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Nuclear Pathologies or, No Aporias, Not Now!

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The emergence in the waning years of the millennium of what has been troped, however loosely, as nuclear criticism heralds some noteworthy institutional gestures in the professional fiction that has come to be called literature. Most obvious is the attempt to align criticism with crisis, the latter word being the modern hyperextension and distortion of the former. "Crisis" is the Latin translation of the Greek *krisis*, meaning "a sifting," the adjectival form of *krisis* being *kritikos*, meaning the ability to judge, discern, discuss, and so forth. The late Latin and Medieval Latin words *criticus* and *criticare* respectively mean "in grave condition" and "to be extremely ill." The conjunction, then, of discursivity (judgement, discernment, discourse) with illness embodied in the cognates of "crisis" and "criticism" lies at the heart of much that nuclear criticism seeks to unveil: namely, that the historical condition of nuclearism made possible by scientific discursivity (not to mention the physical effects produced by that discursivity) has crept into an analogous literary condition of nuclearism in which the potent valencies of words carry the very possibilities of destruction and annihilation (deconstruction) that are pathological to nuclearism generally. The structure of atomic fission is not particular to the atom, in other words, but lies dormant in the analogously atomic structure of language, which represents its own sophisticated form of particle physics.

The pathology of a scientific language that can produce the means (and here we enter the realm of literary mythmaking) to annihilate humanity totally through the magic of that which cannot be seen becomes the pathology of a literary language in which the (unseen) semiosis inherent to all hermeneutic systems overtakes the ability of language to represent in a determinable one-to-one or one-to-many correspondence the relations between the signifier and signified. The breakdown, of this correspondence — the fissure that erupts from the recognition of such a breakdown — becomes "nuclear" insofar as such a recognition

1 This review article was previously published in the *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature / Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée* 23.4 (1996): 1226-32 and the author's name was misspelled. The Editor and the Book Review Editor apologize to the author and to the readers of the journal for the mistake that occurred.

produces the certainty that language is pathological (or in William S. Burroughs's terms "a virus") that substitutes the truth of (in)sensate reality with indeterminacy, thus obliterating the selves and identities through which that language is constructed, circulates, and is transformed. The apophantic notion of a proposition that refers to something "real" masks, in the logic of nuclearism, the pathology that the only thing to which the proposition is referential is to itself as a "real" representation of a particular discursive moment. The problem for nuclear criticism is the degree to which such abstract theorizing about the nature of language and its effects in constructing what it has become fashionable to call "subjectivity" is in fact nothing more than the pathological "techné" by which the profession of literature seeks its own self-perpetuation. Only a few high priests (literary *philosophes*) who dare to step into the fissure between the signifier and the signified can emerge bearing the "truth" of indeterminacy. Professional self-perpetuation is guaranteed not only by the explication of this indeterminacy, but by the "nuclear" proliferation of "critical" crises engendered by this indeterminacy.

In such a context the physical realities of nuclear destruction are retropped as the linguistic realities of the "exploding word" in whose fragmentary morphemes and phonemes are to be found yet other words, language being created anagrammatically out of this ongoing, "nuclear" disintegration.² But all too frequently this retroping occurs at the expense of the recognition that such a displacement is analogical — and, moreover, an analogy that only a few purveyors of such ideas would find sustainable. The enormous gap between theory and praxis in nuclear criticism thus becomes a secondary pathology from which there is literally no escape if one is to elaborate the terms of the analogy. Jacques Derrida's paronomastic use of the missile/missive analogy, made famous among a limited circle in the special issue of *Diacritics* (Summer 1984) that "officially"³ canonized nuclear criticism is but one extreme example of the phenomenon I am describing. The distinctions between the language of representation and the representation itself, embodied in the missile/missive pun, become diffuse and overlapping, eventually merging into one and the same thing, thus justifying the theoretical analogies between the physical realities of a nuclear

2 Michel Foucault anticipates many of the terms of this argument when he states that "when we destroy words, what is left is neither mere noise nor arbitrary, pure elements, but other words, which, when pulverized in turn, will set free still other words — this idea is at once the negative of all the modern science of languages and the myth in which we now transcribe the most obscure and the most real powers of language" (103).

3 See the editorial note on nuclear criticism that begins the special issue of *Diacritics*: "By Nuclear Criticism is meant something positive and something unavowed, a new topic and an explication of what is already everywhere being done" (2). This is a professional gold mine indeed: both a "positive" new topic and something that is "everywhere" already.

detonation and the metaphysical realities of language.⁴ In the case of Derrida what results is the pathological acknowledgement of the primacy of literature as archive, as the group of texts "most radically threatened ... by the nuclear catastrophe" (Derrida 27). (One wonders about those living "texts" for whom nuclear catastrophe might be considered at least an equal threat. One wonders about those living "palimpsests," the survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, whose bodies were "overwritten" by the nuclear text, and whose "archival" presence is fast dwindling. One wonders about the language that transforms the unspeakable physicality of suffering and annihilation into the convenience of a trope.)

But lest I be accused of exploding Derrida's text for the benefit of my argument, here is a more complete version of the passage in question:

we are dealing hypothetically with a total and remainderless destruction of the archive. This destruction would take place for the first time and it would lack any common proportion with, for example, the burning of a library, even that of Alexandria, which occasioned so many written accounts and nourished so many literatures. The hypothesis of this destruction watches over deconstruction, it guides its footsteps; it becomes possible to recognize, in the light, so to speak, of that hypothesis, of that fantasy, or phantasm, the characteristic structures and historicity of the discourses, strategies, texts, or institutions to be deconstructed. That is why deconstruction, at least what is being advanced today in its name, belongs to the nuclear age. And to the age of literature. If "literature" is the name we give to the body of texts whose existence, possibility, and significance are the most radically threatened, for the first and last time, by the nuclear catastrophe, that definition allows our thought to grasp the essence of literature, its radical precariousness and the radical form of its historicity.... (Derrida 27)

Taken from what Derrida titles his "Fourth Missile, Fourth Missive," the passage typifies the pathologies, textual and otherwise, of which I am speaking. The

4 A good example of this occurs in Marguerite Duras's script for the film by Alain Resnais, *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, in which the following exchange takes place: "HE [the Japanese architect]: What did Hiroshima mean for you, in France? SHE [the French actress]: The end of the war, I mean, really the end. Amazement ... at the idea that they had dared ... amazement at the idea that they had succeeded. And then too, for us, the beginning of an unknown fear. And then, indifference. And also the fear of indifference ..." (33). The notion of the "end," "really the end," registers both the physical and metaphysical "ends" immanent to nuclearism, while also registering the quite different notions of "end" at stake in the exchange: for the Japanese, Hiroshima signifies death and annihilation; for the French, Hiroshima signifies the end of the confrontation and thus the possibility of life and renewal. Fear and indifference emerge as the emotional side-effects of this recognition that the "crisis" has ended, because they symptomatize a new, more dangerous pathology peculiar to nuclearism, the recognition that the "end" is never really or necessarily the "end," the "end" always being illusive, what Jean Baudrillard refers to as "l'illusion de la fin." The passage precisely typifies the conflation of physical and metaphysical realities to which I have been referring.

totality of destruction, an oft-mentioned justification for nuclear criticism's theoretical concerns, re-tropes other familiar means of thinking the unthinkable, but ultimately remains just that: a totalization that, like other such totalizations remains in the realm of eschatology, phenomenologically impossible to verify, and ultimately, meaningless, except as a signifier that masks the literary longing for catharsis, ritual purification, and the capacity to speak the unspeakable. The logical quandary works like this. If one is around to verify that total destruction has taken place, it obviously has not. If it has taken place, its meaning no longer exists because the language to give it meaning would be gone as well. The proleptic and hypothetical imagining of the totality of destruction is therefore pathological, precisely because it invests the unspeakable with the pretense of speakability. But remember: Derrida's fourth missile/missive itself begins with the assertion: "As for the aporias of the nuclear referent, we don't believe in them" (26). Thus, the recognition and thinking through of those textual representations in which the nuclear referent circulates is given the authoritative stamp of denial from a voice in which those aporias speak with surprising vigour and clarity.

Such a doxology — "we don't believe in them" — justifies Derrida's claim that nuclear war "is not real, as it remains entirely suspended in its fabulous and literary *époque*" (28).⁵ The hypothetical imagination of total destruction grounds deconstruction, thus revealing the "radical precariousness" that is the "essence" of literature. This is using an elephant gun to swat a gnat — as if to suggest that literature requires the nuclear in order to grasp self-consciously its radical precariousness (take that for anxiety of influence!), as if to suggest that in the realm of total destruction there exists a hierarchy of precariousness in which literature is somehow privileged over other forms of being, whether textual or (meta)physical. To appreciate the degree of literature's radical precariousness, as the logic of this form of nuclear criticism goes, is to imagine the possibility of total destruction that has been an abiding myth of nuclearism, even though in the two cases in which nuclear weapons were used militarily (discounting the hundreds of nuclear tests that, interestingly enough, have been separated from the language of war only to be associated, ironically, with that of "security"), there was much less than total destruction, with messy after-effects that radically undermine, however horribly, the purification myths that underlie notions of total destruction, total purification.

Literature, in the pathological logic I am enumerating, needs the nuclear in order to grasp its own importance as archive, as repository of linguistic representation, its radical "historicity." Tell this to writers for whom death remains a professional fixation and suddenly the high-minded critical abstractions reveal the fig leaf covering the familiar (suspended) trope: mortality re-troped as total annihilation engenders a sense of the radical precariousness of things

generally, and the rewriting of this myth by nuclearists bespeaks more of a professional interest in the establishment of a "new" literary terrain, than it does a recognition of deep-rooted literary patternings — inexpressibility, mortality, thanatos, eschatology — that continue to function effectively as part of the play of literary representation. Thus, "the characteristic structures and historicity of the discourses" of literature whose recognition deconstruction makes possible are, in fact, sublimated in the rush to engender a sense of the radical newness of nuclearism as a literary trope, not to mention professional preoccupation. The pattern is a familiar one to those who have watched with a somewhat sceptical eye the unseemly and oftentimes naïve haste with which modernism has been supplanted by postmodernism, despite the fact that the so called "specific" historical markers of both so called periods or styles can, by analogy, be found in many earlier periods or styles. The epidemiological holocausts of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, to cite but one example, may very well have had similar effects, *mutatis mutandis*, on the eschatological envisionings of the literature of those periods as nuclearism has had on late-modern textuality. And to say as much is to fall into the trap of periodicity, seeking historical discontinuity as if that discontinuity reveals the "truth" of history itself — a trap all-too-frequently used by nuclear critics to set the stage for their "distinctive" form of criticism.

All of this is *not* to suggest that thinking the imminence of total annihilation, nuclear or not, can not have its salutary effects. Derrida's argument, however, self-consciously ignores the irony of its references to the "essence" of literature in the same breath as it gives credence to deconstruction, "at least what is being advanced today in its name," as "the" nuclear act of criticism — as if no other hermeneutic model could also carry the analogy with, at least, an equal effectiveness, as if the radical precariousness of literature is not "always already" in place as an ineradicable marker of textuality. The argument thus becomes more of a justification for nuclear criticism by a professional *philosophe* who is seen (by some) to have fathered the genre with his missile/missive,⁶ than it is an argument that makes sense of how the "nuclear," in its formidable array of textual renderings, has penetrated the language of literature and textuality generally.

The latter topic occupies much of Peter Schwenger's attention in *Letter Bomb*, a singular book about a difficult topic. Striking a balance between theoretically

6 Note how Derrida begins the "Fourth Missile, Fourth Missive," with the professional concern of acceding to the "literary" terms of the *Diacritics* colloquium — even though such an accession is wholly arbitrary in terms of the logic of the topos, though not in terms of the logic of the profession: "Under the heading of *nuclear criticism*, in a colloquium organized by *Diacritics*, we have to talk about literature, about the literature that I shall distinguish from poetry, from the epic, from *belles-lettres* in general" (26). Schwenger argues that Derrida's essay "may be said to have initiated nuclear criticism" (xv), though if one is to adhere to a more open notion of textuality, the question of when this "initiation" occurred would become somewhat more complex.

5 For a revision of this idea see Baudrillard's assertion that "Notre Apocalypse n'est pas réelle, elle est virtuelle. Et elle n'est pas future, elle a lieu *ici et maintenant*" (166).

high-minded (read "metaphysical") notions of nuclearism (to which he is somewhat sympathetic) and the "real" effects of a nuclear detonation, Schwenger treads the fine line with delicacy and aplomb. The book, which reads as a series of contemplative essays, ranges over a wide group of sophisticated texts, from Thomas Pynchon and Russell Hoban to Andrei Tarkovsky, Maurice Blanchot and Ernst Bloch. Though a jacket-cover blurb from Ora Avni suggests that *Letter Bomb* "offers excellent readings of noncanonical contemporary novels" — the very arbitrariness of such designations is at stake in the book itself, which coherently canonizes a number of texts, filmic or scripted, that may be deemed "nuclear."

Perhaps the most striking chapter, "Hiroshima in the Morning," strings together a theoretical narrative that in many ways parallels the narrative of nuclear criticism itself — struggling to emerge from a repressed consciousness into the dubious light of the morning after a nuclear detonation. Beginning with the image of Jacques Lacan in Baltimore thinking about the unconscious ("The best image to sum up the unconscious is Baltimore in the early morning") and Dean MacCannell's early essay on nuclear criticism entitled "Baltimore in the Morning.... After: On the Forms of Post-Nuclear Leadership" in which MacCannell discusses the notion of a cultural unconscious, Schwenger argues for Hiroshima as a liminal Other, a city that in Western consciousness "has been relegated to a place that one is tempted to call the unconscious" (48). As if anticipating the pragmatic criticisms that may be brought to bear on such a proposition, however guarded, the chapter then shifts to Hiroshima at "8:15 on the morning of August 6, 1945" (48) and to an extended meditation on the thinkability of the dreamlike state of those who survived the detonation. Schwenger refers to the Japanese phrase "*muga-muchu*, 'without self, without center'" (49) as a way of describing the transformed consciousness visited upon the survivors. The problems of thinkability and speakability insofar as they relate to the horror of the Bomb thus become central to Schwenger's argument, especially in regard to how the subject/victim experiences that horror as a form of (un)conscious effacement: "If that unconscious is structured as a language, we have some warranty for the dubious academicism of describing the bodies of Hiroshima's citizens as 'inscribed' by the blast" (52).

Schwenger recognizes that "It is through language, then, that war's aspect of unmaking is removed from a nation's consciousness; it could consequently be argued that language creates the unconscious to which it relegates that aspect and which it thus conceals" (51). This recognition grounds the more radical claim Schwenger makes: "Language ... is involved in this massive destructuring of the physical world; for all its abstractness it is as much the 'cause' of the body's suffering at Hiroshima as is the physical fire" (52). Few critics dare to make such connections between physical and metaphysical praxis, and Schwenger's insights here have important resonances for theorizing the political dimensions of the discursivity that engendered the capacity to create weapons of mass or total destruction. Furthermore, Schwenger eloquently makes a case for language as

pharmakon. The pathology of a speech that uncovers its potential for total destruction is but one side of the coin. The flip side notes the salutary effects residing in language's ability "to make the world, to make something even of its unmaking on that August morning" (52).

The reverie of destruction compels the possibility of renewal, an argument that sustains Schwenger's book through to its conclusion, which argues for language's "paradoxical being" (150) as a form of resistance to nuclear nihilism. (But remember: no aporias, not now, especially with regard to the nuclear referent.) The perverse redemption of "hope" — that most suspect but necessary condition of possibility — in the face of the totalitarian reality of the Bomb thus becomes a form of critical resistance against the cynical discourse engendered by the Bomb as either a physical or a linguistic phenomenon.

Inscription, then, physical or psychical, may become transcription; scars of both kinds may be translated into new meanings; and the unconscious that is Hiroshima may emerge into a language that is adequate, if not to its impossible real, at least to us who are struggling to come to some kind of deferred terms with it. (54)

The struggle to create an "adequate" language, at once impossible but real, present but deferred, conscious but unconscious — remember, no aporias, not even now — becomes the struggle to articulate the crisis of a criticism for which no such language exists, except as an impossible, transcriptive deferral of possibility. Schwenger aligns that possibility with creative acts of resistance to the totalitarian discursivity that produced the Bomb. The desire to create "new meanings" remains perhaps the unconscious dream of a ritual purification that forever removes the pathological stain of language and its effects.

But to say as much is to remember that no such aporias gather in the shadow of the nuclear referent.

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of mythology investigated by Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen and, with particular interest to the literary parallels of paranoia, by John Farrell, a professor of literature at Claremont McKenna College. The "complicity between the deceiver and the deceived" is the very essence of the investigation of Borch-Jacobsen into the reality of what may have taken place between Bertha Pappenheim and Josef Breuer (Freud's elder and occasional mentor in Vienna and the man responsible for introducing his young protégé to the Berlin ear-nose-and-throat specialist Wilhelm Fliess).³

When Borch-Jacobsen's book first came out in French — as *Souvenirs d'Anna O. Une mystification centenaire* — it produced a veritable flurry of controversy. The book section of *Le Monde* published a fairly favourable review by Roland Jaccard under the surprised (or provocative?) title: "Freud, mystifi-cateur? Cent ans après la naissance de la psychanalyse, on découvre les falsifications auxquelles le thérapeute eut recours pour imposer sa théorie." André Green, the ancient doyen of French analysts, found a typo in his copy (29, French edition: "elle avait vu un serpent noir s'avancer vers elle pour la mordre" — instead of "lui" and "le") which implied that the intended victim of the nocturnal hallucination whilst nursing her sick father was to be Anna and *not* her father. Green immediately sent off to *Le Monde* a baroque interpretation of Borch-Jacobsen's slip as part of a half-page article of refutation (longer, incidentally, than Jaccard's original review).⁴

3 For an understanding of Freud's cocaine-fueled states of mentation during the formative years of psychoanalysis a reading of his correspondence with the Berlin oto-rhino-laryngologist, Wilhelm Fliess, is mandatory. The unabridged letters were published by

Harvard University Press in 1985 as *The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess 1887-1904* in a translated edition supervised by Jeffrey M. Masson.

4 On June 14, 1996 an interview with Nicolas Weill ("Histoire officielle et désinformation") in *Le Monde* allowed Borch-Jacobsen to explain his position and his research and to vent his irritation with the "believers" (as Adolf Grünbaum calls them) of the French school (see Borch-Jacobsen 1996b). This interview and this number of *Le Monde* also covered the more general issue of the proposed Library of Congress Freud exhibition which had been postponed following an open-letter signed by many leading Freud scholars (British, American, Australian, Canadian, were among the nationalities of the signatories) protesting the absence of any material critical of Freud at the exhibition. This open letter had led in its turn to a French Manifesto signed by, among others, Julia Kristeva, Philippe Sollers, Elisabeth Roudinesco, André Green. This *Manifeste* accused the Library of Congress of bowing to appeals to censorship and declared that the original signatories (which included Adolf Grünbaum, Oliver Sacks, Frank Sulloway, Frederick Crews) were motivated by right-wing "political correctness" [sic!] and were proposing partisan limits to free speech. This was either a nadir in Franco-American understanding, or else another example of Parisian intellectuals obfuscating the truth on the ever-urgent march of progress. Borch-Jacobsen, himself, I should point out, is French! Nonetheless, he indeed signed the original request for *comprehensive* examples of contemporary Freud research at the Library of Congress exhibition. (The present writer was asked to sign this petition but declined on the grounds that the Library of Congress

The Way it Was: The Story of Anna O. and Early Psychoanalysis¹

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The letter "B" regresses to the first letter of the alphabet and the letter "P" regresses to its immediate neighbour. And so, with this elementary piece of encoding, the Austrian socialist and woman's movement pioneer, Bertha Pappenheim, became "Anna O."² This quasi-anonymity, no doubt the fruit of judicious appeal to medical professional confidentiality, produced the original fiction in the procession of "case histories" which were to entrance the readers of psycho-analytic literature. The fiction of the patient's name (a necessity for medical reporting) was but a prelude to the fiction of the patient's case and treatment (a fiction, as we shall see, necessary to the whole enterprise).

As Michael Wood, professor of English at Princeton University, noted in a recent review of John le Carré's latest novel, *The Tailor of Panama*: "of course fictions get about only because someone wants them. There are so many conspiracies in the world that a world without conspiracies seems unreal. "No two bluffs are the same," le Carré writes in *The Night Manager* (1993), "but one component is necessary to all of them, and that is the complicity between the deceiver and the deceived." The world of deception and spying and interpreting and of suspicion that is le Carré's is an appropriate place to enter the labyrinth

1 Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, *Remembering Anna O. A Century of Mystification*. New York and London: Routledge, 1996. Pp. 125. US \$49.95, paper US \$14.95; John Farrell, *Freud's Paranoid Quest: Psychoanalysis and Modern Suspicion*. New York: New York University Press, 1996. Pp. 280. US \$34.95.

2 This minor point of the simplicity of the patient's encoded nomenclature is worth mentioning given the hyperbolic, and quite unnecessary, inventiveness of some American scholars. Elaine Showalter, in *The Female Malady*, offers the following: "Breuer never explained why he had picked the name 'Anna O.' for Bertha Pappenheim, but the palindromic form of 'Anna' suggests the divided feminine psyche, while the 'O' suggests the letter of the mad Ophelia, the symbolic circle or cipher of feminine sexual mystery" (155). These amusing conceits may delight Elaine Showalter; but they have nothing to do with the case of "Anna O," nor with the mistakes and deliberate deceptions involved in its publication in *Studies on Hysteria*. Of the latter Showalter has nothing to say and her Freudian-friendly section on this case may not even have grasped the deceit of which she (like previous generations) was victim.