

Theory and the Transformative Humanities

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Edited by

Kunhammad K K and Rafseena M

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INTRODUCTION: THEORY AND THE TRANSFORMATIVE HUMANITIES

KUNHAMMAD K K

There is no theoretical critique without practical transformation... And no practice without transformation. As a result, ..., an interpretation ... will not even have been possible, as interpretation, without transformation, without transformative alteration.

—Jacques Derrida, *Theory & Practice* 1967 (2019)

The Humanities has been at the forefront of intellectual discourse for centuries. Nevertheless, there seems to be a growing consensus among educational thinkers and researchers that the humanities discipline is in a state of crisis. The essence of this “sorry state of affairs” is inescapably captured in the words of Ibanga B. Ikpe:

The future of the humanities as an academic pursuit that is relevant to the needs of society has been variously described as gloomy, hopeless and bleak. This diagnosis has been mainly due to declining interest in the humanities both by students and the society in general. Whereas the more favoured disciplines in business and technology bask in the admiration of society and thereby attract funding for studies, research and community engagements, the disciplines that make up the humanities struggle by the day under the threat of being consigned, like alchemy, to the rubbish heap of history. The reason for this sorry state of affairs is not farfetched; the humanities is said to have failed to evolve with society and has therefore lost its relevance. (51)

Ikpe touches on the two crucial dimensions of this debate about the increasing obsolescence of the humanities discipline. On the one hand, various thinkers, including Rabindranath Tagore, Edward Said, Paul Gilroy, and Mikhail Epstein, concur with Ikpe’s view that the established traditions of academic freedom, the flexibility of imagination, and the very idea of education have been challenged by a profit-driven agenda that has forced the humanities to seek, *not* philosophical and political, but

economic justification for its continued relevance. In their view, this pervasive influence of the logic of profit has corroded the university ethos and seeks to overthrow the basic premises of the humanities as a discipline. Martha Nussbaum has called this “a silent crisis of massive proportions and grave global significance” (1). According to these thinkers, new advances in science and technology that offer the possibility of artificially prolonging, destroying, and transforming human life challenge the true purpose of education and the very meaning of what it is to be *human*. In the face of such a posthuman future, the traditional focus of the humanities on questions of value, of meaning, and of ethics, are more important than ever before. As Nussbaum puts it: “When practiced at their best, moreover, these other disciplines are infused by what we might call the spirit of the humanities: by searching critical thought, daring imagination, empathetic understanding of human experiences of many different kinds, and understanding of the complexity of the world we live in” (7).

On the other hand, there are thinkers, such as Mikhail Epstein, who believe that the humanities have failed to evolve with society and that the courses offered by the discipline belong to the bygone days when there was no need for specialized skills.

Epstein persuades us that the current crisis is directly related to the “textual turn” in the humanities that reached its apogee in the twenty-first century:

No one now seems to expect anything from the humanities except readings and re-readings, and, first and foremost, criticism rather than creativity and suspicion rather than imagination. As a result, the humanities are no longer focusing on human self-reflection and self-transformation. [T]here is now a vacuum of human meaning and purpose that technology cannot, and the humanities will not, fill. As they retreat from the forefront of history and society, the humanities lose the best and brightest to other fields, becoming a shelter for those less creative and those with more “archival” inclinations. (2)

Epstein argues that just as doctors make people better, lawyers ensure that there is law and order in the society, and sociologists seek political solutions to social problems, the humanities must make better humans: “the humanities create the human... the humanities must humanize” (7). If science can transform human life through technology and if sociology can transform society through politics, it is high time that the humanities developed a practical dimension and took up the task of the transformation of culture through the work of the humanities. Epstein remarks:

Will the humanities let this evolutionary dynamic go by without their own attempt to enhance the role of humans in the transformation of the universe and their own nature? Will the humanities depart from their mission of serving human self- fulfillment? Will the humanities miss the astonishing opportunities of exploring the very phenomenon of the human in the time of its greatest and most dramatic transformation? (Epstein 11)

Epstein calls such a sustainable humanities “the transformative humanities”—a humanities programme that can transform cultures and through it individuals and the society.

How can the humanities transform culture? As a kind of thinking that attempts to transform thinking, it is theory that plays a crucial role in rendering the humanities truly transformative in its impact. In the first article in this collection, “The Interdisciplinary Humanities and the Future of Theory,” Jonathan Culler echoes this sentiment:

The impetus to theory is a desire to understand what one is doing, to question commitments and their implications. Theory is driven by the impossible desire to step outside one’s thought, both to place it and to understand it, and also by a desire—a possible desire—for change, both in the ways of one’s own thought, which always could be sharper, more knowledgeable and capacious, more self- reflecting, and for change in the world which our thought engages, so there will always be new developments, will always be changes in the realm of theory, for discussions of theory today. (10)

Theory, in this approach, is fundamentally transformative, because the theoretical drive, the impetus that drives one to theorize, triggers “the impossible desire to step outside one’s thought, both to place it and to understand it, and also by a desire—a possible desire—for change.” Change or transformation is the key word here. Theory is not an inert object of knowledge—theorizing is the beginning of change, of transformation. The distinction that Krippendorff draws between “theory of” and “theory for” is that “TheoryOf” is nothing but representation, something inert that is meant for passive consumption while “theory for” implies efforts at producing transformative effects through acts of theorizing (102).

However, way back in the late 1960s, Jacques Derrida had stressed the significance of transformation within the humanities with greater subtlety and depth. Long before Epstein emphasized the need for a shift “from interpretation to performativity” (69) and wrote a manifesto for the “transformative humanities”, Derrida had declared that interpretation

worthy of the name would be essentially performative. It can be seen that the whole point of deploring the decline of the humanities ultimately boils down to the age-old dichotomy between theory and practice, thinking and doing. Although theory and thinking are synonymous for Derrida, “the final objective of thinking” is never “to think correctly”.

Since true thinking invariably aims at revolutionary practice, a new theory of revolutionary practice is essential for the revolutionary transformation of practice itself, a transformation that brings about what Derrida (invoking Marx) calls “a relevance that is more rigorous” (8). As Derrida remarks:

One cannot even say—this would be a gross understatement—that one can think praxis only on the basis of revolution or revolutionary practice, for that would suppose that the final objective was to think correctly, to have a good theoretical concept of the meaning of practice (unless thinking isn’t equivalent to theory...) No, one can practise practice only in a revolutionary way, but revolution itself revolutionizes ... only by transforming practice in a revolutionary way, and starting from a transformed practice, from a new concept of practice, and, every concept being a theory/practice, from a new practice of practice.” (12)

According to this Derridean position, every theory or every act of theorization or of textual interpretation, every “theoretical critique”, is a “theory/practice” that effects “transformative alterations”.

The two essays by Jonathan Culler—“Interdisciplinary Humanities and the Future of Theory” and “Learning from Derrida: the Literary and the Political”—develop this Derridean interpretation of the true objective of textual interpretations and concludes that theory is driven not only by “the impossible desire to step outside one’s thought” but also “by a desire—a possible desire—for change, both in the ways of one’s own thought... and for change in the world which our thought engages, so there will always be new developments.” This desire for changes has fuelled, Culler maintains, a host of new theoretical developments, such as the posthumanism of Donna Haraway, Object-Oriented Ontology of Graham Harman, New Materialism of Jane Bennett, speculative realism of Quentin Meillassoux, Actor-Network theory of Bruno Latour, and the transformative possibilities embodied in these theoretical critiques. The questions that Culler raises not only touch upon many of the issues discussed in the field of theory and the humanities today but also pose significant issues of their own. The synoptic outline of the terrain of theory—from its early phase of ascendancy in the humanities departments across the world to its

contemporary status as teachable wisdom—that Culler presents in the first essay attests to the transformative potential of theory and the humanities.

In “Learning from Derrida: the Literary and the Political”, Culler directly engages the problem of the potential of “transformative alteration” embodied in practices of textual interpretation through a lucid exposition of the inevitable imbrication of the political in the literary in Derrida’s works. Drawing heavily on some of the relatively less known works of Derrida, Culler demonstrates how literature, as “the most interesting thing in the world, more interesting than the world” (Culler 2009), verges on and shades off into the field of the political. Derrida, in his view, “gives great importance to literary discourse, but not as an aesthetic phenomenon apart; rather to its engagement with the world, on the edge of the world, and to the engagement that it calls forth in readers.” Through a rigorous close reading of Derrida’s insightful essay “A Taste for the Secret”, Culler links our experience of literature to our experience of democracy:

This structure of the secret without secret is nevertheless a condition both of literature and of democracy, and here Derrida’s reading of a literary text displays his conviction that critical writing is not revelation of a secret of the text but intervention in a broader field. “If a right to the secret is not maintained,” Derrida writes in “A Taste for the Secret,” “we are in a totalitarian space.”

In Culler’s reading of Derrida, a reader’s desire for transparency in a literary text is a totalitarian temptation, which is an affirmation of the political potential of the literary. Since literature functions, in Derrida’s approach, on the basis of a secret,—“the secret of literature” ... is “a secret whose possibility assures the possibility of literature” (Derrida 2001 39), Culler argues that Derrida’s account of the performativity of literature in its potential for inventive political and transformative interventions is inscribed in his (Derrida’s) very definition of the true nature of literature as

a modern invention inscribed in conventions and institutions which ... secure in principle its *right to say everything*. Literature thus ties its destiny to a certain noncensure, to the space of democratic freedom, (freedom of the press, freedom of speech, etc.). No democracy without literature; no literature without democracy. ... The possibility of literature, the legitimation that a society gives it, the allaying of suspicion or terror with regard to it, all that goes together—politically—with the unlimited right to ask any question, to suspect all dogmatism, to analyze any presupposition, even those of the ethics or the politics of responsibility. (Derrida 1993 28)

Arunlal Mokeri's "Media Convergence, Virality and Fandoms: Reflections on Contemporary Celeb-Culture" investigates the *transformations* that celebrity culture has undergone in the recent past with the appearance of social media, such as the drastically shortened life of celebrity-hood, the enrichment of its vocabulary with new terms—"viral", "like", "share" and "reach"—and celebs' visual availability for consumption. Drawing on the insights of Walter Benjamin who had argued that the "celebrity achieves an aura through mass reproduction", Arunlal effectively captures life caught in the cusp of another media revolution and sheds enormous light on the development of a new celeb-culture against the background of the transformative humanities.

Pradeep Kumar takes up the question of transgender resistance from Arundhati Roy's perspective in his paper, "Narrative as Cognitive Map: Reading Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*", as part of discovering a landmark that situates the individual within a complex, in a seemingly unrepresentable and disoriented cultural totality. The paper critically follows the Jamesonian reading of the evolution of the contemporary postmodern society and the development of cognitive mapping delimiting the cultural and social spaces. Fredric Jameson suggests "cognitive mapping" to "achieve some general sense of the cultural dominant" (*Postmodernism* 6) of the postmodern condition of late capitalism, which we know as globalisation. Cognitive mapping, to Jameson, is a part of the ideological critique along the lines of Althusser which enable the "situational representation on the part of the individual subject to that the vast and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of society's structure as a whole (51)". The invention and projection of global cognitive mapping on social and spatial scale is a political act that helps subvert the exploitative structures of globalisation. To Arundhati Roy, her novel is "[...] a way of binding together the worlds that have been ripped apart" (Interview 2011). The paper situates the novel as a political resistance that struggles to impart meaning through the processes of mapping, organizing, and assembling recognizable patterns in an unwieldy political and social historicity.

In his article, "The Infinity and Ecstasy of Meaning: The Possible Worlds of *Dhwani*", Thulasi Das unearths the poststructuralist potential of the concept of *Dhwani*, which opens up infinite possibilities of meaning and leads the reader to *Ananda* or *jouissance*. Traditionally defined as the *suggestive sense* found in poetry, *Dhwani* arises from the tertiary function of a word namely *Vyanjana*. By drawing on a sound taxonomy of *Dhwani*, Thulasi Das skilfully substantiates the principle of *Dhwani* in its

poststructuralist avatars, most specifically its *aporetic* nature, which Anandavardhana terms *ananthya*. *Dhwani* is strongly redolent of the poststructuralist notion of the incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier. This paper successfully demonstrates how a transformative reading of *Dhwani* could show ancient aesthetic theories reflect and respond to the exigencies of contemporary taste and needs.

Ever since the publication of Benedict Anderson's classic *Imagined Communities* (1983) gave the discourse of nationalism a new impetus, there has been a veritable explosion of nationalist discourses. Works, such as Homi K. Bhabha's *Nation and Narration* (1990), Partha Chatterjee's *Nation and Its Fragments* (1993), Miller's *On Nationality*, U. Özkirimli's *Theories of Nationalism*, and A.D. Smith's *Nationalism and Modernism*, testify to the relentless discursive production on nationalism and affirm the transformative potential of this discourse. As Bresser-Pereira puts it, "... [N]ationalism is the ideology that legitimizes nations, and seen as modern society is territorially organized into nation states, the ideology of nationalism is strong and omnipresent" (1). Prasanth V. G. takes undertakes an exploration into the discourse of nationalism in his paper "From *natio* to Nation: Ideological Ambivalence in the Postcolonial Conceptualization of Nation" with to show how the concepts of the nation and nationalism have assumed greater significance in the context of postcolonial debates on the intricately intertwined historical developments of colonialism, imperialism, and conquest on the one hand, and neo-colonialism, diaspora, and globalization on the other. Prasanth demonstrates how these diverse developments would make sense not in isolation but in their totality, despite the number of inherent contradictions within such developments. He examines the historical, social, and political backgrounds that have contributed to the development of the nation and its fictional representation in works of literature, and draws on Benedict Anderson's epoch-making *Imagined Communities* to unmask the contingency of nation states and related theoretical constructs. Prasanth explains how, despite their contingent origins and existence, nations have come to establish themselves as real and the predominance of nation states gets challenged by the turn of this century with two contradictory trends: globalization and devolution.

Another theoretical terrain that holds transformative potential for culture is the emerging field of Memory Studies, which is a constellation of ideas related to the retention of the past and its implication for cultural transformation. Culture is in a constant state of flux and is not an entity that can be codified permanently. It is ever ready to be created, transmitted,

re-framed and is at times endangered and at times developing. To a significant extent, culture is believed to be stored in memory and transmitted biologically. The categorisation of memory into biological and social realms caused a series of sporadic developments, in the field of Memory Studies and consequently in the field of the humanities, specifically Cultural Studies. Manchusha Madhusudhanan's paper, "Historicising Narrative through Cultural Memory: A Study of Select Native Novels", proposes to analyse the different ways in which Cultural Memory guides human representation of the past and serves to historicise narratives, especially in native literature. She throws light on how the capacity to remember, to create and re-create past events, was used by minority groups to legitimize their cultural differences by claiming localized and competing traditions. In the post-world wars scenario that survived untold trauma and remorse, it became a kind of therapeutic regeneration to turn to "a collective past" even in fiction and art. Emphasizing the interventions of Paul Ricoeur, Maurice Halbwachs, Aleida Assmann, and Jan Assmann, Manchusha shows how memories are not static representations of past events, but "advancing stories" through which individuals and communities forge their sense of identity. As a theoretical perspective, Cultural Memory has become one of the most productive areas of research in the field of literary studies. Manchusha's discussion of a few selected texts—Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*, Linda Hogan's *People of the Whale*, and *Chappy* by Patricia Grace—in the light of memory studies illustrates the inter- relations between memory, culture, and the human condition.

Medical Humanities is another burgeoning field of enquiry in the humanities. In "Possible Bonds: Medical Humanities and Interdisciplinary Theoretical Exchange", Smrithi Venugopal M. and Sheron K. P. R. look at how humanistic values and principles are incorporated into the study of medicine and medical education.

Humanities and the sciences are still looked upon by many as disciplines on opposite poles. Venugopal and Sheron examines how, in comparison with science which relies on the systematic study of the structure and behaviour of the physical and the natural world through observations and experimentations, the humanities as the study of human cultures, language, literature, philosophy, and history, among others, is still held in low esteem. The domain of the humanities is also criticized for students learned but "not necessarily learned enough" to take up a specific profession, thus making many students reluctant to choose it on account of inadequate job prospects. The authors show how, despite being accused of reading and re-

reading texts, the humanities forever play an inevitable role in adding a moral, ethical, and liberatory spirit to the concrete, empirical facts that the sciences attempt to explain. In their view, medical humanities is a growing field of scholarship that produces powerful, innovative analyses of today's health care issues, many of which are fundamentally moral and ethical. The authors call for an application of the humanities, social sciences, and the arts to medical education and practice. Venugopal and Sharon conclude that in the technologically advanced contemporary societies, the need to bridge the gap between scientific and humanistic cultures is of paramount importance. In recent decades, trauma theory has emerged as an indispensable force, birthing a new school of literary reading called "trauma theory". Shoshana Felman, one of the most important theorists of trauma, has defined the twentieth century as the "age of trauma" and her works, including *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (with Dori Laub) (1992), *The Juridical Unconscious* (2002), and *Writing and Madness* (2003), showcase some of the most remarkable attempts at charting out possible interfaces between literature and trauma. Cathy Caruth (1996) and Ulrich Baer (2000) have applied trauma theory in the reading of some of the masterpieces of world literature, such as Albert Camus' *The Plague*. Most recently, Catherine Malabou has taken trauma theory to a different level (though not with an intent to apply it to literary works) in her new book, *The New Wounded* (2012). The paper "Memorising the Holocaust Trauma: A New Imperialist Hegemonic Mechanism" by Ninette Rolence and Saigeetha seeks to explore this aspect of the revival of traumatic memories in the context of contemporary life. Trauma features a disruptive tendency in the individual and the collective psyche of a community. Autobiographical trauma becomes a cognitive perception in the reading of more extensive traumatic incidents and experiences that humanity itself had faced at large. Ninette and Saigeetha argue that at various historic moments, these occurrences have created havoc in the construction of personal identities and have also put to question the sense of security in the face of danger. Taking into account the political significance of the revival of holocaust memories in the humanities today, the authors argue that in a world on the verge of total annihilation, the holocaust acts as a means of holding the various smaller political "powerdoms" under the control of the hegemonic powers.

Recent theoretical trends in food studies have opened new avenues in literary and cultural studies. The significance of studying food as a pathway to understand culture and history has by now been well established. In her paper "Food and the Binaries: An analysis of Joanne Harris' *Five Quarters of the Orange*", Duna Liss Tom explores the ways

in which food helps to frame different binaries for individuals as well as the society. Every community celebrates with food and incorporates foods as symbols, and many of these traditions provide the cultural memory for how foods should be prepared for healthful consumption. Furthermore, each region that gives rise to a distinct literature necessarily also maintains culturally specific rules governing foods that are especially valued and foods that are especially shunned, and control the contexts in which particular foods may or may not be eaten. Food events, in which food is served, therefore, help define the social organization and cultural identity of the very communities that give rise to distinct literary traditions. Food studies examine how the use of food imagery and metaphor represents complex ideas and deeper meanings in literature. In her novel, *Five Quarters of the Orange*, Joanne Harris depicts the inextricably entwined past and present of the Dartigen family in a scrapbook of inherited recipes and memories.

In her paper “Hetero-Sexualising the Transgender Identity: A Discourse of the Marginalized in *Njan Marykkutty* (2018)”, Anu Kuriakose analyses the question of trans identity in the film in terms of Butler’s understanding of gender performativity, the Kristevian notion of abjection, and the Lacanian notion of *object petit a* or the object-cause of desire. The author highlights drastic shifts of paradigm in Kerala with regard to the trans identity. With the introduction of the government-sponsored gender mainstreaming interventions, the visibility of transgenders and sexual minorities in the public sphere of Kerala are carefully observed and critically examined. The popular media in the state reconfigure its space to include the non-normative gender and sexuality as a matter of concern in the contemporary times and the conspicuous absence of those who experience gender dysphoria from the space is getting blurred. Anu Kuriakose examines the depiction of a transsexual as the lead character in the recent Malayalam film *Njan Marykkutty* (2018, Dir. Ranjith Sankar) and the representation of the transgenders in the popular media. The film portrays the transgender as an aberration and downplays the rampant hetero-sexualisation of the transgender body. Though the popular support for a transgender lead character is sensationalised in the media as a huge success saga, it also makes the individual a commodity to be consumed in a market economy. It is argued that the excess in normalisation of the transgender body ironically endorses the heterosexual values of the binary gender performance when the surgically re-appropriated body is celebrated, clapped at the big screen, and sensationalised as achievement, as the central character voices the misconception that “I am not a transgender, I am a transsexual”.

In “The Digital Gaze: Unveiling the Transition of Gaze in the Digital Era”, Rafseena M examines how the conceptual framework of gaze as a profoundly influential concept in cultural theory has been restructured, reoriented, and redefined. She demonstrates that the new version of gaze via the digital form helped re-contour the ontological structure of the human world and constitutes new forms of agential representation in the digital space. Taking cue from the various platforms of the digital space—the follower counts of top celebrities in social media platforms, including Instagram and Facebook, and the philanthropic side of the digital media at times of emergencies—Rafseena investigates the ways in which the digital gaze can have transformative effects on society.

N. Sajan and Pinkey Isha address the question of the transformative performativity of art. In “Visual Discourses of Transformative Performativity:

Reading Women’s Art Installations”, Sajan discusses how Indian artists liberated themselves from subservience to western modes and forms of representation, and explore their re-invention of visual and performative idioms. In his analysis of the major installations of four women - Jayashree Chakraborty, Anita Dube, Anju Dodia and Bharti Kher—Sajan provides profound insights into how they had developed their visual media and strategies of transformative performativity in the newly emerging

ethos of installation art. Pinkey Isha’s “The Epical Romance of Sirat ‘Antar: Negotiating Contours in Arabian Chivalric Courtly Traditions” presents a close reading of *Sirat ‘Antar*, an epical romance modelled on the great warrior poet Antara. Isha studies the various aspects of this chivalric epic and shows how *Sirat ‘Antar* embraces the echelons of oral performance, visual culture, and popular art practices.

In “The Matrix of Desire: David Lurie and the Deleuzio-Guattarian Ethics in Coetzee’s *Disgrace*”, Milda Mary Savio and Shivshankar Rajmohan A. K. address the question of desire and subjectivity. Using Deleuze and Guattari’s formulation of “machinic” production of desires, they demonstrate the “becoming” of David Lurie, the protagonist who invents a new ethic of desire. Prasadita L. Raveendran investigates an emerging cultural trend called “wokeism” or “cancel culture” and demonstrates how it proceeds to reconfigure and reconstruct our traditional notions of justice and accountability. Through a detailed comparative analysis of the first episode “Forget Me Not” from the Netflix series *Ray*, a motion picture rendering of Satyajit Ray’s short story and “The White Bear” episode from the series *Black Mirror*, Prasadita situates the transformative elements within practices of digital wokeism and cancel culture.

The articles collected in this volume are structured around a series of interlinked questions that are inspired by the possibilities of revitalizing the humanities and engage with various kinds of cultural artifacts to effect what Derrida calls a “rigorous relevance” through transformative interpretations. Broadly speaking, these essays raise and attempt to answer the following questions: How crucial is the role that art and literature play in human life? How do language and representation impact culture and society? How do discourses on gender transform our modes of living and relating to the world? What is the future of theory in a world that is increasingly marked by a wilful neglect of the humanities? What idea of the human would be involved in the revised theories and practices of a transformative humanities? What values and sense of responsibilities are opened up by a posthuman perspective? How does history illuminate these concerns? How do conflicting notions of humanity and of what counts as human relate to the numerous instances of exclusion, exile, and dispossession that we see around us? How can the teaching and research practices of the humanities account for erased or manipulated histories, absent geographies, forbidden archives, and other instances of organized forgetting? Is Jonathan Culler’s claim that a semiotics can revitalize the humanities still valid? We hope that along with us, the reader enjoys these multidisciplinary perspectives and revels in the *dhwani* that works of art can evoke in the human mind.

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LEARNING FROM DERRIDA: THE LITERARY AND THE POLITICAL

JONATHAN CULLER

I proposed several topics for my talk here, concerning various aspects of critical theory and literary studies. “Learning from Derrida” is a topic that could take me in many directions, since Derrida wrote about such a wide range of topics: the history of European philosophy, first of all, from Plato to Heidegger, from the Greeks to the twentieth century, not in the mode of history exactly, but in the mode of critical reading of key philosophical texts, both highly canonical, Plato, Kant, Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger, and thinkers of philosophical significance even though they are not generally treated as belonging to philosophy proper, such as Walter Benjamin, the anthropologists Marcel Mauss and Claude Lévi-Strauss, the psychoanalysts Sigmund Freud, and Jacques Lacan, the linguists Ferdinand de Saussure and Emile Benveniste. Then Derrida’s later work especially takes up a host of issues -political, legal, and ethical as well as literary and aesthetic: nationalism, racism, friendship, the New Europe, hospitality, the gift, violence and justice, feminism, the legacy of Marxism, and the Animal. There is, I should, say, something for everyone, though not necessarily for all tastes, since he is frequently a difficult writer and a complex thinker.

Choosing among all of these possibilities my take on learning from Derrida will necessarily be partial and personal, with an emphasis on the implications of his work for literary studies, though I’ll mention several other topics as well.

But allow me to begin with a brief autobiographical account of my learning from Derrida. During my first year in graduate school, Derrida published three books, *Speech and Phenomena*, on Husserl, phenomenology, and writing, *Of Grammatology*, on the problem of speech and writing, and the logocentrism of Western philosophy, with special discussions of Ferdinand de Saussure and Jean Jacques Rousseau, and *Writing and Difference*, a collection of essays about various current figures and topics, including Levi-Strauss and Structuralism. Well, I was working on phenomenology and structuralism at that time, so these books were a

challenge for me, which I did not really take up until the summer of 1968, after I had finished an M. Phil thesis on Phenomenology and literary criticism. My Ph.D., dissertation, which became *Structuralist Poetics*, included a final chapter, "Beyond Structuralism," which tried to take account of Derrida's critiques of aspects of structuralism, which it seems to me had been wrongly taken as a rejection of the movement. [Happy to say more about this later]. But quite aside from the relation to structuralism, these works had much to teach.

They undertook a reading of philosophical texts, not just for their arguments or statements but for their textuality, how they behave. One could call it a literary treatment of philosophical texts, except that Derrida argued that such topics as metaphor are inescapably philosophical. So a first lesson was about the excessive narrowness of philosophy, ever since Plato, who wrote philosophy in the form of dialogues, a literary genre, but particularly in the Anglo-American world: philosophy is writing but does not like to think of itself as writing, embracing an ideal of transparency, to present the *logos*: truth, logic, and thought.

Derrida's writing at this stage for which we may use the term that became attached to it, deconstruction, undertakes a radical critique of fundamental categories of Western thought by exploring how these categories have been constructed in and by the discourses that rely on them. Exciting, radical, revelatory, unconditional thought (In an essay called "The university without condition," Derrida speaks of a commitment to theory as a unconditional thought). His is a mode of analysis that examines not only the arguments of philosophical texts but also the rhetorical procedures and devices they employ and the tensions or contradictions between what is claimed or assumed and what the texts themselves do in order to support such claims. A major focus of this deconstruction has been the traditional binary oppositions that have structured Western thought since the time of the Greeks: for example, the oppositions between inside and outside, mind and body, literal and metaphorical, speech and writing, presence and absence, nature and culture, intelligible and sensible, form and meaning. Each of these oppositions is hierarchical, in the sense that one of its terms has been taken to be primary, fundamental, and the other secondary and derivative. Thus, nature is logically prior to culture; writing is seen as merely a way of representing speech, which is taken to be the basic form of language; meaning is what comes first and is then given expression by form.

A deconstruction of these oppositions asks how the philosophical enterprise and thought in general have relied upon the privileging of one term and invites us to consider whether in fact such hierarchies should not be revised. In particular, one questions these hierarchical oppositions by showing how they have been constructed and, in the process, undoing that construction and establishing a new relation between the terms. We can see, for example, that the idea of “nature” is a product of culture: conceiving something as prior to culture is a specific cultural operation whose import and function needs to be assessed. In the opposition between nature and culture, the primacy of nature cannot, therefore, be taken for granted. What we have, rather, is an opposition elaborated within culture; what counts as nature in any historical moment will be a fact about that culture. To argue in this way is to invert and restructure the opposition (to “displace” it). Instead of a primary nature and a secondary culture, we discover a variable distinction between nature and culture within culture.

For Derrida, the most telling and pervasive opposition has been the one that treats writing as secondary or derivative with respect to speech. According to this opposition, in speech ideas and intentions of the speaker are immediately present; it is a direct and authentic form of language, whereas writing is merely a graphic representation of the spoken word (a sign of a sign) and hence marked by absence and possibilities of discrepancies between form and meaning. By setting aside writing as a secondary and derivative, a mere representation open to misunderstanding, accounts of language have taken as their object an idealized form of speech, where the linguistic form is a direct expression of what the speaker, as we say, “has in mind.” But Derrida argues that linguistic forms can function as signs only to the extent that they can be repeated in different contexts, in the absence of any particular speaker’s presence or intention.

Speech is only possible, in other words, to the extent that it has the qualities assigned to writing, such as absence, difference, and the possibility of misunderstanding. One mark of this, Derrida has shown, is the frequent recourse, in attempts to describe speech, of examples and metaphors drawn from writing. In effect, speech has been described as a form of writing, even when the claim has been that writing is derivative from speech (Derrida 1976). This deconstruction of the traditional hierarchical opposition between speech and writing argues not that there are no differences between speech and writing but that the traditional opposition is untenable and that both speech and writing are forms of a general writing (*archi-écriture*), which is the condition of possibility for

any system of representation whatsoever.

Derrida argues that treating writing as a secondary to speech is part of what he calls the “logocentrism” of Western culture: the presumption of an order of truth or thought prior to its representation by signs (Derrida 1976). Logocentrism tries to treat representation as inessential rather than inextricably involved in the structure of phenomena, but an attentive reading of the texts of the philosophical tradition shows that they tell a different story. Derrida’s work attempts to demonstrate that discourses which treat writing as secondary in fact must make use of notions linked to writing when they characterize speech and that thus speech can be seen as a version of a generalized writing, which is the condition of language and thought in general. This is an instance of the deconstruction of concepts seen as fundamental, such as “presence,” “truth,” “origin,” and “identity.”

This work was an exciting philosophical critique of Western philosophy. Philosophy, Derrida argues, has been founded on a theory of “presence,” in which such notions as truth, being, and reality are determined in relation to an ontological centre, essence, or origin, based on the repression of absence and difference. But since his demonstration works not by erecting an alternative theory but by exploring how philosophical discourses have produced their concepts through rhetorical stratagems, such deconstructions offered students of literature a powerful practice of reading which would illuminate how texts--whether philosophical or literary--implicitly put in question what they explicitly maintain or what they appear to assume. Barbara Johnson, a leading American practitioner, calls deconstruction “a careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within a text” (Johnson 1981). This made literary study more exciting, more concerned with fundamental issues, than when it had been a matter of showing how all the parts of a poem contribute to a unified effect. But I will come back later to what we might learn about literature from Derrida.

Another strand of his work from which I and others learned much is his discussions of the performative functions of language. The notion of the performative comes from the British philosopher J. L. Austin, who argued that philosophical treatments of language were wrong to take as the norm sentences that made statements, as though the function of language were to make true or false statements. He distinguished this constative use of language from a performative use, where utterances do not state a fact but perform an action, such as promising, warning, declaring, advising: “I promise to pay you tomorrow” or “I call this meeting to order.” Rule of thumb, if you can add a “hereby” you are dealing with a performative: I

hereby order you to stop. I hereby promise to pay you tomorrow. In exploring the distinction, Austin goes on to conclude that there is a performative dimension to every utterance. If I say "the cat is on the mat" that is tantamount to saying "I hereby declare that the cat is on the mat," so performing an action of stating. For Derrida this notion becomes very important, looking at ways in which language performs actions. His first intervention is to reject an exclusion of Austin's. Austin says his analysis applies to "words spoke seriously --I must not be joking, for example, or writing a poem." He is concerned with a set of serious utterances by which people undertake to perform actions. But Derrida argues that in setting aside the non-serious Austin is failing to recognize a major aspect of the functioning of language, a general iterability that should be considered a law of language. For something to be a sign it must be able to be cited and repeated in all sorts of circumstances, serious and non-serious. He thus broadens the scope of the account.

The second step Derrida takes is focusing on this question of the force of language, as act or event, which does not just, as in Austin, accomplish recognized purposes through codified formulae, but also inaugurates, creates something new, as a promise creates something that did not previously exist, or as naming your child brings into being a new identity. In a wonderful little text entitled "Declarations of Independence," Derrida analyses the American "Declaration of Independence," the founding document by which the US declared its independence from England, as based on a complex combination of performative and constative utterances. The key sentence in this document runs, "We, therefore, ...do solemnly publish and declare that these United colonies are and of right ought to be free and independent states." The declaration that these are independent states is a performative that is supposed to create the new reality to which it refers: we hereby declare that we are independent. But to support this claim is joined the constative assertion that these ought by right to be independent states. Of course, the success of such performatives is never guaranteed: the Catalan parliament in Spain declared the independence of Catalonia, based on a referendum, but so far this has not worked, has not become a reality.

At this point Austin's distinction has been expanded and particularly redefined: the constative is language claiming to represent things as they are, and the performative is an act of language that purports to make something happen by organizing the world, perhaps bringing things into being, imposing linguistic categories, rather than simply naming what already is. This becomes especially important in the work of Judith Butler,

for example, who drawing on both Derrida and Foucault, developed a performative theory of gender and sexuality in such books as *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Butler proposes that we consider gender as performative, in the sense that it is not something one is but something one does, something one enacts. Your gender is created by your acts, in the way in which a promise is created by the act of promising. You become a man or woman by repeated acts, which, like Austin's performatives, depend on social conventions, habitual ways of doing something in a culture. This does not mean that gender is a choice, a role you put on: that would suggest the existence of an ungendered subject prior to gender who chooses, whereas to be a subject at all is to be gendered. The "i," Butler writes, emerges only within this process or matrix of gendering. And the performativity of gender is not a singular act, as are Austin's performatives, but a reiterative and citational practice, the compulsory repetition of gender norms that animate and constrain the gendered subject --at one point she speaks of gender as an assignment variously carried out -- but these acts are also the resources from which resistance, subversions and displacements can be forged. The scope of this dimension of linguistic and non-linguistic performativity is something I and others have learned from Derrida.

But let me now turn to literature, which has been, of course my own principal field. The performative dimension of literary language, which strives to create something new as it tells us about the world, is something we have learned about from Derrida, enthusiastically embraced by literary critics, because it grants a new status to literary language, which no longer consists of pseudo statements but can be seen as a creative, world-changing use of language. However, this situation is rather more complicated than is often allowed. (I'd be happy to talk about that more, if you like.) I would say that the early effect of Derrida's work for literary studies, which was the domain in which his work was received in the Anglo-American world, was to offer new strategies of reading, based not on Derrida's own engagements with literary works, which, as I shall explain, came later and involved different strategies, but based on his readings of philosophical texts. These involved close reading, attentive to rhetoric and its implications, and to apparently marginal or anomalous moments of texts, whereby language resists or undercuts what the text is apparently saying, or has been alleged to say. So, close reading, but with different presumptions than Anglo-American new criticism's presumption of the unity of the text, the aesthetic resolution of paradoxes, self-presence and self-reflexivity, where showing that the text does what it says was the highest compliment. Derrida made available different possibilities, almost

the opposite, as we attended to the resources with which a text resists, questions, what it appears to assume or put forward. A deconstructive literary criticism involves, in the phrase I quoted from Barbara Johnson earlier “a careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within a text.” I describe a range of examples, critical explorations of the tensions in literary works, in my *On Deconstruction*, but I could succinctly illustrate the sort of strategy herewith a two line poem by Robert Frost that I discussed on *Literary/theory: A Very Short Introduction*:

We dance round in a ring and suppose
But the Secret sits in the middle and knows.

The poem depends on an opposition between knowing and supposing, between the human way of being and that of the secret. But we might ask whether the poem itself is in the mode of supposing or knowing. As a product of the human imagination, we might assume it is an instance of supposing, but it sounds very knowing indeed, positively proverbial or gnomic. But what does the poem show is about knowing? Well, the secret, which usually is something one knows or does not know, here is made the subject of knowing. By metonymically promoting the secret to the role of knower, the poem shows that a rhetorical supposition can produce the knower: the secret who knows is produced by an act of supposing. Its constative assertion, that the secret knows, depends on a performative supposing. The poem asserts that the secret knows but shows this to be supposition. Reading the poem against itself is one of the techniques of deconstructive reading learned from Derrida’s readings of philosophical texts. Such strategies also raised the stakes of literary analysis, where fundamental philosophical issues came to be in play.

But in later years Derrida came to write about literature himself and to reflect on literature as an institution, and this gave us new things to learn. In an interview with Derek Attridge, ‘This Strange Institution Called Literature,’ Derrida speaks eloquently of literature:

Experience of being, nothing less, nothing more, on the edge of metaphysics, literature perhaps stands on the edge of everything, almost beyond everything, including itself. It’s the most interesting thing in the world, maybe more interesting than the world, and this is why, if it has no definition, what is heralded and refused under the name of literature cannot be identified with any other discourse. It will never be scientific, philosophical, conversational.ⁱ

Literature can be ‘the most interesting thing in the world, more interesting than the world,’ because it exceeds the actual but includes its possibilities, opening their condition of possibility.

This is a celebration of literature of a sort not much heard these days, when advanced critical approaches treat literature as one discourse among others, to privilege which would be an elitist mistake. It is important to emphasize that this celebration of literature is not, in fact, a privileging of some distinctiveness of literary language or of aesthetic achievement. Derrida suggests that ‘there is an experience rather than an essence of literature.’ⁱⁱ This experience has various dimensions, but one which Derrida stresses is the experience linked to what he calls the suspension of the ‘thetic’ –the articulation of theses or propositional claims: ‘literary experience, writing or reading, ... is a non-thetic experience of the thesis, of belief, of position,’ providing, in its fictionality an experience of what belief, position, thesis might be. Denying literature an essence, Derrida nevertheless gives great importance to literary discourse, but not as an aesthetic phenomenon apart; rather to its engagement with the world, on the edge of the world, and to the engagement that it calls forth in readers.

In affirming the importance of literature in these terms, Derrida reminds us of its power and of the centrality of its structures to many other worldly phenomena. In a book of 2004 largely inspired by Derrida, *The Singularity of Literature*, Derek Attridge writes, ‘Derrida’s work over the past thirty-five years constitutes the most significant, far-reaching, and inventive exploration of literature for our time.’ⁱⁱⁱ Not simply *of* our time, *for* our time. This is true, though it is not widely recognized. One of the more grotesque aspects of the mediatic reception of Derrida in the US is the idea that somehow Derrida’s work and deconstruction generally have constituted an attack on literature. Derrida’s writing on and around literature is not so well known as his early work on philosophical texts or even so well known as later engagements with political and ethical texts and issues, such as *Specters of Marx*. This is particularly ironic, given the fact that Derrida has been most welcomed by members of literature departments, but perhaps it is not so strange after all, since we literary critics have a professional stake in believing that we already know how to read literature and are eager to learn other things from Derrida, such as new modes of analysis attentive to language and to the problematic of language can engage other discourses – of philosophy, ethics, politics, and so on. Perhaps also, the writers on whom Derrida has spent the most time – Maurice Blanchot, Francis Ponge, Jean Genet, Paul Celan – seem special cases, so that his writing about them does not seem so easily generalizable

into an ‘approach’ to the novel, for instance, or to poetry.^{iv} And indeed, Derrida’s writing about literature is not easily assimilated to any approach that would present literature in historical periods (The Victorian Novel), as literary education has been wont to do. It engages literature in more novel ways. ‘Che cos’è la poesia,’ a wonderful brief meditation that responds to the question ‘what is poetry?’ put to him by an Italian journal, stresses that to respond to such a question is to dispense with knowledge, to burn the library, to leave the paradigm of knowledge and respond in a different way. Such a text does not engage in critical practice. It boldly speaks of ‘the poem’ – the poem in general -- as, for instance, ‘une passion de la marque singulière’ (a passion for the singular inscription). This text offers an account of the poem as hedgehog, *hérisson*, prickly on the outside, rolled into a ball to protect itself, yet entirely vulnerable to being squashed on the highway. Outside this animal fable, it treats the poem as something addressed to an anonymous ‘you’ that asks to be learned by heart, that teaches the heart.^v

Although this essay certainly sparks thoughts about a theory of the lyric, it does not, any more that Derrida’s writings on Mallarmé, Shakespeare, Kafka, Joyce, or Baudelaire, provide a method of reading. These Derridean texts cannot be described as a deconstruction of hierarchical oppositions, an inversion and displacement of oppositions; nor do they invert or critique the illusions of the aesthetic –as some deconstructive writings about literature seem to do. They do not invest in a recognized mode of academic writing but invite readers to engage differently with literary works.

It is not easy to say what these essays are – they are as different from one another as, on the one hand, the elaborate pursuit of the paradoxes of mimesis in ‘La Double Séance,’ on Mallarmé, the aphoristic reflection on proper names and naming of ‘Aphorism Countertime,’ on *Romeo and Juliet*, and the rigorous pursuit of a thematics of the gift and the counterfeit and of textual self-reflexivity in the chapters of *Given Time* on Baudelaire. I would stress the radical patience of these essays, and their focus on small units -- not Joyce or Mallarmé but a particular sentence.^{vi} One might say about them that they attempt to respond to the singularity of the texts they treat, and indeed the singularity of the literary work is a major theme of Derrida’s literary engagement. While his critical performances are partly consonant with the traditional notion that the task of criticism is the celebration of the uniqueness of each literary work, he notes that singularity is necessarily divided (*se diffère*), takes part in the generality of meaning, without which it could not be read, and so is not closed in on

itself but iterable.^{vii} The singularity of a work is what enables it to be repeated over and over in events that are never exactly the same.

Stressing this aspect of singularity, as opposed to a traditional notion of uniqueness, Derrida never claims to offer a reading of a text as an organic or self-contained whole but, rather, intaking up a literary work, to write ‘a text which, in the face of the event of another’s text, tries to ‘respond’ or to ‘countersign.’”

This response to singularity opens onto the most general questions of meaning and the conditions of experience. And it is a provocation to reading. ‘Reading,’ Derrida writes, ‘must give itself up to the uniqueness [of the work], take it on board, keep it in mind, take account of it. But for that, for this rendering, you have to sign in your turn, write something else which responds or corresponds in an equally singular, which is to say irreducible, irreplaceable, “new” way: neither imitation, nor reproduction, nor metalanguage.’ (69-70)

This writing on and in response to literature impinges on literary and critical culture in that it makes the goal of one’s writing on literature not, as various hermeneutics of suspicion and historicisms may have seemed to teach us, one of mastery, in which the critic tries to demystify other contextualizations and outflank all other commentators, scrutinizing their assumptions. Nor is it a matter of producing knowledge about the literary productions of a period. Rather, you should try to respond with writing that is rich enough and idiomatic enough to provoke responses in its turn – not an easy matter, of course. ‘Good literary criticism,’ writes Derrida, ‘the only worthwhile kind, implies an act, a literary signature or countersignature, an inventive experience of language, in language, an inscription of the act of reading in the field of the text that is read’ (52). This is a tall order, not at all easy to do, of course, which helps explain why this critical work on literature has not so far been a model for literary studies, but it certainly offers possibilities for the humanities. Students in the US are greatly attracted to creative writing courses offered by English departments, and while much of this attraction may flow from the rampant modern ideology of self-expression, it is quite possible that a fundamental draw here is also here a desire to write in interesting, creative ways. Such desire could be channelled in new directions in literature courses if, instead of demanding ‘sound’ interpretive essays, they encouraged students to invent more freely. [I should add that this is not a lesson I have learned.]

The responsive engagement that Derrida calls ‘inscription of the act of reading in the field of the text that is read’ is provoked, Derrida suggests, by an ‘impassioning’ linked to the secret, a theme in a number of his writings on literature, from ‘Passions’ to *Given Time* and ‘I Have A Taste for the Secret.’ [This is a complicated matter, but interesting, so I ask you to indulge me here] Derrida’s early reading of Plato’s *Phaedrus* began, ‘A text is not a text unless it hides from its first comer, from the first glance, the law of its composition and the rules of its game. Its law and rules are not, however, harboured in the inaccessibility of a secret; it is simply that they never can be booked [*livré*] in the present, into anything that could be rigorously called a perception.’^{viii} Here the notion of secret – which is rejected as a model --seems linked to something hidden that could be revealed, made present – which is not the case with a text, whose threads have to be teased out, or articulated in a reading. Much literary education has unfortunately, seemed to have proceeded on the presumption that there is a secret, that the text harbours a secret meaning (for some critical schools, what the author intended, for others not even known to the author) – a secret which the teacher doubtless knows and which students have to attempt to uncover or at least guess at: ‘what is this text really about?’ Derrida’s rejection of the model of a secret that could be known is potentially salutary.

Twenty years after ‘Dissemination,’ in ‘Passions,’ Derrida repeats as a refrain the phrase, ‘*il y a là du secret,*’ which could be clumsily translated as ‘there is something of the secret there.’ The secret now functions as a limit – not as a content that might be detected or revealed.

Derrida’s later understanding of literature links it to ‘a secret without secret,’ as what impassions us in our engagement with literature.^{ix} Literature depends upon the *call* of the secret, which, he writes in ‘Passions,’ ‘points back to the other or to something else....the secret impassions us.

Even if there is none, even if it does not exist. Even if the secret is no secret, even if there has never been a secret.’^x What pulls us to literature is the sense of a secret, even though it is a secret that could not possibly be revealed –perhaps ‘secretiveness’ would be a more apt characterization: the sense of a secret despite our knowing that there is no truth to be revealed. A broader recognition of the centrality of this structure to the appeal and functioning of literature might help to free literary study from the students’ sense that they are, in their ignorance, being asked to discover and reveal the secret of the text.