DIFFÉRANCE, DEFERENCE, AND THE QUESTION OF PROPER READING

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Article:

The early Greeks were aware that situation, propriety, and originality comprised a unity, and they believed that this unity marked the difference between grammar and the full speech of discourse. Isocrates, for example, said in "Against the Sophists" that

> . . . the greatest proof of the difference between these two arts is that oratory is good only if it has the qualities of fitness for the occasion [$\kappa\alpha\iota\rho\omega\nu$], propriety of style [$\pi\rho\epsilon\pi o\nu\tau\omega$], and originality of treatment [$\kappa\alpha\iota\nu\omega$], while in the case of letters there is no such need whatsoever.[1]

Of these the central term is *prepon* [$\pi\rho\epsilon\pi o\nu$]. As Max Pohlenz has brilliantly demonstrated, the history of classical art theory is in fact the history of the concept of the proper.[2]

In the last decade the notion of propriety has again become problematic for literary theory. The problem is not merely that twentieth-century developments in phenomenology undermined projects that describe truth in terms of representation, or that extensions from structural linguistics to semiotics have forced philosophers of language to contest the idea of the text upon which these projects depend. The problem is more far-reaching because modern thought has simply forgotten the meaning of *prepon* altogether.

In the late twentieth-century, the forgetting of *prepon* has become acutely noticeable in literary criticism because so many popular theories derive from deconstructive or hermeneutic philosophy. I do not mean to claim that the forgetting of *prepon* originates from these philosophies, or that these philosophies are the only ones which encourage critics to forget *prepon,* or even that deconstructive and hermeneutic methodologies cannot be useful tools for critics concerned with the question of propriety. I chose these two methods for consideration here simply because in the present scene of literary theory it is rhetorically impossible to address the issues involved in the question of proper reading without first distinguishing them from the issues of deconstruction and hermeneutics. This of course requires an examination of what is meant by propriety in these two philosophies.

I

The question of whether proper reading is possible in a post-structural context is often confounded since the word "proper" in English and other major European languages combines at least three senses which are distinguished clearly in Greek. Jacques Derrida calls attention to these senses in "White Mythology." The essay argues that a purely structural explanation of metaphor — exemplified by Aristotle's definition in the *Poetics* — will always attempt to ground the internal relations of the metaphoric structure in the integrity of the "proper" name. Proper names, in this sense, bear essential truth. Metaphor reveals nonessential properties; but, Derrida points out, although metaphor need not reveal essence, unless the essence of the substituted term is present to consciousness, the properties of its referent cannot be attributed to the referent of the missing term. The negative moment of metaphor, the moment in which A not only is B but also not B, cancels the possibility of the metaphor's having a "proper," that is, universal referent. As a result, "the figure of speech sets out on a

voyage into a long and hidden sentence, a secret recitative, with no assurance that we shall be led back to the proper name."[3] However, although Derrida claims that metaphor cannot display "proper" — universal, literal — sense, he carefully isolates what he means by the proper from the other terms Aristotle uses which usually are translated in French by *propre* (and in English by "proper").

The first term, *idion,* is the one Derrida focuses on; it refers to the "literal" sense of a term. As such, it is closely associated with the concept of "property" in the *Topics.* Derrida claims that in the Aristotelian scheme this kind of propriety underlies metaphor's ability to substitute one term for another and still make sense. But in the case of those metaphors missing a term (paradigmatic for Derrida) the "proper" sense is always just out of reach — deferred. Derrida can make this claim only because he assimilates the second term for the proper — *kurion* — with *idion. Kurion* refers to a noun's "current" or "ordinary" usage. Since metaphor is defined in the *Poetics* precisely as the transference of an alien *(allotrios)* name (in one of four ways), and since the alien is defined in its opposition to the current, metaphor is by definition "improper." This assimilation requires accepting the following argument:

> Though the difference between *kurion* and *idion* is never explicitly dealt with, it seems that the first notion, which is more frequent in the *Poetics* than in the *Rhetoric,* designates the property of a name in its dominant, its chief or capital sense. We must not forget that this sense of sovereignty is also the guiding sense of *kurion.* By extension, the *kurion* is interpreted as a primitive (as opposed to derived) sense, and sometimes is equivalent to the current, literal, or familiar sense. . . . ("WM," 47-48)

But Paul Ricoeur strongly opposes Derrida's assimilation of the current into the literal:

> Must one say that ordinary usage has to be "proper," in the sense, of primitive, original, native, in order for there to be deviation and borrowing? It is but one step from the idea of ordinary usage to that of proper meaning, a step that leads to the eventually customary opposition between *figurative* and *proper.* Later rhetoric takes this step, but there is no evidence that Aristotle took it.[4]

The issue here is whether or not metaphor needs to refer to the properties of a referent in order to state something meaningful. Derrida's position, simply put, is that *if* metaphor needs to so refer, that is, if its statements must have "truth value" to be meaningful, then it is not meaningful. Ricoeur's position is that metaphor need not refer to the properties of a referent to be meaningful.

Derrida's intent, as always, is to undermine structuralism from within - not to propose a theory of proper reading. Writing *sous râture,* he is marking the structuralist formulation of Aristotle's thought. Nevertheless, almost offhandedly Derrida observes that in Aristotle, although in one sense metaphor is by definition improper, in another "Nothing prevents a metaphorical *lexis* from being proper - that is, appropriate *(prepon),* suitable, decent, proportionate, becoming, properly related to subject and situation, to things as they are" ("WM," 47). Metaphor is not proper (current, ordinary - *kurion)* by definition, yet it must be proper (suitable, appropriate - *prepon)* in use.

Ricoeur is apparently in agreement:

> . . . the problem of use brings up that of "appropriate" use *(prepontôs khrêsthm). It* is a question of "metaphorizing well," of "using in an appropriate way" the processes of *lexis. (RM,* 23)

The difference between the two lies in what "use" means. Once *kurion* and *idion* are collapsed, use becomes "application," and we end up with a nominalist theory of language like that of Nelson Goodman[5] or in the semiotic "prison house." If *kurion* and *idion* remain distinct, however, using metaphor becomes discovery:

> For - and this is precisely the point - to metaphorize well cannot be taught; it is a gift of genius, of nature *(euphuias to sêmeion estin).* Are we not now back at the level of finding or inventing, of that heuristic that . . . violates an order to create another, that dismantles only to redescribe? *(RM,* 23)

And thus we are apparently back to old debate, of whether the world makes sense or whether only we make sense of the world.[6]

But the issue in this debate can be described in another way. If Derrida's view is correct, the ambiguity surrounding the difference between the *kurion* and the *idion* allows what is in fact a purely linguistic change, the proportional metaphor (a change at the level of *lexis),* to be described as a change in the perception of *phusis* (a change at the level of *dianoia),* that is, as a recognition of resemblance or similarity. Derrida wants to show that although "metaphor (or *mimesis* in general) aims at the expression of knowledge" ("WM," 48) it cannot truly do so. Ricoeur, however, wants to resurrect metaphor's power to instruct.

Resemblance, from his point of view, occurs not between the things themselves, but between the ways things are understood. Metaphor "suspends" reference; it does not set up a proportional ratio. Although one states the problem negatively and the other positively, Derrida and Ricoeur are not in conflict, at least on this issue. Formulated as a purely intra-linguistic change in difference, metaphor is ultimately incoherent. To understand metaphor as a coherent change in meaning, theory must step outside the rules of semiotics, and it must shift its attention from the literal to the current, from the word's relationship to things themselves to the world's relationships to contingency and circumstance.

What can be said for metaphor can be said for reading problems in general: there is a vast difference between examining a statement to determine its ability to convey an understanding of metaphysical truth and examining a statement to determine how whatever we understand (or think we understand) is understood. The difference between Derrida and Ricoeur — or between Derrida and Heidegger, since Ricoeur is decidedly Heideggerian in this aspect of his theory of interpretation — is more than a difference of method. Although both appear to inquire about the nature of proper meaning, one asks about the nature of *idion,* the other of *kurion.*

One of Derrida's chief claims is that an entire class of concepts — "metaphysical" concepts — are intrinsically improper whenever they are applied to reality. In other words, it is always improper to take a metaphysical concept literally. Much of Western thought, Derrida claims, has been built upon the fact that the force of the propriety of usage *(kurion)* has covered over an impropriety of application.

II

Much of Derrida's work can be understood as an exploitation of the fact that, strictly speaking, one cannot ask of a piece of writing if it is fit for a specific occasion *(kurion),* as Isocrates rightly pointed out. Writing is seldom meant for the occasion in which the writing takes place. It always presents us with a clear instance of "literal" meaning *(idion).* We might say that the act of writing necessarily abstracts the *idion* from the *kurion.* Derrida's great insight is his recognition that the linguistic reduction — the separation of *langue* from *parole* — has precisely the same effect on propriety that writing does; that is, it silently collapses the *kurion* into the *idion,* so that, although *langue* has no references, which are necessary for the proper performance of the *kurion,* after the reduction we tend to interpret the structural remains of discourse as if there were still references — as if there were still something to read.

Derrida's most famous "non-concept," *differance,* plays upon the necessary absence of writing's references, and therefore upon the reader's incapacity to grasp properly (as *kurion)* what is read.

Traditionally, the sign is first and foremost a substitute for its referent, whether considered as a present thing or as the sign's sense. But when the referent is not there (when what is absent cannot be made present), we go, as Derrida says, "through the detour of signs" *(SP,* 138). This detour is always at work in writing. According to the law of difference, as I write now I make sense only by referring to other senses, by deferring a present grasp to

ever further elaboration. The parallel phenomena for linguistics is that sense itself has no positive value: signs are signs in the first place only by virtue of their differences from other signs. Saussure maintains this thesis of arbitrariness as the first principle of semiology. In *Of Grammatology,* Derrida's deconstructions undercut the assumed correspondence between sound and sense which, Saussure had thought, guarantees the relation between the sign and its referent. Speech, rather than guaranteeing a self-presence (guaranteeing that at least I know what I mean) is found to be always already writing, that is, always cut off from the here and now, from the present about which I speak.

Whether or not one accepts Derrida's reversal of the dominance of speech over writing, one has difficulty denying that any given piece of writing (text) whose meaning cannot be "grounded" in speech (such as by questioning its author or by empirically "pointing" to the phenomena in question), or that any text which one considers a text as such (that is, as a self-enclosed entity), is governed by what Derrida has called the "structurality of structure."[7] The minimal claim of this concept, one that can be accepted without accepting Derrida's other claims, is that the moral implications of any given written text will be carried semiotically through a series of structural linkages which are ultimately governed by a single metaphysical opposition — such as good/evil, truth/falsity, freedom/oppression, etc. — and which in turn cannot be grounded in any way except through further linguistic linkages. The unity of the difference between the terms of such an opposition cannot be found in either the speech act of the speaker or in any definite, experienceable phenomena. Ultimately, the difference between the terms of the opposition is historically constituted by the history of writing itself through a process of linguistic deferral of sense and through the force of what Derrida calls the "traces" of former constitutions of sense.[8] Very simply put, the way one reads the difference between, say, good and evil in any one text is completely the product of the way one has read this difference in other texts.

This last statement, however, although perhaps a good first approximation of Derrida's theory, is a trivialization of it. The subjectivity of the "one has read" is entirely absent from Derrida's version of *differance* and is more in line with structuralist philosophy *per se,* which always assumes that reading will always be the product of the subjectivity of the subject, that is, the imposition of the reader's own project on the passive structurality of an enclosed text.

Derrida proposes that *differance* produces differences — not *differance* understood as the combined movement of differing and deferring, but *differance* as the underlying unity of the two. Differences, says Derrida, "have not fallen from the sky ready made" *(SP,* 141); they are historical phenomena. From now on Derrida "shall designate by the term *differance* the movement by which language, or any code, any system of reference in general, becomes 'historically' constituted as a fabric of differences" *(SP,* 141). Beneath the dual movement of difference and deferment, moves another, more general, containing both.

This primordial movement makes signification possible by sustaining the "interval" between the signified present and its negatives. Any present is present only so long as it retains its relation to its past and to its future and yet maintains its absolute difference from them. If the interval were not sustained, past, present, and future would merge, undistinguished, leaving an unmitigatedly spatial "world." If the interval were sustained only by consciousness, its lapses and shifts would leave the world unintelligible. Since the linguistic reduction eliminates the possibility of the interval's being sustained by the consciousness of the individual speaker, the interval must be sustained by the movement of language itself, by the unity of spacing and temporalizing.

Sustaining the interval, which in turn allows the present signified to be itself, is therefore not the function of the self, but of what Derrida calls the "trace," a concept he develops through Freud. Every act of signification *breaks a path* through the economy of differences, leaving a trace as it goes; every such act must find its way through patterns of past traces. These past traces act as forces, limiting and guiding the movement of the "present" trace, which as it moves along differentiates its trace from others not its own: "The concepts of trace *(Spur),* of facilitation *(Bahnung)* [literally - "path-breaking"], of forces of facilitation are . . . inseparable from the concept of difference" *(SP,* 149). We thus have an economy of force encountering an economy of

difference, forces which produce differences by breaking them up, differences which divert and defer forces without finally stopping them.

Since the trace, being neither of the subject nor the object, sustains the interval ("represented" in writing by the non-signs of spacing between words and punctuation) the trace remains silent. Like the undulation of ocean waves, the differentiations of sense appear on the shores of consciousness, but the origin of the forces producing them is lost in the distant horizon. As with the Freudian unconscious, the Derridian alterity - the ultimate referent of the signifier - "is definitely taken away from every process of presentation in which we would demand for it to be shown forth in person" (*SP,* 151). The "other" of present consciousness is always lost in a "dead time."[9]

In assigning to the "trace" the function of sustaining the interval, Derrida seems to imply a pathetic consciousness, a consciousness unable to take hold of its time, being no more than a function in a system. Having such a consciousness, man has never been in touch with his Being; he commands no essential force. Apparently, what we are to assume is that the only force possible is the arbitrary force of interpretation, a force justified merely by the rhetorical authority of the interpreter.

But is this Derrida's view? To answer this question is difficult because in the essay "Differance," as he often does, he juxtaposes his *differance* as the "abyss between Being and beings" with the Heideggerian difference - with difference as the forgotten difference between Being and beings.

However, the fact that Derrida juxtaposes his view of difference to Heidegger's rather than arguing against it implies the answer: Derrida cannot argue against Heidegger's view simply because he does not offer a contrary view of the same phenomena. Derrida is concerned with one kind of propriety, Heidegger with another. Derrida, of course, can criticize Heidegger for claiming that he destroys metaphysics through a critique of *kurion.* In effect, this is what Derrida does by offering his critique of *idion.* But the question of which of these two critiques of metaphysics is the more valid as a critique is purely a question for philosophy; it is not a question for literary criticism. The question here is whether the processes that each critique reveals — processes involved in the reader's relationship with language — are the processes central to the concern of the reader as critic.

If at least for the time being we can define criticism as an activity whose purpose is to evaluate the relative worth of particular pieces of literature, then (again provisionally) we can say from the beginning that neither grammatological deconstruction nor hermeneutic interpretation can serve as the central methodology of literary criticism. The problem lies with their relative exclusionary principles, that is, their definitions of propriety. Deconstruction can exclude texts which improperly center their structures on "metaphysical" oppositions, or, since this would pretty much exclude everything, it can refuse to exclude anything, and heap its praise and focus its attention upon texts which call attention to their own ungroundedness, to the fact that they are writing.

Heideggerian hermeneutics, on the other hand, with its focus on our everyday understanding and the propriety of circumstance *(kurion),* must include anything which is thoroughly situated in its time and place, and it will praise that which exemplifies situatedness or being bound by limitations. It is the very opposite of criticism in that it defines understanding in terms of engagement and presence, rather than critical distance.

III

Heidegger is able to analyze signification in its relationship to the *kurion* because, rather than performing the linguistic reduction,[10] he performs the phenomenological reduction which disengages consciousness from the natural attitude, which posits existence — for the sign, proper ("literal," *idion)* meaning. At the same time, however, this move leaves the sign's relationships to entities other than and including other signs intact, albeit in a general, non-specific manner, thus putting Heidegger's analysis at the "ontological" level as opposed to the "ontic," the level of the historically specific, particular situation (the level of the *prepon).*

Thus, unlike Derrida's *differance,* which attempts to follow the trace of the difference which establishes the identity of the sign, Heidegger's seeks the trace of the "ontological difference," the forgotten difference between Being and beings. For a theory of reading, the ontological difference is analogous to the difference between meaning *(Bedeutung)* and sense *(Sinn).*[11] Sense is to meaning as beings are to Being. Whereas for Derrida the trace of *differance* is effaced and its source forever lost, thus rendering the sign incapable of grounding, in and of itself, its proper *(idion)* meaning, for Heidegger, though the trace of the ontological difference is effaced the moment sense is made present, that trace "remains preserved" *(H,* 336; *SP,* 157) so that its path and its origins are recoverable.

Put into terms of reading theory, when we attend to signs a sense, or structure, of the text comes to light and a meaning, or content, comes to light, but we then necessarily forget the relation between them — the differentiation of one from the other. Since the trace of this difference is not apparent, it is natural to think that the structurality of the text — the sense it makes — is its meaning, just as metaphysics tends to think that the totality of being is Being, when in actuality the movement of difference is what is truly at stake.

This difference can be recovered, according to Heidegger, only by letting the sign be seen as it is *in use,* which means, among other things, that the analysis of the ontological difference must take place without benefit of the linguistic reduction.[12] The reduction disengages the sign from its relationships to all entities other than signs, and since it is precisely these relationships which are at stake at the level of the *kurion,* signs must be allowed to be involved with them.

In *Being and Time* Heidegger says, "Letting an entity be involved, if we understand this ontologically, consists in previously freeing it for its readiness-to-hand within the environment."[13] According to Heidegger, letting be is the non-formal *a priori* "condition for the possibility for encountering anything ready-to-hand" *(BT,* 117) so that whatever is usable for making must be discovered to be already for this use. And this includes making sense through signs: ". . . signs, in the first instance, are themselves items of equipment whose specific character as equipment consists in showing or indicating" *(BT,* 108).

Here Heidegger is careful to distinguish among indicating, referring, and relating:

> Every reference is a relation, but not every relation is a reference. Every "indication" is a reference, but not every referring is an indicating. This implies at the same time that every "indication" is a relation, but not every relation is an indicating. *(BT,* 108)

A relation *(Beziehung)* "is something quite formal which may be read off directly by way of 'formalization' from any kind of context, whatever its subject matter or its way of Being" *(BT,* 108). Relations, in other words, are *structural* in the sense that Derrida uses that term. A reference *(Verweisung)*[14]*,* however, is encountered only in our dealings with equipment," which in turn ". . . is essentially 'something in-order-to' . . " *(BT,* 97).

Now the sign is a kind of equipment. As such, like all equipment, it is constituted by reference (among other references). Unlike other equipment, its specific "in order-to" is to indicate, to point toward *(BT,* 109). The sign, therefore, is not essential to the Being of the ready-to-hand as such. The ready-to-hand is already there, waiting for its sign.

We must note, then, that a reference finds its place in the referential totality to which it belongs under the direction of the "toward-which" of the whole. Likewise, the sign — even if it finds its "place" in its difference from other signs — still belongs to the same totality as that of the reference it merely indicates or marks. A sign cannot be "a Thing which stands to another Thing in the relationship of indicating"; rather, it is *"an item of equipment which explicitly raises a totality of equipment to our circumspection . . ." (BT,* 110). Accordingly, a sign cannot be "authentically encountered" from a theoretical standpoint; it can be so encountered only *in use.*

Thus when Heidegger asks, "What is the appropriate way of having to do with signs?" his answer is to "give way" to them, to take a direction from them, to let them be themselves in their reference of indicating. So long as I look at the sign only in its relations to other signs, I prevent it from doing its work as equipment arid completely miss its references. For not only is the reference not a thing, it is not a sign; rather, it is "the foundation upon which signs are based" *(BT,* 114). But, if the difference between the reference and the indication is not formal but thoroughly practical, then I can authentically grasp the sign only when we are already concerned with the equipmentality it refers to.

Moreover, I must understand in advance (though not necessarily thematically that letting the sign do its work as equipment — letting it be involved in a context of references — is but one special kind of relation within a totality of references:

> Whenever we let there be an involvement with something in something beforehand, our doing so is grounded in our understanding such things as letting something be involved, and such things as the "with-which" of involvement. Anything of this sort, and anything else that is basic for it, such as the "toward-this" as that in which there is an involvement, or such as the "for-the-sake-of-which" to which every "toward-which" ultimately goes back — all these must be disclosed beforehand with a certain intelligibility. (*BT,* 118-19)

The relational character of reference is accordingly quite different from that of indication. Heidegger calls this character "meaning" *(bedeuten).*[15] In order to grasp the sign authentically, I must first be inclined to let the sign be "involved" — I must myself become a part of the general movement of involvement.

Involvement, the "character of Being which belongs to the ready-to-hand . . ." (*BT,* 115), is always "definable as a context of assignments or references . . ." (*BT,* 121). For equipment to be equipment, something must be involved *with* other things in a complex of others *toward* something, *in order to* do something, for *the sake of* something. The movement of meaning is not simply one of difference and deferment, but one of what I shall call *deference.* To let something be involved, a sign especially, I "submit" *(anweisen)* or "refer myself" to this movement: I defer. I take a part in an *"` a priori'* letting-something-be-involved" - deference - which is "the condition for the possibility of encountering anything ready-to-hand . . ." (*BT,* 11-7). Because of this ontological deference, when I deal with an entity ontically, I can "let it be involved (defer) in the ontical sense" (*BT,* 117).

Understood ontologically, then, signs are the province of the *kurion,* not the *idion.* They never indicate the "properties" *(Eigenschaften)* of a "thing" so long as property signifies "some definite character which it is possible for things to possess" *(BT,* 114-15). Understood in terms of deference, "Anything ready-to-hand is, at worst, appropriate for some purposes and inappropriate for others; and its 'properties' are, as it were, still bound up in these ways in which it is appropriate or inappropriate" *(BT,* 115). *What we grasp through a sign is the appropriateness (Geeigentheit) of an entity's references, not a thing-in-itself, not a "concept," not a "surface structure."* That appropriateness *(kurion) is* its meaning; in turn, the meaning of a sign lies in its appropriate indication of a meaning. Truly enough, meaning "can be taken formally in the sense of a system of Relations" *(BT,* 121) - through an ascesis I can always volatize meaning into structure. Yet as Heidegger warns, "in such formalizations the phenomena get leveled off so much that their real phenomenal content may be lost, especially in the case of such 'simple' relationships as those which lurk in meaning" *(BT,* 121). One such simple relationship is the "A is B" of metaphor which, according to Derrida, stands at the center of every linguistic structure. In order to avoid covering over the phenomenal content indicated by such structures as the metaphor I must let signs refer to their equipmentality; that is, I must let them do their work of indicating or pointing toward the "references" of entities, their meanings.

Unlike Derridian *differance,* in Heideggerian deference,

> . . . the totality of involvements itself goes back ultimately to a "towards-which" is not an entity with the kind of Being that belongs to what is ready-to-hand within a world; it is rather an entity whose Being is

defined as Being-in-the-world, and to whose state of Being, worldhood itself belongs. This primary "towards-which" is not just another "towards-this" as something in which an involvement is possible. The primary "towards-which" is a "for-the-sake-of-which." But the "for-the-sake-of" always pertains to the Being of *Dasein,* for which, in its Being, that very Being is essentially an *issue.* (*BT,* 116-17)

Understanding meaning is therefore understanding what is significant for Dasein. Ultimately, for Heidegger, proper reading is deference to Dasein.

Now, we misunderstand entirely Heidegger's analysis if we take Dasein to be only ourselves - me and you, this person or that one. These signs, any signs, are not for us but, as Heidegger puts it, for "them":

. . . the "they" itself prescribes that way of interpreting the world and Being-in-the-world which lies closest. Dasein is for the sake of the "they" in an everyday manner, and the "they" itself Articulates the referential context of meaning. *(BT,* 116-17)

The "they" *(das Man)* is one of the most difficult of Heidegger's notions. Tracing the *idion* never ends but becomes a lost foray into an infinite textuality; tracing the *kurion* ends in *das Man.* According to Heidegger, everything I ordinarily do has already been done by "them" although in a general manner. The "they" is real - "the 'Realest subject" of everydayness" *(BT,* 166). I can be "concerned about" things ready-to-hand only if I have been first "concerned for" Dasein - for "them," and what "they" do *(BT,* 157). All this means is that Being-in-the-world is a Being-with-others before it is a Being-with-things. Dasein's understanding of Being always "already implies the understanding of Others" *(BT,* 161).

Heidegger's "they" clearly is the key to his theory of interpretation. "An interpretation," says Heidegger, "is never a presuppositionless apprehending of something presented to us" *(BT,* 191-92). Interpretation always presupposes some understanding. In interpretation, properly speaking, "the understanding appropriates understandingly that which is understood by it" *(BT,* 188). To appropriate *(aneigen),* to make one's own, is to understand in one's own way what he has already understood in a concrete yet general way through the "they":

In interpreting, we do not, so to speak, throw a 'meaning' over some naked thing which is present-at-hand, we do not stick a value on it; but when something within-the-world is encountered as such, the thing in question already has an involvement which is disclosed in our understanding of the world, and this involvement is one which gets laid out by the interpretation. *(BT,* 190-91)

Thus that which we can articulate has already been articulated for us in a general way by the "they" *(BT,* 203). Accordingly, when we discourse about the world - put its significance into language by making sense of it - that sense, our linguistic articulation, is always bound up with the sense that has been made of it.

More simply put, the totality of meanings (the references our talk is always primordially about) is always already broken up into sense by the everyday talk that goes with our everyday dealings with the ready-to-hand: "Meaning *[Bedeutungen],* as what has been Articulated from that which can be articulated, always carry sense *[Sinn'* (*BT,* 204). Through discourse, through our everyday use of language "words accrue" *(BT,* 204) to meanings. Heidegger's existential understanding of language stands firmly opposed to the structural view in which possible linguistic structures get *applied to* things and events in the world: ". . . word-Things do not get supplied with meanings" *(BT,* 204).

Thus for Heidegger, understanding what discourse is about must precede any structural formulations of the discourse's language. But we must always bear in mind that the "what" is primordially the entities' references of involvement - their deferential relations - and only secondarily the entities themselves as present-to-hand.

Heidegger believes that through a deferral to the "they"' we have always in principle, if not in practice, the possibility of interpreting every instance of discourse in our own language. That possibility, of course, is seldom

more than a very general, indefinite one, for it remains to the individual act of application to make each reading specifically significant for the present situation of the reader.

Nevertheless, because the affordances *(Möglichkeit* - possibility) of the sign in its Being as ready-to-hand "exert their counter-thrust *(Rückschlag)* upon Dasein" *(BT,* 188), our projection *(Entwurf)* of sense upon a text need not be, and should not be, with regard to a scheme thought out in advance. It need not be ascetic:

> Projecting has nothing to do with comporting oneself toward a plan that has been thought out, and in accordance with which Dasein arranges its Being. *(BT,* 185)

Although it is always possible, as Heidegger says, for an interpretation to "force the entity into concepts to which it is opposed in its manner of Being" *(BT,* 191), such reading ignores or forgets the counter-force of the public way; it refuses to defer, to appropriate the text within the limits of everyday understanding.

IV

The distinction between the Derridian trace and the Heideggerian trace seems sharp and definite: it seems an irreconcilable difference, as indeed it is. From Derrida's standpoint - from the view afforded by a relentless pursuit of a transcendental, or even a ultra-transcendental signified - the trace of deference Heidegger describes can be seen only as an absence of sense, an absence merely substituted for in deferment after deferment, a pursuit blindly unaware that the sign's signified is never primordially an object over and against the subjectivity of a subject. For Heidegger, the trace sustaining the interval (the difference constituting the sign itself) is of the public way from which all individual expressions arise and to which they are always leveled, a way always effaced and never made explicit (for "they" are no one) but nevertheless the presence underlying every present, a way that we first and for the most part follow.

However, although this difference is irreconcilable it is not for ail that a conflicting difference, a difference which cannot persist unless one is "wrong" and the other "right." Those of us who are concerned with reading theory must recognize that Derrida's *différance* and Heidegger's *das Man* in effect answer different questions of the same phenomena. Derrida asks *how* differences function in language; Heidegger asks *why.* These are philosophical questions which should not receive the same answer, and neither is the primary question for literary criticism.

Both Derrida's and Heidegger's answers are correct from the perspective of their own questions, yet both are completely inadequate to provide a basis for a theory of proper reading. Derrida is hypercritical. His deconstructive schemes, motivated by a quest for Truth, by a belief that a name *should* properly attach to an object over and against the subject, are predicated by an ultimate distancing, the result of reducing from language not only reference but also motive. Such a reduction exposes the sign as a mere negative, a difference from other signs which, now that it is no longer held in place by a motive, is exposed as a mere function which as a function can only defer to other signs.

Heidegger's reduction retains, in fact accentuates, motives revealing the interpretive processes of the engaged, "involved," or in other words naive reader, thus making possible the development of a reflexive hermeneutics, such as Gadamer's. Yet, this very reflexiveness prevents any measuring of the distance between the text and the self: it is decidedly non-critical, allowing an understanding of the self's engagement with the text, but not its difference from it.

Thus the questions Derrida and Heidegger ask of difference, general and philosophic as they are, and in general answers — which we can call textuality and publicness, respectively — and do little in themselves toward answering the literary critic's overriding question about the specific differences between texts and statements within texts. The preceding analysis of Derrida's and Heidegger's understanding of difference, I now must claim, exemplifies a kind of differential analysis which is specific to literary (in the broad sense) criticism even as it generates the terms within which all such analysis must take place. Criticism, what I have called "proper

reading," cannot allow differences to become the scene of dialectic or deconstruction or interpretation or any reading process which perpetuates conflict and contradiction or promotes reconciliation or subsumption. The very purpose of criticism is to be critical — it puts texts in their place. It cooperates with texts in their struggle to make a difference, but that difference being made, it enforces the distinctions those differences represent. In other words, criticism must assume the sophistic stance that whatever can be said is necessarily both true and false — it is just a matter of finding the question to which the statement might be an answer. The following represents the search for the question to which the preceding analysis is the answer:

If Derrida's theory of structurality is correct, at the center of every structure is an opposition, hierarchically ordered so that one suppresses, dominates, or excludes the other. The statement "At the center of text X lies opposition A/B in which A suppresses B" elicits the following questions:

1.   *Is this the case?* The elucidation of an answer to this question must be some sort of structural analysis, structural in the broad sense as Derrida commonly uses the term. Such an analysis need not be aware that it is answering the question in the above form; at its simplest, it need only claim that the text presents a unity of part and whole. It is critical to the extent that it consciously establishes a text from a particular point of view.

2.   *How is this the case?* This question requires a critique, a "deconstructive" response, because it presupposes the structurality of the response to question one. That is, it presupposes that the textuality of text X has been established by the answer to question 1.[16] It is hypercritical to the extent that it traces the effects of having established a point of view.

3.   *Why is this the case?* This is the hermeneutic question, and it requires an interpretation for an answer. Primarily, interpretation determines motive, or "meaning" in Heidegger's terminology. Interpretation may be structural, naive, or reflexive. A structural interpretation imports an heuristic order, such as Freudian theory or systematic theology, to elucidate the motivations for a text's arrangement of part to whole. Naive interpretation, characterized by what Heidegger calls "involvement," is unsystematic, unaware of its points of view and its presuppositions and prejudices, to use Gadamer's term. Reflexive interpretation seeks to become aware of its prejudices, presuppositions, and points of view.

4.   *Whether this should be the case?* This is the question of propriety *(prepon),* the ultimate, evaluative question for criticism. To be such a simple question — "Whether or not A should suppress B" — it seems extraordinarily difficult to answer, for it apparently requires answers to the first three questions to answer its own. However, what *prepon* means, and whether its question stakes out a special territory for literary criticism, depends entirely upon how one answers this delicate question.

5.
There are only three responses to the question of whether or not A should dominate B in the central opposition of text X:

—   Yes, A should dominate B.

—   No, B should dominate A.

These first two responses presuppose the stability of the text and require reference to some outside order, theological or ideological, which in a presumed hierarchical arrangement of texts or orders is ranked higher than the text in question. Most of what historians of criticism have called "moral criticism" respond in this way. The positive "should" of these first two responses, however, carries the implicit claim that A and B have "proper" references, proper in the sense of the Greek term *idion,* which therefore have distinguishable properties maintaining their differences without regard to the linguistic order in which the statement "A should dominate B" has been written. These first two responses accordingly will always be open to the critique of deconstruction.

— No, A should not dominate B; B should not dominate A.

This, as a universal response to our question, takes into account the character of linguistic difference, the ever-present possibility of deconstruction, and the grarnmatological conclusion that metaphysical oppositions cannot be grounded and that the determination of the text, as such, is always an act of will, conscious or unconscious. Since our language works in such a way that the choice of A over B must be arbitrary in the sense that it cannot be fixed in the properties of a referent, this response assumes that the meanings of A and B persist only in terms of our understanding of the relationship between them. When our question is answered this way, the "referent" persists only as a balance, perhaps as a tension, between A and B: there is no hierarchical ordering of the two.

Concern for *prepon,* therefore, is a concern for balance, and *prepon* itself, as the ideal balance between the opposing metaphysical terms that lie at the center of a structure, serves as a universal standard of measure against which one may weigh the actual structurality of any text.

Such a standard is possible only for non-reductive reading. Whereas deconstruction and hermeneutic retrieval require a linguistic reduction (to *langue)* and a phenomenological reduction (from postulation of existence), respectively, proper *(prepon)* reading cannot survive such reductions, since the balance in question is precisely one of the text's truth claims within particular circumstances. However, this does not mean that "proper" reading is necessarily naive reading, for the issue is not whether truth claims are legitimate or the circumstances are verifiable, but whether the claims are balanced within the circumstances as they are understood. Proper reading, in other words, attempts to define the circumstances under which the text's structure would be balanced.

Proper reading can achieve this goal because it is both engaged and critical. An adherence to the standard of balanced opposites will curtail the projection of the reader's prejudices onto the text, even though the standard cannot pre-empt faulty presuppositions, because the possibility of "taking sides" is ruled out in advance. Prejudice, of course, is necessary to the reader's pre-understanding, and a non-reductive reading according to the universal standard provides the engagement necessary for understanding. Yet, it provides the distance necessary to avoid merely idiosyncratic misreadings without having to rely on either a previously conceived heuristic order or on some kind of reduction from the full force of discourse.

In the latter methods, critical distance is achieved by the substitution or comparison of one order by or to another. Thus these methods are necessarily anachronistic because they must either re-write the text in terms not endemic to its context or they must remove it from context altogether. But proper reading is not anachronistic and can answer its question from within the text's own context simply because an understanding of the context is not necessary to be able to answer the question of whether or not the central opposition should be balanced or hierarchical: the answer is *always* that the opposition should be balanced.

But if the answer to this primary question is always the same, what good does it do to ask it? The response is simple: when this question is primary, it profoundly affects the nature of the other questions — the structural, deconstructive, and hermeneutic questions — by limiting their scope.

1.   The structural question now becomes "Is it the case that A and B do not dominate or repress one another?" The answer here will always ultimately be "no." The reason is that the standard of propriety is unrealizable, and although of course some texts will approach balance more nearly than others, given the fact of changing circumstances, perfect balance is unattainable. Altering the structural question in effect collapses the structural and deconstructive questions into one question ' "How do A and B deviate from their ideal balance?" Since the question of propriety presupposes the necessity of a balanced opposition at the center of an integrated structure, merely posing the question has the same "de-centering" effects as an act of deconstruction. Any act of structuring according to the norm of balance will be able to identify the "gaps" and "fissures" of the text. Moreover, deconstructive activity will no longer need to pursue aimlessly its signifiers into infinity or to be content with merely reversing the hierarchical order, for it will have as its aim the pursuit of the structural modifications that would have achieved a balance.

2.   The hermeneutic question now becomes, "Why is it the case that A and B are not in balance?" Just as the structural/deconstructive question, now subordinated to the question of propriety, shifts its focus from the search for textuality in general to the deviations of a particular text from a balanced order, the hermeneutic question must now focus on the "referentiality" of a particular text in a particular historical situation (more specifically, on the motivations behind the text's deviations from balance) and on understanding texts as responses to other texts. Harold Bloom's studies of "revision" are an approximate example of one level of this latter approach, but Bloom's studies depend upon "original" texts for their standpoint (originality itself being an interpretive product) rather than the ideal standard of balanced opposites.

Certainly there is a considerable amount of work to be done in order to work out the implications of this subordination of the structural/deconstructive and hermeneutic questions to the question of propriety. However, the chief effect is quite clear: these primarily philosophical questions have now become questions appropriate to the pursuit of literary criticism, questions which will allow critics to distinguish texts according to a norm, a fixed standard.

V
Now arises the issue of the worth of having such a norm. Some of the benefits have already been touched upon:

1. The norm provides a fixed standpoint which curtails the effects of ideological prejudice on evaluation while allowing them the free play necessary for understanding. In other words, adherence to the norm provides the reader with a point of view which is ideologically "neutral" since it is purely negative and can have no project of its own (A can act to suppress B and B can act to suppress A but propriety can demand only that neither suppress the other). Thus the normative standpoint is both engaged and critical.

2. The subordination of the structural/deconstructive question and the hermeneutic question to the question of propriety creates a perspective from which the former questions can be seen to be equally valuable and in fact interrelated rather than mutually exclusive opposites. The ideal goal of balanced opposites provides a fixed point from which to shift from one question and its respective level of activity to the other, and it prevents the aimless regress which these methods tend toward since they have no critical goal of their own.

A third, more important benefit follows from this last observation, namely that a reader, a concrete self, is consciously pursuing an articulated goal — a more comfortable status, for me at least, than being a mere function of a system blindly pursuing signs or a "there-being" submitting to an anonymous "'them." We can say that a self pursues this goal because he or she pursues it by exercising the power of the negative. The importance of criticism's having access to the negative has been elaborated in the American critical tradition first by Irving Babbitt[17] and later by Kenneth Burke.[18] The central point for both of these men is that the capacity to assert the negative is exclusively human, non-natural, and that it is the only possibility for attaining self criticism — the ability to criticize one's own actions or for one's method to evaluate itself. The only reason that the methods we have been discussing can be performed at all is that their negative moments are exercised up front in the form of their respective reductions. The decision to perform these reductions is indeed an act of thinking, but all that can follow such global negatives are merely descriptions of and responses to the phenomena these reductions open up. Structuralism, deconstruction, and hermeneutics cannot ask the "whether" question, so how can they answer "No"? These methods deny the reader's personal agency as they deny distinctions of value among texts. In effect, they deny the existence of the self because they methodologically exclude its possibility in advance.

Proper reading, of course, is not the only way to preserve the reader's self. "Moral" criticisms, those which ask the question "whether" from the vantage point of a theology or ideology, preserve the self but do so at the expense of the integrity of the text. Marxists, Christians, and so forth convert the "No" into a "Thou shalt not," by shifting the locus of measure from the text's own central opposition to that of an authoritative ideology. One could argue that this move also effectively suppresses the self, but even given the possibility of an authentic conversion, the move unquestionably subordinates the text to an alien set of ideas. Proper reading is the only

way of reading that can evaluate without morally condemning or praising and still allow the text its place within the world.

A fourth and most important benefit of proper reading is that it allows texts to be judged in terms of the circumstances of their production and reception. Although its emphasis on balance and centrality make proper reading seem to be yet another neo-Kantian criticism, and though indeed the judgment of propriety is a *kind* of aesthetic judgment, it is not one which presupposes an abstraction from practicality. Rather than judging the poem's or novel's structural balance after it has been disengaged from the world of practical affairs and from its relationship to textual predecessors, proper reading judges the poem's balancing response to the excesses of its predecessors and its productive circumstances as it defines them. Like Marxism, proper reading redefines criticism as a form of historical labor, though of course unlike Marxism, it has no predefined program it hopes will relace a rotten past.

VI

This is not to say that proper reading does not imply an ideology, because it does, as all methodologies do. But it is an appropriating ideology rather than a dominating or supplanting one. Marxism seeks to supplant capitalism, deconstruction to supplant structuralism, romanticism to supplant classicism, and so on. Proper reading seeks merely the appropriate place of all such isms. Words must have a place, and the ideas which are the products of words must have a place, and to be in place means to not usurp the place of others. For example, Derrida's and Heidegger's accounts of propriety differ, and it is because they differ that they can be read. But more important, because they differ one cannot replace the other. The task of proper reading is to work out how they differ, why they differ, and grasping this will always justify proper reading's starting point - the assumption that one should not replace, supplant, or dominate the other.

Thus proper reading seeks to delimit the legitimate boundaries of individual instances of discourse, boundaries that the discourses very likely do not recognize themselves. The nature of such boundaries may be infinitely various, and the procedures for discovering them may be equally various, but to the critic any such procedures will always submit to a central principle, namely, that *prepon* supercedes all other questions of propriety. For *prepon* to take its rightful place, a willing, concrete human self must exercise his or her capacity to assert the negative and resist the easier path of blindly following the dictates of the theologies, ideologies, and methodologies which may so easily replace human judgment.

NOTES
1.   George Norlin, trans., *Isocrates* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1929), pp. 11, 171.
2.   Max Pohlens, "To πρεπον: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des griechischen Geistes," *Nachrichten von der Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen* 1 (1933), pp. 53-92.
3.   Jacques Derrida, "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy," *New Literary History* 6 (1974), p. 44. Hereafter cited as "WM."
4.   Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language,* trans. Robert Czerny (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), p. 19. Hereafter cited as *RM.* In a note, Ricoeur will argue further that "The manner in which the *Topics* deals with *idion* is based on considerations completely outside the theory of *lexis,* and foreign in particular to the theory of ordinary or unusual denomination" (n. 24, p. 326).
5.   Ricoeur describes Goodman's theory this way:
      For a nominalist perspective, the problem posed by metaphorical application of predicates is no different from that posed by their literal application: "The question why predicates apply as they do metaphorically is much the same as the question why they apply as they do literally." Metaphorical sorting under a given schema conveys information just as a literal sorting does. Application in both cases "is fallible and thus subject to correction." Literal application is simply one that has been endorsed by usage." *(RM,* 236-37)
Quotations of Goodman's text are from *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (New York and Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968), pp. 78-79.

6.   Of course, labeling Derrida or Ricoeur, or Aristotle for that matter, as nominalist or realist is not entirely fair. Derrida is merely deconstructing a structuralist reading of Aristotle - he did not invent the opposition between the figurative and the literal. Ricoeur disclaims the label when he says that "the location of the theory of the proper with the *Topics* is enough to remind us that we are not here in a fundamental, or constitutive, order, but in the order of dialectic" *(RM,* 327). Yet, the similarity of the debate between these two forms of idealism (which we might call conventionalism and phenomenalism) and the Scholastic debate is striking.

7 . For the clearest explanation of this concept, see Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," *Writing and Difference,* trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 278-93.

8.   In Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs,* trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 149. Hereafter cited as *SP.* Throughout this essay, I will italicize translations of *différance (difference* with an "a"). I will silently substitute *différance* for Allison's translation (differance) in all quotations.

9.   Derrida develops the notion of "dead time" in *Of Grammatology,* trans. Gayatri Chakrovorty (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1974), pp. 65-73.

10.   Like Heidegger's, Ricoeur's recognition that the linguistic reduction (although only through it can we see that the sign remains cut off from reality) covers up the practical work of language marks the deep gulf that ultimately separates hermeneutics from Derrida's ultra-transcendentalism:

> . . . a philosophy of language need not be limited to the conditions of possibility of a semiology: to account for the absence of the sign from things, the *reduction* of relations of nature and their mutation into signifying relations suffices. It is necessary, in addition, to satisfy conditions of discourse insofar as it is an endeavor renewed ceaselessly to express integrally the thinkable and the sayable in our experience. Reduction — or any act comparable to it by reason of its negativity — no longer suffices. Reduction is only the inverse, the negative facet, of a wanting-to-say which aspires to become a wanting-to-show. ("Structure, Word, Event," in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of His Work,* ed. Charles E. Reagan and David Stewart (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), p. 118.]

11.   I reverse the usual translation of these terms to emphasize the difference between Heidegger's distinction and those of Frege, Hirsch, and others.

12.   The distinction between *langue* and *parole,* and thus semiotics in general, is useless to Heidegger's analysis since the ontological problems of the *kurion* occur at a level different from those of the *idion.* According to Joseph J. Kockelmans,

> The distinction between *langue* and *parole* is certainly not denied or overlooked by Heidegger. In *Being and Time* as well as in *On the Way to Language* Heidegger shows that he is acquainted with "traditional" conceptions of language and speech. Although he evaluates these conceptions in a positive way, he explicitly stipulates that his own thought moves not on the level of these reflections but rather on a more elementary, if you wish a deeper level. [Joseph J. Kockelmans, "Ontological Difference, Hermeneutics, and Language," in *On Heidegger and Language,* ed. and trans. by Joseph J. Kockelmans (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), pp. 231-32.]

13.   Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time,* trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York and Evanston: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 117. Hereafter cited as *BT.*

14.   Macquarrie and Robinson point out (n. 2, p. 97) that *Verweisung* is difficult to translate. They chose "assignment" and "reference," sometimes one alone, sometimes in a hendiadys. "The basic metaphor," they say, "seems to be that of turning something away towards something else, or *pointing it away,* as when one 'refers' or 'commits' or 'relegates' or 'assigns' something to something else. ..."

15.   *BT,* 120. Macquarrie and Robinson translate *bedeuten* as "signifying." To remain consistent, I shall quietly substitute "meaning" and its derivatives for "signifying" and its derivitives in all subsequent quotations.

16.   See Stephen R. Yarbrough, "Intrinsic Criticism and Deconstruction: Their Methods' Legacy," in *South Central Review ,* 3 (Spring, 1986), pp. 78-89, for an extended discussion of the methodological procedures of structuralism and deconstruction and their relationship to one another.

17.   See Irving Babbitt, "Introduction" to *"On Being Creative" and other Essays* (New York: Biblo and Tannen, 1968).

18.   See Kenneth Burke, "Definition of Man," in *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966), pp. 9-13.