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## ON LITERATURE AND ETHICS

### AN INTERVIEW WITH J. HILLIS MILLER

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The interview that follows was conducted at the University of Zaragoza, Spain, 29 April 2005. Professor J. Hillis Miller had delivered a series of lectures on ethics and literature as part of the graduate course “Coming out of relativism: The re-evaluation of history and ethics in recent US fiction.”

*In your writings, you have repeatedly called attention to the problematic relationships between individual examples and conceptual generalisations. In fact, you have been very cautious in advancing that your selection of examples to illustrate the ethics of reading is arbitrary and inevitably conveys a certain bias. You have also stated that establishing a synecdochal link between example and context, or example and theory, may be misleading or even wrong. Furthermore, in *The Ethics of Reading* there is the assumption that each text is unique and demands a unique response. That is, each reading answers to a singular linguistic imperative. Considering all these issues, is there still any room left for a general theory of the ethics of reading?*

Yes, of course. It would be a theory based on the problematic you have outlined. What you said in paraphrasing me was theoretical. It did not have any examples. It was a theoretical formulation about singularity and about the problematic relation between example and generalisation. It was a theoretical construct. That means you can have a general theory of the difficult relation between general theory



and a particular case. You expressed that general theory very well. I do not see any problem with that. It is theory, highly theoretical. It is even general, that is, implicitly applicable, without modification, to innumerable examples. For example, in my lecture yesterday I was expressing a theory about the specificity of ethical decision *à propos* of Sethe's decision in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. What I advanced was a theoretical proposition. I do not really see any problem about doing that. There is a problem, however, about how actually to carry out, in a concrete situation where a decision is demanded, what my proposition proposed. I heard at a conference recently in Ghent, in Belgium, a marvellous plenary speech given by a sometime student of

mine, Carol Jacobs. She is now a Professor of German and Comparative Literature at Yale. She has been working on Plato's *Republic*. She had a lot to say about the notion of justice, which is what Plato's *Republic* is about. Her lecture was, I would say, very scrupulous. I do not really like the word deconstruction anymore, so let me say that Jacobs' talk was a putting in question of the traditional assumptions about what Plato was saying by emphasising the *mise-en-scène* of the *Republic*. Plato places Socrates halfway between Athens and Piraeus. He is outside Athens, beyond its borders, but not yet in Piraeus.

Professor Jacobs went on to talk (as people do now, but did not use to do) about the way Plato's dialogue is a kind of narrative. It tells a story. Then she emphasised the way in which the search in the dialogue for justice—*dike*—is not satisfying. That is to say, it turns out to be not easy to define. That is typical of Plato's dialogues: a failure at the end to come to a satisfying conclusion and a promise to go on with the investigation at another time. In the question-answer period after Professor Jacobs' lecture—this is the point in the story I am telling—somebody in the audience asked her whether she was prepared to generalise on the basis of what she had said about the relations among politics, justice, and individual ethical responsibility. Jacobs is more rigorous than I am. She was firm in her denial. She answered: "No, I have been talking about Plato's *Republic*. I was not saying anything about whether or not what happens in the *Republic* can be universalised. You cannot generalise from what I have said. I was just talking about Plato." That is the correct answer, perhaps even more correct than what I said in my lecture yesterday, in which I succumbed to the desire to generalise. Few people, certainly not I, have Carol Jacobs' rigor.

Here is another example of rigor. The reader encounters a lot of Derrida's own theory in his essay, "Force of Law," of the relation between justice and law. This theorising comes in the preliminary section of that essay, as a preparation for a reading of Walter Benjamin's "Zur Kritik der Gewalt." The first part of Derrida's essay generalises about the non-congruence between law and justice. Derrida suggests that you could say, "If I follow the law, a pre-existing law, then you could say what I do is lawful, that is, I have obeyed the law." However, you cannot say it is just, since justice for Derrida always involves a free decision. Or, in a quotation he makes from Stanley Fish, "Every judge in applying the law has to make a fresh judgment." You could say that the relationship between the law and any particular case brought before the judge or jury is analogous to the relationship between literary theory, or ethical theory, and a particular case.

Why does the judge have to make a fresh judgment? Because the judge has to decide whether a given law applies to this particular case. That does not go without saying. The lawyer for the defence often tries to defend the accused by saying: "This law does not apply to my client. It is inapplicable in this case, because the circumstances of the case are different."

A judge's courtroom decision is a speech act of a peculiar kind. There is also a surprising passage in J. L. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words*, the Bible of speech act theory. Austin presents many examples that come from the law and makes many complicated references to lawyers and the law *à propos* of the question of felicitous speech acts—whether a given performative utterance is felicitous or not. He says, for example, that a felicitous speech act has to be uttered in the right circumstances, by the right person, etc. Lawyers, says Austin, have over many years worked out a lot of these problems. They have done this in order to ensure that when the judge says, "I sentence you to six months in jail," the person really goes to jail. Austin faults judges and lawyers for not being aware of the degree to which their speech acts are to a distressing degree arbitrary, rather than prescribed by the law. In the amazing sentence I have already referred to, he says that the judge, in uttering a judgement, "makes law." Probably most judges would be very anxious not to have to accept that responsibility. They would be inclined to say, I imagine, "I am not doing anything but just impartially applying the law." Austin would respond, "You are wrong about that."

Something similar could be said about literary theory. Every reader has theoretical presuppositions. Yale College freshmen and sophomores, whom I used to teach, almost all thought, at least in the '70s and '80s, that they could make a work mean anything they wanted. That is a theoretical presupposition. It was a strange widely-shared ideological aberration, part of the culture of those elite students who got into Yale. Nobody reads with an open mind. You can tell students to read without any abstract preconceptions, but of course, they do

have preconceptions. You could not make any sense out of any text if you did not have many preconceptions. But when an interpretation is actually made, what is, I would say, scandalous about this act is the recognition that the interpretation of a literary work, which presumably says something about the specific text in question, looks like it ought to be constative, that is to say, a statement of fact, but it always has a performative aspect. Any interpretation implies a speech act: "I declare this work means so and so."

That fissure between the constative and the performative, matches the disjunction between law and justice. One can imagine a "lawful" reading of a text. We do get those from students. A student takes a given critic or kind of criticism—Judith Butler, feminist criticism, Derrida, Jung, Lacan, or whatever—and simply applies that to the text. Some teachers even like and encourage that deplorable activity. You ought to say to such a student, "You haven't really read the work. You just read into it certain theoretical presuppositions, presuppositions that are not even your own." Everyone, as I have said, has theoretical presuppositions, even if they are tacit and "unconscious." Good reading is defined by the encounter of something in the text that does not fit the theory you have. Good reading contradicts the reader's theoretical preconceptions, his or her expectations about what will be found in the text read. If a rigid application of a theoretical assumption corresponds to a judgment that just applies the law, a "just" reading is a reading that goes beyond theoretical assumptions to respond to the unique demand the text makes for a "fresh judgment," one analogous to the judgment of the just judge. Accepting this is difficult for students because they think that they are doing just the right thing when they "apply" Freud or whomever. They tell you, "You've been talking about Freud, explaining Freudian criticism to me, and that is what I thought you wanted me to do." But you must reply, "No, no, you haven't got the point; you haven't understood. You must read for yourself, and are always on your own when you do that." All reading opens on what Derrida calls an "indeterminable future." You

never know what is going to happen when you pick up a book and read. So, that would be my answer to your question.

*When dealing with issues concerning ethics and moral we have an immediate terminological problem related to these two terms. In your seminar on Beloved, you agreed to the opinion that Sethe did the right thing—in the ethical sense—but had no moral right to do it. Could we not otherwise think that Morrison's protagonist did the right thing, according to her own personal circumstances that had taught her a private moral law, but she had no ethical right to do so—in the sense that she was killing the other, her children? In other words, coming to a terminological matter, if we cannot get hold of the origin of the ethical, why should we interpret it only in one way?*

I remember that Morrison does not use these terms (ethics or moral). She uses the term "right," whether it was right to do something. We do not want to foist those distinctions too easily on her. Moreover, what she says is, speaking in her own voice in an interview: "It was an impossible decision." An "impossible" decision, that is an interesting way to put it. She means, I take it—though she does not say so—that either way Sethe decided, either to let her children be taken back, or herself to take them back into slavery, or to attempt to kill them, she would have done, in a sense, the wrong thing. She would have done something that she had no right to do. However, she had to decide what to do. It means that there is no clear right decision. Her formulation about doing the right thing is not in Morrison's own words either. She says that somebody else analysing her novel—Morrison does not say who this was—said: "She did the right thing, but she had no right to do it." I would say that Sethe did the right thing ethically. She acted in a way that is outside the law. Her decision was just, since it was inaugural, initiatory. It came from a spontaneous response to the demand made on her by the situation, by her context, and by her belief that there is another side to send her children to. I

think we would have a quite different meaning if she did not have this religious belief. She does not say that her decision was based on a moral law that she had developed as a slave. That is not said anywhere. What she does say is based on her experiences as a slave, but she does not generalise from that to establishing a moral law that is universal in the sense that it says: "It is better to be dead than to be a slave." She does not say that. What she says is that her experiences of slavery have led her to believe that. Nor does she say anywhere that anybody would have done the same thing in the same situation or ought to. She does not say that. That is not in the text. Nor does Morrison—at least in the interviews I have read—say anything like that, that Sethe's is a model for others' behaviour. In a sense, you could argue that my imposition on the text is the act of identifying moral with a pre-existing law or habit or whatever. I call that morality, whereas, for me, ethics is always parallel to justice. That is to say, the parallel I would make is between morality and the law, justice and ethics. You could say that what Seth does is, I would say, ethically right, but she had no moral right to do it. That is the way I would phrase the distinction, clearly reversing the use of moral and ethics that you made. That is perhaps because I am familiar with using it in that way, for example in the Kantian tradition. The word "moral" is often used in a condescending and in a denigrating way, to name the unreflective following of a moral rule by someone. Such people behave morally but they are not really just or ethical, precisely because they do not think of the unique circumstances. You may take as example the way people in my country used to blame the poverty and so-called immorality of black people on racial stereotypes. They would say something like, "What do you expect from the shiftless black people? They are very immoral. Marriage does not work for them. Black teenagers are always getting pregnant—that is immoral," and so on. "Immoral," however, is a term that you cannot easily apply if you look at the actual circumstances. The life of a particular black person is always complicated, too complicated to fit generalisations about the

innate immorality of African Americans. Morrison's *Beloved* attempts to show what life was actually like for black people under slavery. It attempts to justify Sethe's killing of her baby daughter, to persuade us to believe that she was right to do that.

*So, in that sense the moral is already an interpretation of the ethical. Or is it a misinterpretation of the ethical?*

It is an attempt to escape the burden of ethical decision by being able to say, "I do not have to think about this. This is what the Bible tells me: 'Thou shalt not kill'." That would be a moral law. That is the Old Testament, or at any rate one aspect of the Old Testament. The story of Abraham and Isaac already raises a question like that Morrison raises about Sethe and *Beloved*. Was Abraham right to be willing to sacrifice his dearly beloved son Isaac? You might say, however, that the New Testament is the place in the Bible where something like the ethical—in Kierkegaard's, Derrida's, or my own sense—is salient. Jesus makes decision difficult, as you know. He says: "I come not to destroy the law but to fulfil it." It seems to me that the change involved in "fulfilling the law" is the reason why it is so difficult to be really a Christian, why there are so few Christians. You have to believe that Jesus is the Messiah; you have to believe you should give all your money to the poor, accept poverty. I do not see too many people doing that. You have to leave your father and mother and follow Him, that is to say, disobey the law that says: "Honour thy father and mother." Jesus is very specific about that. He makes it hard to be a Christian, to say the least.

*In contemporary theory, the turn to ethics is frequently associated with Levinas' reinstallation of the ethical impulse as a pre-symbolic encounter with the other. Somehow, a religious Logos is recuperated for contemporary theory in some of his writings, a notion also questioned by Derrida. Ethics, religion and Logos: what is your opinion about this triad?*

Well, I do not know as much about Levinas' works as I should. I have read some books by him, but I can speak with only modest authority about Levinas. My position is closer to Derrida's, but perhaps not even identical to his because it veers a little more in the direction of scepticism when I have to deal with formulas like the "wholly other." I think that each and every other is an "other," but I am not sure about the "wholly other." In Derrida's case, reservations about Levinas always surface. As you probably know, in his essays about Levinas, Derrida is very respectful of him, but he always draws back. Derrida draws back, for example, by saying in effect that Levinas is too much of an orthodox Jew for him. That is to say, there is, for Derrida, too much belief in Levinas in a personified divinity who is male, patriarchal, long-bearded, up there in the sky somewhere, all-powerful, the ultimate appeal. In one of his essays, Derrida comments about Levinas that women are never salient in his works, Derrida accuses Levinas—and implicitly Judaism in general—of being sexist. Why should Jehovah not be a woman? How does Levinas know that God is a man? What is the point in making this presumption about God's masculinity? Surely, when you read the Old Testament, it is very hard to believe in it without believing in that old man in the sky with a long grey beard. Derrida does not believe in that. I think that is what makes it impossible for him to be identified with any orthodox religion, including Christianity, about which he knew a lot. I remember once, sitting in one of his last seminars, I realised that there I was, in the presence of this "deconstructionist" who was supposed to be destroying Western civilisation, but he was, on the contrary, giving a long sympathetic seminar about St Augustine. *The Confessions* was one of his favourite books. Derrida was not critical of Augustine. He was more sympathetic in his treatment of Augustine than in his treatment of Heidegger, or Kant, or Hegel. I thought that seminar on Augustine revealed a lot about Derrida.

Nevertheless, Derrida went to a lot of effort in a long essay to try to distinguish his position from what many people say he is, that is, an

example of negative theology. Negative theology is a way, by an adroit use of negation, to generate belief in a traditional monotheistic God. You say, "I do not know what God is. He is not this. He is not that. He is not the other thing, because he is inscrutable and incomprehensible." It is very tempting to say this is what Derrida is really saying, for example when he talks about "le tout autre (the wholly other)" in *Donner la mort (The Gift of Death)*. What he says can be interpreted as a kind of negative theology. I find it interesting that Derrida took it upon himself to discuss this issue. He took it upon himself to write an essay in which he says: "No, what I am doing is not negative theology." That is an important move by Derrida.

I guess you would say that in my own case I am more in sympathy with Morrison's Sethe than with Abraham. That is to say, in the ethical decisions that I have to make, I am still waiting to hear the voice from God that tells me what to do, but I have not heard it yet. Abraham hears a command from God to sacrifice Isaac, and accepts that command. Sethe hears no such voice. I wish I could. It is like believing in ghosts. I wish I could see one, as Thomas Hardy once said. In a similar way, I would be very happy to hear a little voice, the little voice of conscience speaking to me, telling me what to do, mediating God's command. So far, thank God, I have not had to make the kind of decision Sethe makes or that Abraham makes. However, my experience is more like hers in finding myself often in a situation where I must decide something important but do not get much help from moral formulas. I feel like I am pretty much on my own in decision-making. That is not too far from Derrida. However, the difference is that Derrida talks about the experience of the demand made on me by the "wholly other," and that sounds to me like some kind of little voice. It is closer to that, in any case, than my sense of having to decide on my own, so Derrida is somehow in between Levinas and me, I would say.

I was brought up a Protestant. My father was a Baptist minister. My brother is a Presbyterian minister. My grandfather taught men's Bible classes in a small Presbyterian church in Virginia

for forty years. He read the Bible very well. That is my family heritage. I do not go to church now, but I went to church until I was fourteen or so, and attended Sunday School all that time. I am sorry to say that I was often inattentive at church, daydreaming about something or other, and not listening to the sermon. Sometimes I could hear my own father preach, because he was President of a small Baptist women's college in upstate New York. He was, among his other duties, sometimes at least, the preacher on Sunday for the two hundred students at the college. They were all expected to go to church in the college on Sunday. Becoming a Baptist means that you are totally immersed in water at the age of 12, which is when Jesus was supposed to have been baptised. There is a kind of tank upon a platform. You are dressed in something like a nightgown for the ceremony and bent over backward into the water by the minister. Quite an experience. In other Protestant congregations, babies are baptised at birth. They have no chance to choose. Baptists are given a choice. You are supposed to reach the age of reason at twelve years of age and to be able to say: "I accept all that is involved." It is like Confirmation for Roman Catholics.

Now, coming back to your question, you asked about the recuperation of the Logos. I do not think that you can avoid recuperating the Logos in one way or another, but that is not an innocent event. As you know, when John in the fourth Gospel says: "At the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God," the Greek word for "Word" there is "Logos." John identifies the Logos with the Mediator, the second person of the Trinity: Jesus is the Logos. Obviously, in spite of that association with Christianity, you can have logocentrism without Christianity. It is hard, however, in the aftermath of the appropriation of Greek philosophical thought, either Plato or Aristotle, by Christian theology not to associate logocentrism with Christian theology.

Logocentrism is so intimately woven into our languages—Spanish, English, any European language—that it is very difficult to think against it. You have to use its tools against itself. I will

put this in another way. Derrida makes many reproaches to "logocentrism," which is, after all, his own invented word. You could say the whole effort of deconstruction as a mode of interrogative thinking is to put logocentrism actively in question. Nevertheless, there is a side of Derrida that is complicit with an ineradicable logocentrism, his reasonable philosophical argumentation, for example, not to mention the traces of religious thinking in his work, whatever his denials. To claim to be free of logocentrism, to say, "I am free of the Logos," is something like saying: "I do not believe in ghosts." Either is a dangerous thing to say. Just saying either is a kind of denegation that obliquely confesses the opposite of what it says.

*We would like to change the subject now. In a piece that you wrote around 1998, entitled "Literary Study in the Transnational University," you gave a panoramic view of the role and function of the study of literature and literature departments in a university transformed by globalisation and new technologies. The university was increasingly run and controlled by multinational corporations, and the study of literature had been replaced by cultural studies. After seven years, have you perceived any changes, for the better or the worse?*

That is an interesting question. I have not reflected recently on the way I formulated the question of the university then. That essay was written quite a while ago. I try to be very careful not to succumb, as sometimes older academic people do, to the tendency to say: "Oh, when I was a boy (or girl), things were in good shape in the university. Now things are getting worse and worse." This is the tendency towards idealising nostalgia. Such people tend to consider that what all these young students and teachers are doing today is pointless evasion, a sell-out. Such people say, "We used really to understand philology and literary history, now young scholar-teachers do not know anything about this great tradition and the ways it was institutionalized." I have to be sure to avoid feeling or saying

anything like that. On the contrary, I would say that there is a tremendous amount of intellectual vitality, a touching vitality, in young students and teachers in my country. This is the case with graduate students especially. Many of them have an uncertain future, since there are not enough jobs to go around. They may or may not get a job. Nevertheless, they maintain their integrity. They do dissertations on things that really interest them, even if that might make it even more difficult to get a job. This is a brave acceptance of their vocation even though it may be against their own interest. I find this very touching. It is evidence that Humanities study is certainly not going away. I also find very impressive, when I travel here and there around the world, particularly to China—to give one example of a quite different place from the United States or Europe—encountering the same kind of special energy and willingness to think outside the boxes in younger people.

Many young students and teachers in the United States, in Europe, as well as in East Asia, have turned to something called “Cultural Studies.” I am not one of those mossbacks who say: “Oh, we must draw the line. We must force students to read *Beowulf* and 18<sup>th</sup>-century English poetry, etc.,” texts they may not want to study. They want to work on film, or on television, or even on video-games, cultural forms that are of great influence today on what people think, feel, and believe, in short on their ideological convictions and on their consequent actions, for example the way they vote.

I do think that the role of literature in our culture today is changing and weakening. The evidence for this is clear. So many people spend much more of their time today watching television or using the Internet than they do reading literature. Many people still do read fiction, even though it may be romances, mystery stories, or science fiction, not Chaucer or Dickens. Nevertheless, the actual formation of voters’ ideologies in the United States is not determined by reading Shakespeare or George Eliot. Most crucial choices are determined, in good part at least, by television and by other forms of mass media. Since that is the case, it is a good idea to study these media, to find out

how they work. To think about new media critically seems to me an urgent necessity. I think this is even truer now than seven years ago, when I wrote the essay to which you refer. We now have generations of young people who have been brought up with computers, MP3 music, video games, television, and film. The lives of these people have been determined to a great degree by the effects of the new media. It is not unreasonable that they should be interested in analysing these things. I think it is a mistake to be condescending and say: “Well, the film of *The Golden Bowl* is not anything like as good as the novel.” The film is different, necessarily different. You can do things with films that Henry James could not do with words on the page, and vice versa. The differences need to be identified, rather than making a judgement.

For example, I think that now it is important to make a serious study of video games, because millions of video games are sold. This study is only beginning. There are many people, including intelligent college students, who spend a lot of time playing video games. So, I think it would be a reasonable thing to study them. Other issues we should be studying include, for example, the reasons why so many people buy the I-pod, or these little MP3 players. It is because popular music plays a huge part in their lives. They may be “post-human” when they are walking around plugged into the I-pod, but they are plugged into their I-pod, and they still look human to me. It follows that it would be a good idea to study the effects on human beings of this situation of being plugged in, and also to study the actual content of this music that they listen to.

I discovered recently that there is an important connection of popular music to video games. The audio part of video games used to be just odd sounds, shots when people were killed, etc. Now, apparently, new CDs of pop music are incorporated into the soundtrack of the video games. Often people would have heard this popular music first in the video game that they play. This means that there is collaboration between the music industry and the makers of video games. The people who make video

games, like the people who make television advertising, are smart and creative people. It would be a mistake to condescend to them.

My wife and I watch mostly public television (PBS), but we also watch network news and a certain number of network shows, so I see many of these fascinating ads. It is clear that there is an impressive amount of creativity that goes into these ads. I like best the PBS [Public Broadcasting Service] ones, because they are not really ads. There is a series that somebody made for PBS [Alfonso Cuarón's "Fish" ad won an Emmy for Best Commercial]. These "ads" are shown over and over, so they really sink into your mind. After they show an episode, they show a caption: "Be creative" or "Be courageous," or something of the sort. There is one that I have seen repeatedly and find absolutely wonderful. It shows a goldfish in a goldfish bowl, watching television. Here is this goldfish, and there is the television set. On the television screen, there is a shot of salmon leaping up a river falls. Then you see the little goldfish jump out the window. It falls down on somebody's umbrella. The fish then falls off the umbrella into a little puddle, flopping there. Then the fish jumps into a big bottle of bottled water, which a man is just about to put on a truck. He puts it on the truck and drives across a bridge. The little goldfish jumps out of the bottle into the river. In the last shot, you see the little goldfish swimming up the river falls with the salmon. Then the caption says: "Be creative," or "Think big," or something like that. Another episode in the series shows an ordinary looking man, not at all a sophisticated person in appearance. He goes into one of these photo-booths where you can take photographs. He takes a whole lot of photographs of himself with various expressions. He puts them in sequence in a book. Then he plays a record of some great tenor singing. He flips through the picture book in time with the record, so it looks like he is singing the aria. Again, there is a little caption that says: "Be courageous," "Think big," "You can do it," "Be creative," or something like that. Oddly enough, I can remember the video part in detail, but cannot remember which caption goes with which episode. That proves, I guess, that picture *is* worth a thousand words!

A lot of creativity also goes into television ads for automobiles. There has been a shift from aiming ads at male buyers of cars to aiming at female buyers. Experts in market study have discovered that the decision in a family about what car to buy is most often made by the wife. So, they change their tactics somewhat, but they still appeal—they can't resist this—to the idea that you should buy a given car because you can then drive it at 150 km/h on a narrow road. Sometimes the commercial even has a statement at the bottom saying: "This has been done by an expert professional driver. Do not try to do this yourself with your own car." Nevertheless, the appeal is to human fantasy of speed and omnipotence. If I buy this big SUV [Sport Utility Vehicle], then I can imagine myself in possession of all that power and speed. I imagine myself driving off the road, out in the desert somewhere. Many people in California and in other places own these SUV's. Hardly anybody uses them off road in the desert. They just use them to drive the kids to school or to go to the supermarket.

*At the end, the aim of the ad is always to convince you to buy something. All that creativity is only put there for a marketing purpose.*

That is right. Nevertheless, one has to recognize the high degree of creativity that goes into commercial advertising. One has to have a double attitude towards them. They have a crass goal, but they are very powerful in their effects on people, and they are often extremely clever. When studying ads, you should compare them with the cultural power of novels in the Victorian period. What to a considerable degree determined the ideology, the beliefs about courtship, marriage, the class structure, and so on of Victorian middle class people? The answer is novels. They did not have television. They did not have advertising in the same way as we do. They had newspapers with some advertising, but the novels had the greatest effect on what people thought and believed, on the way they behaved. If you want to know what the Victorian assumptions were about this

or that, read Trollope. I do not think you would say today: “Read Trollope, or read Pynchon, or read Toni Morrison to find out our cultural assumptions.” You would say: “Look at video games, look at television ads, look at movies, and look at popular music.” There is therefore every reason to study those. I am in favour of doing that. The sad side of this shift is that such study is not quite the same thing as reading Shakespeare, Dickens, Trollope, George Eliot, or Henry James. I am mossback enough to believe that there are cultural losses when so many people do not read or “study” literature anymore.

You were asking about the transnational university. It certainly is the case, that everywhere I go, in the United States and Canada, in Europe, in East Asia, I find traditional literature departments are in jeopardy in one way or another. My colleagues in Irvine—the conservative ones in the English department—are I think naïve in that they do not want to see that what is happening in the German department, the French department, or in any non-English language department, will eventually happen to them. Foreign language departments all over the United States have been amalgamated. The Administrator looks at a foreign language department and says: “You have an office; you have three secretaries; you have five full Professors and twelve other faculty, and there are only twenty students. It is not economically sustainable.” The administrators do not usually ask themselves: “Is it a good thing to have French taught even if there are not many students? Is it good to have people do study and research on French language and literature?” They ask marketing and financial questions instead. If only a few students come to study French this means for these administrators that they can just put all the foreign language departments together in a single department. They save money by having only one or two secretaries. This means, eventually, that you have Latin, Greek, Chinese, French, German, etc., all in one department. This is just one step from saying: “Do we really need more than one Professor of French? Isn’t five perhaps too many?” What I find naïve is

that some English professors still think English literature is going to survive, therefore who cares about the others. I would not be so sure, since it is just one more step to ask: “Do we need this many people teaching English literature, *English* literature, in the United States, that is, the literature of a foreign country? Do our students really need to read Chaucer? Do we need someone teaching Old English? Why?” In a university like mine, at Irvine, over half of the students are Asian-Americans. Many of them have English as a second language. You can say that we have to teach them English so they can be assimilated. We have to do that in order to make them good United States citizens. A number of states, California among them, have passed laws declaring that English is the official language. Therefore, we have to teach our students Shakespeare, to make them good citizens. That is certainly a plausible justification, but I think the reasoning is not clearly thought out by many politicians.

We are now back in a kind of McCarthy period, with the Patriot Act, secret surveillance and wiretapping, etc. The difference between the McCarthy period in the ‘50s and now is that in those days there was a specific persecution of the universities. There was a lot of interference. There was an attempt to show that university professors were communists, etc. That is not happening now. I think the reason is that they do not care what we humanists teach. They do not think that what goes on in the humanities side of the university really matters. Administrators are able with a clear conscience to say: “Yes, we still have the Humanities. They are important here in Irvine.” But just what are they good for in relation to the overall mission of the university? I asked this question once of the then President of the nine-campus University of California, President Atkinson, at a reception. He had made a speech a while before about the mission of the University of California. He was defending a huge budget request to the legislature, money from the State, now over three billion dollars. That is about the size of the entire budget of the state of Maine, just for the University of California. What he had said was that the central purpose of the University

of California is “to make California competitive in the global economy.” I think that, if I were in his shoes, I would probably say the same thing. That is the way to get money from the legislature. However, I asked him: “If this is the mission of the University of California, what, in your opinion, is the function of the Humanities in relation to that mission? How do the Humanities make California competitive in the global economy?” I asked this in the blandest and least hostile way I could think of. He gave me the right answer. It was interesting. Administrators are smart people. “Oh,” he said, “I wouldn’t presume to tell the Humanities what to do.” It was an evasion, but a tactful one. If administrators were forced to answer, they probably would say the Humanities are there to make good citizens of our people by teaching them how to think critically and how to read the great books of the Western heritage.

It is also interesting that Cultural Studies has been institutionalised with hardly any resistance from university administrators. Because they might have said: “This is a big change, not teaching Shakespeare anymore and teaching popular music, film, culture generally. You even teach Native American literature. That is not what we thought the English Department was there to do.” However, they have not done that. Without protest, they let people who have been hired to teach Flaubert, for example, change to other things. There was a woman in Irvine’s French Department who shifted from research on Flaubert to research on black women’s fashion magazines. Quite correctly, she saw such magazines as an interesting and symptomatic cultural phenomenon. Nobody tried to stop her from making that radical change in her teaching. It shows the power of academic freedom. In the United States, just because you have been hired to do something, once you have tenure nobody tries to stop you from teaching whatever you like. I have myself benefited from that in my shift from purely English texts to texts in French and German, along with English. Nobody tried to stop me from becoming a comparatist, though I had no credentials for that.

Since I wrote the essay you mention, the situation has advanced in the direction of further

internationalisation of the university. For example, since I have been here at Zaragoza on this trip, I have seen in an e-mail that the University of California at Irvine has recently been given a large amount of money to set up a Persian Studies Centre. That will make Irvine in Southern California an important place to study Iran, Iraq, and so on. You can see why that has happened. The money apparently came from some very rich Saudi-Arabian donor. The university administration accepted the gift, because the Islamic Middle East is a good thing to study these days, even in a place about as far away from “Persia” as you can get in the United States, though southern California no doubt has a good many citizens from what used to be called “Persia.” That is parallel to the way science has come to be studied in California, though it was not initially a centre for scientific innovation. Anything can and should be studied everywhere, without much reference to local culture. That is a feature of globalisation.

On the other hand, I think the main big change that is happening quite rapidly is the emergence of China and India as major capitalist countries with tremendous economic and military power. They are becoming much more powerful economically than Japan because their resources are greater and they have much larger populations. They are also rapidly industrialising. Eighty per cent of the goods sold in our mammoth retail store chain, Walmart, are made in China. Why? Because they are cheap and well made, as a result of low labour costs. The United States has lost in recent years one million jobs to China. Nowadays in the United States when you call up to order something from a catalogue, you hear a voice speaking from India. Our retail companies outsource their catalogue answering systems. At the other end of the line, you hear a very polite Indian voice who has the catalogue on the computer screen, and from whom you may order this or that article. That is happening more and more. Our Government has even outsourced part of the Department of Homeland Security to India. One might object, “This is crazy, this is our homeland security department, and you are now having some of its work done in *India*? What about the security

of the Department of Homeland Security?" They answer that it is a matter of saving so many millions of dollars a year. Indians are very good at software. As you know, India has a big Silicon Valley, and they are not doing just routine work. They do high quality creative software. Technology is a basic component of the so-called "posthuman being." Technology skills can be rapidly assimilated anywhere in the world. It does not take generations, as you could argue what humanists study, in a way, does, in spite of the rapid spread of American films and popular music all over the world. I sometimes wonder whether we Americans or United Statesians can ever really understand British literature, in spite of the similarity in language. British culture is so different from our own, the class structure for example. Programming and other technological skills can be rapidly taught to anyone all over the world. Indian workers have become good in this field, as good or better than our own programmers and computer designers.

*Finally, why do you not like the use of the word "deconstruction" anymore?*

The answer to that is very simple. It is because the word "deconstruction" triggers assumptions in people's minds that are often based on misinformation. That is why. The power of the media is such that they have put in people's minds a distorted conception of what deconstruction is for Derrida, but which, nevertheless, is one widely disseminated concept of deconstruction. That misconception is one of the things deconstruction is. Derrida invented the word. He based it on Heidegger's "Destruktion." Derrida put another syllable in and made it into the more complicated term

"De-con-struction." Negative and positive together. The word has now become indispensable. My wife shows me uses of the word she finds in home decorating magazines, architectural magazines and so on. She showed me an article recently about an architect who says: "first we deconstructed the house..." [laughing]

*Even here, we have popular uses of the term. The famous chef Ferrá Adriá also "deconstructs" different dishes. He uses explicitly the term "deconstruction" as in "desconstruir un plato."*

That's neat! For the whole world, "deconstruction" has become a necessary word. I am delighted to hear that a great chef deconstructs a dish. However, the term is frequently used in a misleading way in reference to Derrida's work or that of other so-called "deconstructionists." Often you hear people saying, "Well, deconstruction. It means destroying everything. Derrida is immoral. He is undermining western civilization. He is a relativist who believes you can make the text mean anything you want, that it has no meaning in itself, etc." So if you say: "I am doing deconstruction," people rush to the conclusion that you are doing what they mistakenly think Derrida was doing. If you try to explain what you are actually doing, it takes a long time, and probably it does not persuade them. They just look puzzled and dubious. They say: "No, no, I know what deconstruction is. It is dangerous. It is the destruction of western civilization. It is the destruction of the recipe and taking apart the fish or the building or the poem or whatever..." [laughing]

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## **The ESSE Book Award**

The ESSE Book Award is a new scheme, and the competition was open until the 1 February deadline for prizes that will be awarded during the course of the next ESSE Conference in London. There was a total of 41 entries from 14 different countries, more in Literature (26) and Linguistics (10) than in Cultural Studies (5). The next competition, for prizes to be awarded in Aarhus in 2008, will be announced in the Autumn issue of *The Messenger*.