeming conditional that in fact describes an actual state, Hymen calls together

eight that must take hands
To join in Hymen's bands,
If truth holds true contents. (5.4.128ff)

Ordinary, and even specialist Shakespearians, will add 'it does!', since they instantly perceive the 'If' to be redundant, for Rosalind is really a flesh and blood woman (within the play's fictional world, of course), and the harmony between three of the couples at least (Touchstone and Audrey facing 'foul weather') has been earned.

To Evans as deconstructionist, however, no such positive conclusion is possible. Hymen makes at best

gestures towards the truth, identical with itself, only to break down in a delirium of wordplays on 'truth', 'holds', 'true' and 'contents' which leaves no centre but tautology, endless supplementation. . . . (pp. 82–3)

That Evans should give such an absurdly false account of the language of this scene ('delirium of wordplays') may show the pressure he is under, and to which he subjects the text, in order to pronounce the deconstructionist's *Q.E.D.* Once again actual human behaviour is reduced to language, and to a language endlessly working against itself. And here, too, a Derridian significance is discovered in the reduction, for

This climactic utterance of the Comedies comes, appropriately, from a *deus ex machina* with no serious function to perform but who mirrors the work of one of Derrida's favourite rhetorical devices — also named the 'hymen'. In Derrida, as in Shakespeare, this figure marks the point beyond which interpretation has no jurisdiction: . . . 'the violence of a truth stronger than truth'. . . . This final coincidence completes the conspiratorial work of deconstruction in the Comedies. (p. 83)

Setting aside the question of who has conspired with whom, and also Derrida's wilful claim that 'hymen' has an indeterminable meaning, here is perhaps a fitting point to end this account of the language-fixated, language-fissuring world of deconstruction, that it can imagine that a god who presides at marriages has 'no serious function'.