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The Future Past of Literary Theory

In order to fulfill the didactic assignment and talk about the future of literary theory,¹ one might as well begin with the question of the *present* of literary theory: what is, what would or could be, “literary theory” today? If one can judge by the signs of the times, then the most direct answer to the question would be: “Not much.” Not much these days could qualify as “literary theory,” not much today *is* literary theory — at least in comparison to the fabled hey-day of literary theory during the (late) 1960s and 1970s. In comparison to the various projects of poetics and the attempts at least to pose the question of “the literary” — whether as “literature” or “literary language,” “literariness” or “littérarité” or “literaturnost,” whether coming out of revivals of Russian Formalism or the ambitions of literary semiology, for example, or the more hermeneutically oriented theories basing themselves on phenomenology and its prolongations or radicalizations — very little would seem to count as *literary* theory, literary theory proper, today. Indeed, literary theory in this sense would seem to be very much a thing of the past, and so much so that one is tempted to say: “If you want to talk about literary theory, you had better talk about ‘The Past of Literary Theory’ and forget about its future.” It’s not that there is no “theory,” for “theory” is everywhere one looks today — as, say, “cultural theory” or “queer theory” or “critical theory” — but nowhere is it *literary* theory. And even when it is

¹ The first half of this paper was originally written for (but not delivered at) a conference in Valencia, Spain, on “The Future of Literary Theory” (1998). My thanks to Manuel Asensi.

called “literary theory” — which is seldom enough any more — one finds very quickly that it is anything but “literary.” The recent book by Jonathan Culler, for example — even though it is entitled *Literary Theory, A Very Short Introduction* (when it comes to literary theory, it seems, one cannot be short enough, an “Introduction” or even a “Short Introduction” would still be too long, these days it has to be a *very short introduction*) — very quickly drops the “literary” and speaks instead of mere “theory.” The book’s first chapter is called *What Is Theory?*, and its opening sentence reads: “In literary and cultural studies these days there is a lot of talk about theory — not theory of literature, mind you; just plain ‘theory.’” And it turns out that “just plain ‘theory,’” even though it has radically changed the nature of literary studies, emphatically does *not* mean *literary theory*, “the systematic account of the nature of literature and of the methods for analysing it.” In fact, “when people complain that there is too much ‘theory’ in literary studies these days,” continues Culler, they mean precisely that there is “too much discussion of non-literary matters, too much debate about general questions whose relation to literature is scarcely evident, too much reading of difficult psychoanalytical, political, and philosophical texts” (Culler 1-2). So: “theory” has made a big difference *to* literary studies, but theory *in* literary studies is precisely and emphatically *not* literary theory.

However taken for granted or even legitimate it may be, this dropping out of the “literary” as soon as one even begins talking about something called “theory” in literary studies — even if in its more current politically correct formulation as “literary” and cultural studies — is not just a local or historical accident. It’s not that the theoretical models of extra-literary disciplines have somehow simply overwhelmed and overrun literary studies thanks to their intrinsic strength (and the concomitant weakness of literary scholars). Rather there is a certain necessity in the resistance to and the dropping out of the “literary” when it comes to theory in literary studies (or when it comes to its apparent inverse — that “theory,” just plain theory, seems to proliferate and to thrive precisely “within” literary studies and the university departments ostensibly devoted to the literary). This necessity is worth reflecting upon. And that it is indeed a question of reflection becomes evident as soon as one does so: that is, as soon as one reflects on what it is that would or could be the object of study in the case of a theory claiming to be “literary.” For, clearly enough, there is a certain reflexivity built into any and every project of so-called “literary” theory at its very outset, as soon as it takes its first step and attempts to *define* (as in *de-finire*, to draw the borders

of) the “literary,” since, in doing so, it attempts to constitute itself as an epistemologically reliable *meta*-language, a language about (presumably) an other language. In theory, this necessary self-reflexivity — a language talking about another language — could represent a certain theoretical, indeed scientific, advantage for literary theory. For what better to define, to draw the borders of, an object of study, an object of knowing and consciousness, than a subject of knowing whose relation to the (to be) known object is precisely that of knowing, consciousness, that is, a subject whose constitution is identical to that of the object? On a Hegelian phenomenological model, if the object of knowing (or consciousness) is the same as the subject of knowing (or consciousness), then we can very quickly arrive at the truth and essence of that object — knowing, consciousness — as precisely *self*-knowing, *self*-consciousness (and hence, next step, a self-knowing for a self-knowing, a self-consciousness for a self-consciousness, etc.).² It would seem that nothing could be a better object *for* a language, for a language’s self-knowing, than *another* language. But one cannot help but note that this happy dialectical self-negation and self-mediation of language with itself can work only as long as we presuppose that language is in fact to be understood on the model of consciousness and self-consciousness, that language does in fact work in the same way, i.e., on the basis of the same principles and determinations, as consciousness. Such a presupposition assumes that a subject-language does indeed possess a logical tool that enables it to negate itself determinately enough — in other words, to leave itself out of the process of knowing the way any and every scientific knowledge needs to do in order to control the results of its experiment — to be able to gain a certain objective relation to its object-language. But, in the case of language, how to control the experiment, how to know with certainty that the theoretical subject-language is not subject to linguistic structures — principles, factors

2 The “essence” or “truth” or “in-itself” of consciousness — i.e., a knowing that thinks it knows an object that is differentiated from it and related to it — is *self*-consciousness. That is, consciousness can be what it is — knowing as a knowing of an object — only because it is in essence, in truth, self-consciousness — knowing as a self-knowing. That would be the movement of the dialectic of consciousness (and its first three figures) in the opening 140 pages of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which issues in the second major division: self-consciousness, whose own essence and truth can be verified only in an *other* self-consciousness.

and functions — that overdetermine its relation to any so-called object-language and that thereby prohibit it from ever *determining* its object (and hence also its subject) of study, that is, from defining it, drawing its borders sufficiently and securely enough to be able to say that now, finally, at last, it knows what it is talking about when it talks about a language that it calls literary or literature? It is, of course, this inability of literary theory to construct a reliable metalanguage — its inability to define and delimit the borders of its object of study enough, that is, determinately enough, to be able to leave itself out of and control the scientific experiment and thereby identify itself as *the knower of that object* — that inevitably drives it outside and beyond language (and therefore also “literature,” whatever that may “be”) to the extra-linguistic (and extra-literary) theoretical models of disciplines that presumably *have* been able to identify and define *their* objects of study, disciplines that *do* seem to know what it is they are talking about and can therefore claim a certain “scientific” status. This inevitable drive or impulse of literary theory (proper?) to go to extra-linguistic models in its attempt to construct an at least *somewhat* reliable metalanguage — to seek its models for literature or the literary *outside* language, outside literature — is what destines it for failure. For, paradoxically but consistently enough, in order to know what it is talking about (when it talks about talking [literary or otherwise]), literary theory has to use extra-linguistic models and thus has to pretend that it is talking about something other than language, that its “object” is at least *like* the objects of history, or philosophy (aesthetics, say), or anthropology, or psychology, or psychoanalysis, or even the natural sciences or statistics, etc. But because literary theory’s use of the models of these other “sciences” to identify its own object means that it uses extra-linguistic models to understand something that is, by definition as it were, *made of language*, it also means that it *has to* fail since the only model appropriate to a linguistic object would, of course, have to be a linguistic model. (If you try to understand something made of language by treating it as though it were a rock or a plant or a psyche or a Jesus, then you are bound to fail. And, indeed, one can go so far as to say that even those theories that attempt to construct a *linguistic model* — e.g., the projects of semiology — to grasp literature or the literary fail because, for reasons having to do precisely with the “literariness” of “language as such” — even *their* models can never be *linguistic enough*.) And an ingenious dialectical maneuver — to say, for instance, that literature or the literary would be whatever it is that exceeds the extra-linguistic and extra-literary models of theory, whatever it is that would not *fit* the theoretical

models applied to it — does not really help. For how is one going to *determine* that excess, how is one going to decide that the *excess* of theory bears a *determined* relation to *theory*, that the negativity proper to this excess is in fact a *determined* negation when it would, by definition as it were, be precisely that which exceeds and escapes the determinations of theory and its models? In the case of the linguistic and the literarily linguistic, the *mis*-fit of theory and its object cannot ever arrive at even a determinate *non*-knowledge of its object because that “object’s” excessiveness to theory *overdetermines* it (and thereby also overdetermines the theoretical discourse that would want to determine it, however negatively and dialectically).

What this means is that the project of literary theory — ultimately, *any* and *every* literary theory — is under a double imperative and a double bind. On the one hand, in its attempt to be “scientific,” to know what it is talking about, to identify its object of study by drawing its borders, literary theory is inevitably driven to the extra-linguistic models of theoretical discourses that seem to have been able to gain a certain scientific distance and objectivity in relation to *their* objects. But, of course, this very drive to seek epistemologically reliable theoretical models *for* the linguistic (and the literary) *outside* language (and literature) means that the theory always remains inappropriate to its object (which, after all, is constitutively “linguistic,” indeed primordially linguistic, according to some³). Hence one could say that a certain flight from the literary is intrinsic to literary theory on account of its very drive to *know* the literary by making it an object of theoretical knowledge (*theoria*). Hence also a double bind peculiar to literary theory whose imperative says both: 1) face language, face it, or otherwise everything you say about it is just going to be chatter or gossip that has no claim to validity or truth; and 2) however much you may try to face language, face it, you will never be linguistic enough, whatever you say will be a flight from language and a resistance to theory.

3 For instance, in the tradition of what one could call “romantic” theories of language going back to Herder and Rousseau, or even further back to Vico. Heidegger’s “Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry” and his other writings on language provide more recent examples in this “romantic” line. See Heidegger (1971).

But that the proper object of literary theory is its failure — to constitute itself as *either* “theory” or “literary” — does not leave us with a simply negative result. For at the very least it may indicate how it is we should go about studying and teaching so-called literary theory. We will not get anywhere by studying literary theory as a chronological (and pseudo-historical) series of statements, positions, ideas, concepts, terms, names, dates, and facts. If the proper object of study for literary theory (“proper”) is its failure, then what we need to do instead is to inquire into the reasons for which and the ways in which literary theory fails and has to fail. And in order to do that we will have to ask each theory about the linguistic model it bases itself on — whether explicitly, as is sometimes the case, or, as is more often the case, as a presupposition (that is more or less well hidden, namely, in whatever it thinks language is and how it works whenever it says what it does about so-called “literature,” texts, the linguistic artifacts that are putatively its object). This would be *one* way to study and teach literary theory — that is, as a series of linguistic models (more and less appropriate to linguistic “objects”) — but it is certainly not an arbitrary way. For whether we know it or not and whether we like it or not, *whatever* a theoretician or a critic says about literature or texts, he or she *always* assumes or presupposes some “theory” of language, some model of what language is and how it works. As obvious as this may be, it is most often ignored, suppressed, repressed, or just plain run away from — and especially in and by theoretical discourses that would style themselves as *literary* theory (and, needless to say, academic departments that would consider themselves departments of literary study). I have already begun to spell out the reasons for this flight from language and the literary, this resistance to language and, above all, to language *about* language. This inevitable flight from language entails that the study and teaching of literary theory as the *failure* of literary theory will always amount to a certain measuring of each theory’s resistance to theory, a gauging of the stratagems and ruses by means of which a given theory resists the question of language (while, as I said, nevertheless presupposing a linguistic model). And when I identify the resistance to theory as the resistance to language about language and therefore to language as such, I do so advisedly and with explicit reference to one of the very few truly “literary theoretical” texts produced during the last few decades: Paul de Man’s short

but inexhaustible essay *The Resistance to Theory*.⁴ This essay can help us to specify more precisely what it is that is being resisted when we say that the resistance to theory, as literary theory, is the resistance to language and, *a fortiori*, the resistance to language about language. In doing so, it can also help us to give some concrete examples of what it means to study and teach literary theory as the failure of and the resistance to theory.

Before we ask the question of what it means to say that the resistance to theory is the resistance to language, let us first ask what, according to de Man, is literary theory, what is literary theory today? The answer to this question is, on the one hand, very direct. According to de Man, writing in 1982, the advent of literary theory proper “occurs with the introduction of linguistic terminology in the metalanguage about literature” (8). Appropriately enough, then, continues de Man, “[c]ontemporary literary theory comes into its own in such events as the application of Saussurian linguistics to literary texts” (8). De Man has in mind literary semiology, of course, and its identification of “literariness” as the object of literary theory. Such an apparently bland assertion may seem odd to some. Why should literary semiology and the projects of what goes by the name of “structuralism” in literary study be singled out in this way? Wasn’t there plenty of “literary theory” both before and after those Parisian goings-on? Well, yes and no, but in order to gauge the considerable import of de Man’s assertion it is necessary first to understand what he means by, and what is at stake in, “the introduction of linguistic terminology in the metalanguage about literature” as in, for example, the application of Saussurian linguistics to literary texts. De Man tells us in very direct terms. What he means by “linguistic terminology” is “a terminology that designates reference prior to designating the referent and takes into account, in the consideration of the world, the referential function of language or, to be somewhat more specific, that considers reference as a function of language and not necessarily as an intuition” (8). What does this mean? Exactly what it says: i.e., that a no longer non-linguistic (e.g., historical or aesthetic) terminology, and thus a properly *linguistic* terminology, is one which considers reference as precisely

4 First published in *Yale French Studies* 63 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982) and then reprinted in de Man’s *The Resistance to Theory* (1986). All page references to de Man’s essay are to the *The Resistance to Theory*.

a referential *function of language* — that is, produced by the workings of structures proper to language as such, in the case of Saussurian linguistics, to language as *langue* or a system of signs made up of signifiers and signifieds whose relation is arbitrary and whose constitution is relational — and *not* as an “intuition” — that is, *not* produced by the structures proper to consciousness, its determinations, and its logic, which is always a *phenomeno-*logic, a logic of appearances that does indeed always designate the *referent* prior to designating reference (again, reference as the referential function of *language* and determined by *its* structures and not those of consciousness). To the extent, then, that Saussurian linguistics is a “nonphenomenal linguistics” which introduces the possibility of “a science of language which is not necessarily a logic,” its application to literary texts in the form of literary semiology can count as the “advent” or the “occurrence” of contemporary literary theory. And it is this assumption of the possibility of a non-phenomenal linguistics, a science of language which is not necessarily a logic, that constitutes its threatening nature to “pre-literary-theoretical” ways of doing things in literary study based as they are on “historical or aesthetic considerations” (7). The development of a linguistic terminology in the metalanguage about literature — based on “the assumption that there can be a science of language which is not necessarily a logic” — is a threat because it reveals an “autonomous potential of language” — that is, a certain “freedom from referential constraint” which makes it “epistemologically highly suspect and volatile, since its use can no longer be said to be determined by considerations of truth and falsehood, good and evil, beauty and ugliness, or pleasure and pain” (10). De Man’s reference to the system of Kant’s critical philosophy spells out the nature of the threat contained in literary theory. A theory or a science of language that reveals such an “autonomous potential of language” unleashes a potential, a power, of language that will not be contained by the bounds and strictures of any logic, transcendental or otherwise, and will not obey the laws of pure *or* practical reason, or even the faculty of judgment and the principles of reflective aesthetic judgment. But, as de Man makes abundantly clear a bit later in the essay, literary theory, literary theory proper, occurs, happens, *whenever* (and, I would add, *however*) this “autonomous potential” of language is revealed (and unleashed) by analysis. This means that we should not ask what is so threatening about literary theory at a particular time and in a particular place — a threat that elicits myriad forms of non-understanding and misrepresentation — but rather we should take these as “displaced

symptoms of a resistance inherent in the theoretical enterprise itself" (12). For if the difficulties of and the resistance to literary theory are indeed inherent in the theoretical enterprise itself, "then they will have to be, to some extent, *a-historical* in the temporal sense of the term" (12). Indeed, de Man concludes,

The way in which they are encountered on the present local literary scene as a resistance to the introduction of linguistic terminology in aesthetic and historical discourse about literature is only one particular version of a question that cannot be reduced to a specific historical situation and called modern, post-modern, post-classical or romantic (not even in Hegel's sense of the term), although its compulsive way of forcing itself upon us in the guise of a system of historical periodization is certainly part of its problematic nature. Such difficulties can be read in the text of literary theory at all times, at whatever historical moment one wishes to select. (12)

In other words, if the threat of and the concomitant resistance to literary theory can be *read* in the text of literary theory at all times, then the "future of literary theory" is very much also its past — that is, whatever it was, is, and will be that, when read textually, unleashes the threat and elicits the resistance. It is not so much its past as it is a certain residue or left-over of the past of literary theory, a "remaindering," as I would call it (in translating Derrida's *restance*), released whenever literary theory is *read as text* rather than as a collection of ideas, concepts, theses, statements, terms, etc. from the past. It is this remaindering that always — always already and always again — turns "the future of literary theory" into its future past, the future past of literary theory. And if reading *as text* reveals or releases that autonomous potential of language which is literary theory proper, then we can surmise that any discourse at any time, any "verbal event," once *read textually*, is, was, will, or may be an instance of "literary theory" (for instance, Kant's analytic of the sublime in the Third *Critique* — again, when it is read as text — or Pascal's epistemological discourse when it introduces the zero to suture its own disjunctions).⁵

⁵ See de Man's readings of Pascal and of Kant in his *Aesthetic Ideology* (1996). See also my *Introduction, Allegories of Reference* (2001) on de Man's reading of Pascal, and my *'As the poets do it': On the Material Sublime* (2001) on de Man's reading of Kant.

Now if we ask what it is about “reading textually,” reading “as text,” that reveals or releases an autonomous potential of language freed of referential constraint and irreducible to intuition (because it renders evident that reference is a function *of language* and not an intuition), we get a very clear and very direct answer. What is “revealed in any verbal event when it is read textually” (17), as de Man puts it, is “the rhetorical or tropological dimension of language.” The resistance to theory as a resistance to language about language and to language as such is “a resistance to the rhetorical or tropological dimension of language, a dimension which is perhaps more explicitly in the foreground in literature (broadly conceived) than in other verbal manifestations or — to be somewhat less vague — which can be revealed in any verbal event when it is read textually” (17). The resistance to theory as a resistance to language is a flight from and a resistance to the tropological or rhetorical dimension of language — and, ultimately, of course, a resistance to “reading textually,” since such reading reveals that dimension. Why and how does the tropological or rhetorical dimension reveal or release the autonomous potential of language and, by implication, introduces the possibility of a “nonphenomenal linguistics” (which, again and again, takes reference as a function of language and not an intuition)? Well, it’s because the tropological or rhetorical dimension of language is precisely one of those factors and functions of language that will not be reduced to intuition. “Tropes, unlike grammar,” writes de Man, “pertain primordially to language. They are text-producing functions that are not necessarily patterned on a non-verbal entity, whereas grammar is by definition capable of extra-linguistic generalization” (15). (The fact that tropes are “*not necessarily* patterned on a non-verbal entity” is what makes them a function or factor of language that introduces the possibility of “a science of language which is *not necessarily* a logic” [8].) How is it, then, that tropes — the tropological or rhetorical dimension of language — are not reducible to “intuition”?

An example may help here. Take, for instance, Aristotle’s age-old example of metaphor in his *Rhetoric*: Achilles’ being called a lion — as in “a lion, he [Achilles] rushed on.” Aristotle has, of course, no trouble reading this metaphor: “for because both are courageous, the poet transfers the sense and calls Achilles a lion” (Aristotle 367). In other words, this would be a metaphor by analogy: Achilles and the lion share the property of bravery (as a “proper sense”) and can therefore exchange it — Achilles can be called a lion (and a lion, presumably, could be called an Achilles ... though that would

already raise some questions). The metaphor can be brought back to a proper meaning and thus also to a knowledge of entities and their (proper) properties, what belongs to them. This means, in short, that the rhetoric, the rhetorical figure or trope here, *can* be brought back (re-ferred) and reduced to *logic* and “intuition,” i.e., to the perception and knowledge of what a lion (and a man) *is*. Or, in other words, the *rhetoric* of the trope metaphor is in fact reducible to a *grammar* of transfers and transformations *in an order* which would be continuous with a *logic* (and an ontology) of (potentially) universalizable meanings. Nevertheless, it does not take all *that* much imagination or perversity to ask: why and how are we so sure that this is indeed how the metaphor works and what it means — that Achilles is courageous, brave, like a lion? Why could it not mean that Achilles has, say, a mane of long hair and needs a haircut? Or that his hands are like paws — as in “Achilles paws Patroclus...”? Or that doe-eyed Hera has eyes on the sides of her head? In short, the “reference” (or the “signification”) of these *and all* tropes is not determined and determining but rather *overdetermined* and *overdetermining*. Tropes always, potentially, necessarily produce what de Man likes to call *aberrant* reference — a “carrying back” that wanders, errs, and will never be bring-back-able to a proper sense or proper name. And if this is *necessarily* the condition of tropes — and “tropes...pertain primordially to language” — then it is clear why reference considered “as a function of language and *not necessarily* as an intuition” (8) *always*, necessarily, introduces the possibility “that there can be a science of language which is *not necessarily* a logic” — as soon as we are willing to acknowledge the rhetorical or tropological dimension of language. Now if *rhetoric* or the tropological dimension of language always, potentially, interferes in and disrupts any easy continuous passage between the *grammar* and the *logic* of texts — and thereby introduces a “moment of *literary theory proper* into any and every verbal event when it is read textually (i.e., as text, taking the rhetorical dimension into account) — then the very terms of this formulation point to that most familiar and general of linguistic models, the classical *trivium*, “which considers the sciences of language as consisting of grammar, rhetoric, and logic (or dialectics)” (13). The link between, or the articulation of, these liberal arts and sciences of language with the (apparently) non-verbal sciences of number, space, motion, and time (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music), de Man reminds us, is accomplished by way of logic: “the area where the rigor of the linguistic discourse about itself matches up with the rigor of the mathematical discourse about the world” (13). But — to foreshorten an

entire reading — because rhetoric, the rhetorical dimension of language — and in the broadest sense now — always comes to interfere with the possibility of any unbroken passage between grammar and logic, this most general of linguistic models has turned out to be not a model at all but rather “a set of unresolved tensions powerful enough to have generated an infinitely prolonged discourse of endless frustration of which contemporary literary theory [...] is one more chapter” (13). This infinitely prolonged discourse of endless frustration is, of course, the story and the history of literary theory, and its unresolved tensions are also powerful enough to suggest a way of studying and teaching literary theory and the history proper to it precisely *as* chapters of *such* a text which, *as* text, needs to be *read...* textually.

In teaching a course called *Literary Theory and Its History* over the years at Irvine, I have found it useful to organize it and to teach it as a series of linguistic models — grammatical, logical, rhetorical — that, whether explicitly or not, whether wittingly or not, are always presupposed by any and every literary theory — indeed, by any and every “theory,” whether it calls itself “literary” or whatever, *whenever* it says anything at all about a text. That is, any such statement — about the “form” or the “meaning” of a text — always bases itself on *some* (presupposed) model of text and language and how they work. Hence the burden of reading literary theory consists not just in paraphrasing the meanings, arguments, and theses of these theories correctly but also (and rather) in first reconstructing the linguistic model “underneath” those meanings, arguments, and theses, and, second, in demonstrating how and why that model fails and has to fail — at precisely those moments of “literary theory proper,” when the rhetorical dimension of the theoretical discourse’s own language comes to interfere in and to render impossible any easy passage between its grammar and its logic, linguistic form and linguistic meaning. This “failure” is most pedagogically instructive and most spectacular in the case of those “theories” that are most insistent and most rigorous in their attempts to subordinate, domesticate, and reduce the rhetorical dimension of the text — the text they are reading or the text that they are — to their own presupposed linguistic model. For instance, it has been productive for me to align the projects of *poetics* with *grammatical* models of language and text, the projects of *hermeneutics* with what can be called *logical* models of language and text, and the projects of rhetorically

aware “approaches” with ... *rhetorical* “models” of language and text.⁶ In the case of the projects of poetics — from Aristotle to Jakobson, Barthes, and Todorov — and their attempt to ground themselves on grammatical models of language and text, the interesting moment always arrives — and, since it is a moment of reading, it arrives according to the temporality of “literary theory,” i.e., always as a future past and never as a present — when the theoretical discourse has to move from the mere account of purely formal (or pseudo-formal) intra-textual and intra-linguistic structures to meaning, to an account of extra-textual and presumably extra-linguistic (and thus ultimately universalizable) meanings as still grounded in and reducible to those formal, grammatical, structures. Inevitably and predictably enough, at these moments the theoretical discourse (whose project is a poetics) has to have recourse to those rhetorical structures, factors and functions, of language that overdetermine any attempt to determine the meaning and the reference of grammatical structures.

An example may help here again. And what better example of the project of a poetics could there be than Aristotle’s own *Poetics* — the very first text of literary theory “proper”? The *Poetics* is such a good example because its attempt to ground itself on a grammatical model is particularly rigorous. This is most immediately legible in Aristotle’s theory of tragedy and its thoroughgoing emphasis on, and privileging of, *one* of the six elements of tragedy: namely, plot (*mythos*). “The plot,” writes Aristotle, “is the first principle and, as it were, the soul of tragedy” (1450a), and it takes precedence over the five other elements of tragedy: character (*ethos*), thought (*dianoia*), diction (*lexis*), song (*melopoeia*), and spectacle (*opsis*).⁷ Why plot should be the most important, indeed essential, element of tragedy is clear enough. Since tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of an action, the other five elements of tragedy can serve the purposes of tragedy only insofar as they contribute to the action. Tragedy imitates character, for example, only

6 As will become clear as day (below), these can hardly be *models* if “rhetoric” is that which always comes to interfere in any unbroken passage between grammar and logic.

7 Unless otherwise identified, all quotations of Aristotle’s *Poetics* are in S. H. Butcher’s translation — reprinted in *Critical Theory Since Plato* (1971).

as the agent of action and “mainly with a view to the action” (1450b). Thought (*dianoia*) — “that is, the faculty of saying what is possible and pertinent in given circumstances” — serves the purpose of tragedy only in speeches which make manifest “what kind of things a man chooses or avoids” (1450b), that is, which reveal moral purpose and therefore character — but, again, only insofar as it is the character of men in action, for it is by their actions that men are happy or the reverse. The remaining three elements of tragedy are still less important, with diction (*lexis*), “the expression of the meaning in words,” clearly assimilable to thought (*dianoia*), while song (*melopoeia*) and spectacle (*opsis*) are taken as mere embellishments (for “the power of tragedy [...] is felt even apart from representation and actors” [1450b]). In short, the other five elements are either reducible to plot or they are embellishments inessential to the power of tragedy. By “plot” (*mythos*), however, Aristotle does not mean the events or the “incidents” represented as taking place either on or off the stage. No, as Aristotle never tires of repeating, “plot” means the “structure” or the “order” or the “arrangement” (*syntaxis*) of the incidents. Killing one’s father and marrying one’s mother are not by themselves “tragic,” but they can certainly be included as “incidents,” unveiled in the right order and at the proper time, of a well-constructed tragic plot. Since what matters above all is the structure of the plot, the order or arrangement of the incidents, most of Aristotle’s effort (from chapter six through chapter nineteen) is spent on the kinds, nature, and elements of well-constructed tragic plots. This stress on plot as structure — on the *grammar* of plot, in short — is what makes this theory of tragedy into a proper *poetics* of tragedy and turns Aristotle into something of a “structuralist” *avant la lettre*.

Now if we ask where and how this poetics of tragedy, based as it is on a grammatical model of the text (and of language) — i.e., the grammar of tragic plot — moves from purely intra-textual and intra-linguistic structures to meaning, to an account of extra-textual and presumably extra-linguistic (and thus ultimately universalizable) meanings, then we find that we need to go back to the beginning of the *Poetics* and start over with first things first. In the first paragraph of the *Poetics*, Aristotle proposes “to treat of poetry [or “poetizing”] in itself and of its various kinds, noting the essential quality of each, to inquire into the structure of the plot as requisite to a good poem; into the number and nature of the parts of which a poem is composed; and similarly into whatever else falls within the same inquiry. Following, then, the order of nature, let us begin with the principles which come first.” Aristotle

certainly carries out this project in the terms and in the order announced in the first paragraph. He tells us what all poetry or poetizing is — i.e., modes of imitation (*mimesis*) — what *mimesis* is, what tragedy is, what plot is, what the elements of plot are, etc. — each time providing a definition or a description in answer to the question “What is...?” But a definition or a description of the “whatness” of any thing whatsoever is incomplete unless it also gives an account of what Butcher translates as “the essential quality” of the thing: that is, the *dynamis*, its power, faculty, capacity, ability, to *do* something. We can describe the parts of an axe, for example, all day long, but our account will be “insufficient for any one, ignorant of axes, who proposed to make one, without the addition of the further specification that the piece of steel must be of such a character and the handle so designed and attached to it to enable the user to cut wood.”⁸ So in the case of Aristotle’s definition of tragedy our account of the medium, object, and manner of tragedy and the six elements or parts of tragedy that correspond to them is correct enough, but it is incomplete so long as we do not also take into account the *dynamis* proper to tragedy. We all know what that is; it’s the last phrase of Aristotle’s definition: “arousing pity and fear for the purposes of purgation (*catharsis*).” This is the *dynamis*, power, proper to tragedy, the specifically “tragic” effect if it is produced by a *mimesis* of an action, whose medium (poetic language rather than prose), object (men in action who are better than those of ordinary life), and manner (dramatic rather than narrative) are those of tragedy. That the *dynamis* of tragedy is indeed all-important is clear. Each time Aristotle needs to make a decisive judgment about what matters — what matters most and what matters not at all — for the purposes of a good (i.e., well-made) tragedy, he explicitly goes back to his definition and reiterates some version of the phrase “arousing pity and fear.” This is especially evident in Aristotle’s enumeration of the six elements of tragedy in the order of their importance. Plot is first — again, “the first principle, and, as it were, the soul of a tragedy” — and “character holds the second place” (and thought is third, diction is fourth, song is fifth, and spectacle is last). And *if* plot is first, it is because plot, *by itself*, has the ability

8 I quote Ronald Crane’s explanation of *dynamis* in *The Languages of Criticism and the Structure of Poetry* (53). His remarking of Aristotle’s use of the word in the first paragraph of the *Poetics* was crucial for my reading.

to arouse pity and fear for the purposes of purgation. Hence plot is essential to tragedy in a way none of the other five elements can be. “If you string together a set of speeches expressive of character,” writes Aristotle, “and well finished in point of diction and thought, you will not produce the essential tragic effect (*ergon*) nearly so well as with a play which, however deficient in these respects, yet has a plot and artistically constructed incidents” (1450a). And in this privileging of plot, it is always plot conceived of as the structure or the order (*systasis*) of the incidents, as is clear from Aristotle’s reference to “artistically constructed incidents” in this passage or in another passage where he contrasts plot with spectacle, the least important element of tragedy: “Fear and pity may be aroused by spectacular means; but they may also result from the inner structure of the piece (Fyfe is better here: “the actual arrangement (*systasis*) of the incidents” [Aristotle 1932, 49]), which is the better way, and indicates a superior poet. For the plot ought to be so constructed that, even without the aid of the eye, he who hears the tale will thrill with horror and melt to pity” (1453b). Since it is plot — plot as structure, the *grammar* of plot — that alone has the power to produce the properly tragic effect — not just pity and fear, mind you, but pity and fear produced by the imitation of an action — plot is also where and how the passage from formal, intra-textual, grammatical structures to extra-textual, logical *meanings* takes place. What Aristotle’s theory of tragedy wants, its properly theoretical impulse or imperative — based as it is on an insistently grammatical model of language and text — is an unbroken, continuous passage from the *grammar* of plot to the *logic* of universal or universalizable meanings. Indeed, it would be a passage from the grammar of plot to the *patho*-logic of universal or universalizable meanings, since what we are talking about here is the logic of *emotions* [*pathos*, *pathemata*] like pity and fear. Just hearing a well-constructed tragic plot — as though one could hear the *order* or the *arrangement* of the incidents, the very *grammar* (or the syntax, which is part of grammar) of the plot, somehow — should be enough to produce the properly tragic effect.

But if Aristotle’s “grammatization” of his theoretical model is in fact so thorough-going and so rigorous as to require an ability to “hear” pure grammar (or pure syntax) — in order that the plot may produce the proper tragic effect — then a predictable problem arises for this poetics of tragedy — not on account of a lack but rather an *excess* of rigor. This excess of rigor is especially legible in chapter 19 at the end of Aristotle’s discussion of tragedy when he comes to dispose of the third and fourth most important

elements of tragedy: namely, “thought” (*dianoia*) and “diction” (*lexis*). (The two least important elements — song and spectacle — have been long [and easily] disposed of by this point in the systematic argument of the *Poetics*.) “Concerning thought,” writes Aristotle, “we may assume what is said in the rhetoric, to which inquiry [in contra-distinction to poetics] the subject more strictly belongs.” Why the discussion of “thought” belongs more strictly to rhetoric — in contra-distinction to *poetics* — is clear: “Under thought is included every effect which has to be produced by speech, the subdivisions being — proof and refutation; the excitation of the feelings, such as pity, fear, anger, and the like; the suggestion of importance or its opposite.” Aristotle’s including pity and fear among the emotions (*pathos* is the word) that may be excited by persuasive speeches is an indication of how distinct the project of a poetics is in its difference from the project of a rhetoric (a rhetoric of persuasion, at this point). That is, a well-constructed speech may arouse the same emotions as a well-constructed tragic plot, but this effect will *not* be the properly tragic effect because the tragic plot arouses these emotions not by persuasive speech but by the imitation of an action. The proper order or arrangement of the incidents will produce the proper tragic effect. This is how I understand Aristotle’s account of the apparent similarity and the essential difference between the effect of persuasive speeches (i.e., *dianoia*) and the effect of tragic plot (i.e., *mythos* as *systasis*) in the sentences immediately following: “Now, it is evident that the dramatic incidents must be treated from the same point of view as the dramatic speeches, when the object is to evoke the sense of pity, fear, importance, or probability. The only difference is, that the incidents should speak for themselves without verbal exposition; while the effects aimed at in speech should be produced by the speaker, and as a result of the speech.” If these sentences once again assert the primacy of plot as the most essential element of tragedy on account of its ability to produce the properly *tragic* effect, then they also begin to render legible the full extent of Aristotle’s grammatical model.⁹ When Aristotle

⁹ This may be one place where my interpretation actually “disagrees” with Derrida’s in *White Mythology*. His stress on the difference between *dianoia* and *lexis* is certainly correct enough and useful for the set-up of his reading of Aristotle, but he may be leaving out the stress on *plot* still here in Chapter 19: that is, it seems that Aristotle lines up dramatic speeches with *dianoia*, whereas he lines up the incidents of the plot with a *lexis* that would be a “speaking without speaking.” It is worth noting that there is some debate about what

writes that “the incidents” — of a well-constructed tragic plot, presumably — “should speak for themselves without verbal exposition,” what he says is a figure, a trope, for how else understand a “speaking without speaking”? And it is not just any figure here but rather very precisely a *figure for grammar*, for what the order or the arrangement of the incidents of a well-constructed tragic plot, the *grammar* of plot, can do — i.e., arouse the feelings of pity and fear for the purposes of purgation — without “character,” without “spectacle,” without “thought,” without any of the other elements of tragedy entering in. At least in theory.

But the fact that the theoretical discourse cannot *say* the primacy of grammar over rhetoric (the rhetoric of persuasion in this case) without at the same time also having recourse to rhetoric in another sense (i.e., the rhetoric of tropes) is certainly an indication of a problem for such a theory and its grammatical model. And that the problem is indeed the rhetoric of tropes, the tropological dimension of language, becomes more evident still when Aristotle goes over to dispose of the last remaining element of tragedy: that is, *lexis*, diction or elocution, the *act* of speech. As in the case of “thought” (*dianoia*), Aristotle’s first move is once again to relegate at least “one branch” of *lexis* to “another art” — i.e., rhetoric again — insofar as it has to do with the “modes of utterance”: “But this province of knowledge belongs to the art of delivery and to the masters of that science. It includes, for instance, “what is a command, a prayer, a statement, a threat, a question, an answer, and so forth” (1456b). But even though this part of *lexis* can be passed over easily enough as an inquiry “that belongs to another art, not to poetry,” Aristotle’s text, at least the best text we have, continues (in chapter 20) by talking about what must be still another “branch” of *lexis*: namely, letter, syllable, conjunction, noun, verb, case, phrase. In going through what he calls non-signifying and signifying sounds and the grammatical parts of speech, Aristotle’s account inevitably comes up against still one more element of this branch of *lexis* that cannot be relegated to the rhetoric of persuasion: words. Words may be simple or double, current or strange,

Aristotle’s text actually says here and what the most correct text would be. See Jacques Derrida, *La mythologie blanche* (1972, 276). English translation by Alan Bass in *Margins* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 232. See also Bass’s helpful footnote #38 here.

ornamental, or newly coined, or lengthened, or contracted, or altered. But they may also be metaphorical. That is, in addition to their order or arrangement — i.e., their grammar — words can also be substituted for one another. In short, they can be tropes, for example, metaphor. Thanks in part to Derrida's "White Mythology" (and also Ricoeur's *La Métaphore vive*), the very compact theory of metaphor in the *Poetics* is now well-known, and justly so, since it presents the veritable program (if not hypogram) for any and every discourse on metaphor after Aristotle. Here I am less interested in the theory of metaphor itself than in its systematic place within the order of Aristotle's argument — about the primacy of plot and the subordination and/or assimilation of all the other elements of tragedy to it — and in the implications for that argument of one particular example of metaphor. "Metaphor," begins Aristotle, "is the application of an alien name by transference either from genus to species, or from species to genus, or from species to species, or by analogy, that is proportion" (1457b). Of these four kinds, metaphors by analogy are the best — and not just because the three other kinds can be reconstructed *as* metaphors by analogy also, but because they give knowledge, and they give knowledge because they are based on knowledge: specifically, the knowledge of things and their properties. And in giving knowledge, the metaphor also gives pleasure, very specifically the pleasure in learning which is natural for human beings and which is the *dynamis* of *mimesis* as such. "The old age of the day" as a metaphor for "evening" and "the evening of life" as a metaphor for "old age" are examples of metaphor by analogy. We know, say, that evening comes late in the day and that old age comes late in life — or that our sight grows dim both in old age and in the evening — and therefore, on the basis of this proper meaning, we can transfer the names and substitute evening for old age and vice versa. Such a metaphorical transference would be a clear example of how the rhetoric of tropes can be brought back to a logic of meanings, indeed an *onto*-logic of entities and their proper properties. Even though Aristotle's "discourse on metaphor belongs to a treatise *peri lexis*," as Derrida puts it, this "theory of metaphor remains a theory of *meaning*," (Derrida, 1972, 277; 1982, 233.) But according to the order, the structure, the *systasis*, of Aristotle's own argument, this "logicization," indeed this "onto-logicization," of the rhetoric of tropes is also, and maybe first of all, an attempt at a "grammatization" of metaphor. That is, no matter how much transference, how much movement or substitution or exchange, among words, names, or nouns may take place, the proper meaning of the proper

noun or name can always be recovered and decoded by reconstituting the *order* of substitutions, the syntax or the grammar of tropological transfers. In other words, Aristotle's little theory of metaphor would want to inscribe itself into the theory of plot as structure and the thoroughgoing grammatization of its textual and linguistic model. (This treatise *peri lexis* is, always already, a treatise *peri mythos*.)

But the plot is more complex than that. Its very rigor pushes Aristotle's argument to give still one more example of metaphor by analogy, one in which a term is missing: "For some of the terms of the proportion there is at times no word in existence; still the metaphor may be used. For instance, to scatter seed is called sowing; but the action of the sun in scattering his rays is nameless (*anonymos*). Still the process bears to the sun the same relation as sowing to the seed. Hence the expression of the poet 'sowing the god-created light'" (1457b). According to Aristotle, the sun sowing its rays of light, the sun as sower, is still a metaphor by analogy. Here is where Derrida asks his question: "Where have we ever *seen* that there is the same relation between the sun and its rays as between sowing and seed?" (Derrida, 1972, 290; 1982, 243 (translation modified)). *Of course, we do not see* the analogy between what the sun does to its rays and what the sower does to his seed. Since whatever the sun does to its ray is what makes it possible for us to see anything at all in the first place, anything "under the sun" or "in the sun," saying that we "see" the analogy is like saying that we "see the light," i.e., that we see the condition of possibility of seeing. No, what we do in calling the sun a sower is to impose a name and a sense on that which is nameless and senseless. This is a *blind*, indeed *self*-blinding, imposition of a name. Since it is not based on a knowledge of entities and their proper properties, it is in fact not a metaphor at all but rather a catachresis, the overdetermined *abuse* of metaphor (an abuse that does not bear a determinately negative relation to proper "use"). As self-blinding, this catachresis mutilates, it is self-mutilating, like all catachreses. When I call the cabbage a "head of cabbage" or the lettuce "a head of lettuce," I generously give it a head, but I do *not* give it a face — who has ever heard of a "face of cabbage or lettuce"? — never mind a neck by which it could be attached to a torso. In giving it a head, I behead it. But of course it is not the cabbage that is mutilated. Rather than a mutilation of nature, this is a self-mutilation on the part of him who goes around "humanizing" — i.e., "monsterizing" — nature by giving heads to cabbages and lettuces, faces and feet to mountains, legs to tables, etc. These are all figures for what happens to us as we dis-figure the world

by means of such figures, for, after all, it is only we who can be beheaded, whose legs can be lame, who can be stone cold.

What is the point? The point is not *just* the catachresis and its undoing of Aristotle's theory of metaphor. For our purposes here, more important are the consequences for Aristotle's project of poetics and its rigorously grammatical model of language and text (i.e., tragedy as based on the grammar of plot). First of all, in order, how catachresis undoes metaphor is clear. Since metaphor is based on knowledge and gives knowledge, its use is still very much in line with Aristotle's assumption that poetic language, indeed language as such, is mimetic. The *dynamis* of metaphor would be the same as that of *mimesis* as such: pleasure in learning, which is natural to man, recognizing Achilles under "lion" or the "old age" in the "evening." Catachresis, however, would be an emphatically non-mimetic use of language, the imposition of a name or a marker on that which we do not know and have no name for. For what would be the *dynamis* of catachresis? It cannot easily be knowledge and a pleasure in learning, for we do not learn very much about the sun or the cabbage or the table or the mountain. If we learn anything, it would have to be something about language, about its power to do this. But what would *this* be? Well, it would have to be the "knowledge" that language, whatever it is, is that which slips away from us, wanders away from and erodes all proper meaning, indeed, erodes *us*, as selves, as subjects of knowledge, self-present and self-identical. We "learn" that language is that which we will not be able to make an object of knowledge and consciousness. The consequences for Aristotle's poetics of tragedy, based as it is on the grammar of plot, are equally instructive. If the transferences and substitutions of metaphor are still returnable to a grammar, to an *order* of substitutions, then metaphor certainly remains reducible to the grammar of plot and its putative ability to produce, by itself, the properly tragic effect. With metaphor, rhetoric, the rhetoric of tropes, would not disrupt the continuous passage from the formal structures of grammar to the universal or universalizable meanings of logic. But as an always possible, and therefore conditioning, abuse of metaphor, catachresis clearly comes to interfere with any unbroken passage between sign and meaning, grammar and logic. There may be a certain grandeur and a certain spectacularity to the catachresis of the sun as sower, based as it is on a quasi-Oedipal self-blinding and a pathos that we might want to identify as pity and fear. But there is nothing tragic about being beheaded by a cabbage or a lettuce. Rather than pathos, most catachreses produce bathos. Any attempt to determine the

meaning and the reference of catachresis instead overdetermines it and hurls meaning into a “bottomless overdeterminability.” (The French is “surdéterminabilité sans fond” [Derrida, 1972, 291; 1982, 243]). *But perhaps the most instructive lesson of catachresis would be its consequences for the project of Aristotle’s “Poetics”* as such, as the first text of literary theory “proper.” If the short theory of metaphor in the *Poetics* is an attempt to close off the theory of tragedy by subordinating or assimilating one last “branch” of *lexis* to the grammar of plot and a grammatical model of language, then, with catachresis, what happens instead is that this theoretical discourse, in the very act of trying to close itself off, to draw its own borders — to *know* what it is talking about — can’t do it. And it can’t do it in a specific, determined, indeed overdetermined and overdetermining, way: namely, when it moves from *logic*, the logic of its argument, to *rhetoric*, the rhetoric of tropes, in giving *examples* of metaphor by analogy. As in the case of catachresis, this would be a mutilation, in fact a self-mutilation, on the part of a theory that wants to be complete, self-identical, indeed a self, a subject. This happens and had to *have* happened because the “literary theory” of the *Poetics* is, after all — or is it first of all? — *itself* a catachresis. It is itself a catachresis, the giving of a name to the nameless, on account of the fact that the very project of the *Poetics* as a theory of the poetizing mimesis that “imitates by language alone” is an attempt at a theory of that which “has hitherto been without a name (*anonymos*),” as the first chapter puts it. The treatise “On poetics” (*peri poetikes*) is in fact a treatise “On the anonymous” (*peri anonymos*). In other words, the *Poetics* can be read as a catachresis for this art, anonymous in Greek, namely literature. In its trajectory from *anonymos* to *anonymos* — from the namelessness of literature in the first chapter of the text to the namelessness of what the sun does to its rays in chapter 21 — from one catachresis to another, the *Poetics*, in its very attempt to fill in, to supplement, the lack of a name for literature instead only reproduces the lack. All this was predicted, it was all already programmed, not just in the opening paragraphs of the *Poetics* but also always already in Aristotle’s famous passage on what it is that art (*techné*) does in the *Physics*. Art, says Aristotle, in part imitates nature (*physis*) and in part brings to completion what nature herself could not (Aristotle 199a). *If we work out the logic, what Lacoue-Labarthe calls the “hyperbologic,” of this statement, we arrive very soon at some vertiginous double binds* (Lacoue-Labarthe 1986; 1989). *It’s not just that the possible incompleteness of nature suggests that nature is not wholly natural, not wholly herself, and that therefore art, in being able to complete nature, bring nature to completion, may be more natural than*

*nature. It is also and rather that art, in part imitating and in part completing nature, may imitate nature in its incompleteness, that in the very act of completing nature art may also reproduce only nature's incompleteness. This is indeed the logic of the supplement, and it programs the project of the Poetics.*¹⁰ *All this (and more, much more, supplementarily more) can be read, not only in the very first anonyms of the text but also already in the very first word of the text: peri (on, about, of). Peri poetikes are the words with which the Poetics begins, and they have become its title. Aristotle mentions peri in chapter 20 among the connecting words, the non-signifying sounds that*

- ¹⁰ And it programs any and every discourse on metaphor afterwards, all the way up to and including Derrida's *White Mythology* whose project is to take the "law of supplementarity" as a hypothesis to be "verified" in several examples (*La mythologie blanche*, 273 and *White Mythology*, 229). It is symptomatic that the constitutively self-in-completing, self-fragmenting, nature of Aristotle's *Poetics* is reproduced in the commentaries that, inevitably, take it literally. See the reasons for Gerald Else's refusal to comment on Chapters 20-22 in his 650-page *Poetics: The Argument* (567): "The three and one-half chapters (including the second half of chapter 19) which deal with *lexis* are omitted from this study for three reasons: (1) they are technical to a very high degree (especially chapters 20 and 21) and bristle with special problems, so that any cogent discussion of them would have to be inordinately long and complex; (2) to a degree unequalled by any other part of the work they have to be considered (again chapters 20 and 21 particularly) in a special context, that of the development of 'grammatical' study in Greece; and (3) they have very little — astonishingly little — connection with any other part of Aristotle's theory of poetry." Else would seem to protest too much — as though the merely "technical" and "grammatical" aspects of *lexis* were of no interest or importance for "Aristotle's theory of poetry" — and, for good measure, wonders "whether chapters 20 and 21 in particular are early or late, and how much of them is genuine." When all else fails, one can always doubt the authenticity of the text. In his translation of the *Poetics*, W. Hamilton Fyfe does not do much better. He grudgingly translates chapter 20 but then urges the reader to skip it: "A translator is bound to render this chapter, since the balance of evidence is in favor of its inclusion. But the reader is advised to skip it, since it is written from the point of view of grammar and philology, and does not, like the succeeding chapter, deal with the literary use of words. It is also very obscure" (74-75). When the text becomes "obscure," it's best just not to read it — as though "grammar" and "philology" could not possibly matter to Aristotle. Like Else, Fyfe seems to be very much in the thrall of the belated (and rather un-Greek) *aesthetic* conception of the "literary."

signify when they connect other sounds in a composite sound. But *peri* would be a “connecting” word in still another sense. Although in itself a non-signifying sound (*phone asemos*), *peri* is the very word of signification itself, the very expression of the referential function itself. “On,” “about,” “of,” all refer, all carry back to an undetermined and to-be-determined Y X. But the only way for this X to *be* determined is for this “carrying back” to get converted into a “carrying over or across,” a trans-port or trans-ference, *meta-pherein*, metaphor. And such phenomenalization of reference in a metaphor also always brings along with itself the abuse of metaphor, namely catachresis, which overdetermines the meaning of X and renders its reference aberrant. As a treatise *on, about, of* poetics, which turns out to be a treatise *on, about, of* the anonymous, Aristotle’s *peri poetike* is also always a treatise *peri peri, on on, about about, of of*.

Needless to say, something similar happens to the projects of hermeneutics that would ultimately base themselves on “logical” models of language and text — only in reverse. That is, the hermeneut too always has to reach the point where the attempt to bring back and reduce all non-signifying, purely formal, grammatical and syntactical, structures of language and text to a meaning ultimately grounded in an ultimate horizon of meaning — whether it be Salvation History or, say, the history of capitalism or, at certain moments, even the horizon of the question of the meaning of Being and the history or destiny (*Geschick*) of Being’s self-forgetting — inevitably cannot do so without recourse to rhetorical structures and operations that overdetermine any meaning the hermeneut comes up with, that “stave in”¹¹ *his hermeneutic horizon, and turn his so-called “histories” into allegories (of reading and unreadability, yes). (Insofar as Heidegger — for example, in his interpretations of Hölderlin and of Nietzsche — is a hermeneut, he too is subject to such a reading: to the*

11 Such “staving in” (*crever*), as Barbara Harlow translates it, of Heidegger’s hermeneutic horizon is at least part of the operation performed by Derrida’s *Spurs* (82): “C’est l’horizon de cette question heideggerienne, au moment où il oriente la lecture la plus exigeante, qu’il faudra un peu plus tard, peut-être, après le détour dans lequel nous sommes, crever.”

*extent — the divided border of a divided “extent” — that he is also [always already] something else, he also ... reads.)*¹²

In any event, let me not take de Man's remark about literary theory as “an infinitely prolonged discourse of endless frustration” too literally. Let me end instead by simply stating what I see as the main advantage of this way of studying and teaching “theory,” literary theory — that is, as a series of “self-destructing” linguistic models. The advantage is that it allows one, forces one, to *read* the texts of literary theory, that is, to teach the *past* and the *future* of literary theory, its *future past*, and *not* to reduce it to the empty thematic theses of by-gone presents. In regard to “literary theory proper,” as it were, the present landscape is most appropriate and most promising, for, as always, it promises that literary theory — which *is* not, *was* not, and never *will be* — *will have been*, whenever we read whatever, texts as texts. The time of literary theory as “future past” is not just a verb tense, but should instead be read as something of a grammatical syntagm, the metonymical juxtaposition of future and past in a disjunctive relation to one another on account of the always self-destructing “present” that would lie “between” them.

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12 Needless to say, an extensive labor of reading is necessary to demonstrate this. For some indications, see my two essays on Heidegger's interpretations of Hölderlin: “Heidegger Reading Hölderlin” and “Monstrous History: Heidegger Reading Hölderlin” (193-209) and reprinted in *The Solid Letter* (201-14). On Heidegger's interpretation of Nietzsche, see Derrida's *Spurs* and *Interpreting Signatures (Nietzsche/Heidegger): Two Questions* (246-62).

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