LITERATURE & CRITICISM: NEW DIRECTIONS

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The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, it is an attempt to relate the theories contained in three works wherein the transition from Structuralism to Post-Structuralism is clearly evidenced: Jacques Derrida's **De la Grammatologie** (1967), Roland Barthes **The Pleasure of the Text** (originally published as **Le plaisir du texte** in 1973), and Gérard Genette's essay "Frontières du récit," published in 1966. Taking as its point of departure Derrida's idea of the absolute "neutrality" of alphabetic writing in relation to any trans-scriptural "reference" or "meaning," this essay will move through Genette's analysis of "non-representational" or "non-referential" literature, towards Roland Barthes' nontion of the literary work as a totally self-suficient and self-referential "corpus," in which "the open list of the fires of language" replaces the "semina eternitatis,' the 'zophira,' the common notions, the fundamental assumptions of ancient philosophy."[1] Second, through

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1 Roland Barthes, **The Pleasure of the Text**, (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1975, p. 17

a brief description of the new directions that these critics envision for both literature and criticism, this paper will focus on some of the limitations their theories seem to impose on the nature and function of these two activities.

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Central to Derrida's **De la Grammatologie** is the rejection of one of the basic tenets of the "logocentric metaphysicis" which, from Plato to the modern times, has dominated Western thought: the idea that speech, or the **logos**, due to its phonic origin, is the natural dwelling and the direct conveyor of the "signified" — the element which is supposedly pregnant with "meaning" and whose "formal essence" is identified with the "presence," the ultimate source of the "meaning of being" in general.[2] Breaking away from this theologically oriented logo-phonocentric philosophical tradition, and also from all the dualisms that stem from its fundamental opposition — that between the "intelligible" and the "sensible" — Derrida affirms that speech is by no means the site where the "presence," or the essential form of the signified, presents itself in its pure state. If the "presence" is pure essence,[3] it cannot present itself, unless it "repeats" itself in a different locus, that is, unless it is re-presented.[4] No presentation is possible except in re-presentation.[5] Re-presentation is therefore the indispensable "displacement" that the "presence" must undergo in order to be experienced or recognized.[6] Thence, "signifieds" exist only insofar as they are susceptible of being repeated in, or re-presented by, or "differentiated" into "signifiers." This idea is the foundation of Derrida's denial of the priority of speech over writing, which is also central to his work. For Derrida, speech is also a representational gesture. Like writing, it derives from the "trace," the site of the movement of "differentiation" that Derrida defines as "différance:"[7] both denote the "temporal delay" and "spacial differentiation" which are essential to the historical and/or existential manifestation of the "presence."[8] However, both speech and writing have always been taken for what they are not. By advocating that there is a natural connection between "sound" and "meaning,"[9]

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2 Jacques Derrida, **De la Grammatologie**, (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1967), pp. 22, 23, 31.
3 Derrida, p. 437
4 Derrida, p. 439
5 Derrida, p. 439 and passim
6 Derrida, p. 439 and passim
7 Derrida, pp. 38, 69, 88.
8 Derrida, pp. 16, 72, 397
9 Derrida, p. 21 to 23.

logo-phono-centrism has led us to believe that speech is the transparent dwelling of the "signified," and that writing is just a secondary reflection of the sounds of speech.[10] One of the major points of Derrida's argument is that writing is no reflection at all and has no connection whatsoever with sound and/or speech. Besides, in contrast to speech – which erroneously claims to be the locus of the "presence" – writing does not and must not intend to be more than it is: the locus of the "absence" (of the "presence"). In fact, the absolute neutrality of writing in relation to sound and/or speech, endows it with an "opacity" that far supersedes that of speech. And this is what makes it a "self-signifying-signifier," a genuine re-presentation, a full manifestation of the power of occultation and/or dissimulation which inhabits the core of the "presence" and which constitutes its only mode of annunciation.

What Derrida affirms in connection with alphabetic writing – its independence from speech, sound, and especially from the "metaphorical" implications that logo-phonocentrism has attached to these two elements – may be related to Gérard Genette's ideas about modern literature, as expressed in his essay "Frontières du Récit."[11] For Genette, the basic tenet of any mimetic theory of art – the idea that a literary work is a verbal representation of reality – is highly debatable and must be seriously questioned. Genette argues that once reality is translated into words, it becomes secondary to the verbal reality into which it is transposed. Words cannot imitate or represent reality; strictly speaking, they cannot imitate anything but themselves, precisely because they have a concrete reality of their own which no reality external to them can overshadow or supersede. Borrowing Beveniste's terminology, Genette affirms that modern literature has definitely moved away from "récit" towards "discours." "Recit" is the "representational" or "referential" type of narration, in which the narrative voice tends to neutralize itself as much as possible, in the interests of the events to which it refers. "Discours," on the other hand, is the narrative procedure in which the narrative voice becomes identical with a self-sufficient and self-referential utterance, with no other meaning and no other finality except those which it derives from indulging itself in an endless act of uttering. In other words, having emptied itself of any referentiality and meaning extraneous to its own "corpus," modern literature has become a "discours" which not seldom overlaps with the stream of thought of a "writer" engaged in the very act of writing. It has become the act of "writing aloud."

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10 Derrida, pp. 17, 34, 46, 47 and passim.

11 Gérard Genette, "Frontières du récit," **Communications 8** (Paris: Seuil, 1966), pp. 152-163.

This position is similar to that of Roland Barthes in **The Pleasure of the Text.** Barthes holds that, instead of aiming at "representation," literature should be pure "figuration." "Representation," according to Barthes, makes literature "a space of alibis (reality, morality, likelihoood, readability, truth, etc)."[12] "Figuration," on the other hand, is the "locus" where the text appears as a "diagrammatic and not an imitative structure," and "can reveal itself in the form of a body, split into fetish objects, into erotic sites. All these movements attest to a figure of the text necessary to the bliss of reading."[13] Barthes also says that "the aesthetic of textual pleasure would have to include: writing aloud."[14] His notion of "vocal writing," however, has nothing to do with speech. The writer must not turn the literary work into a vehicle for the expression of his emotions or the translation of his ideas, but into "a text where we can hear . . . the articulation of the body, of the tongue, not that of meaning, of language."[15] In brief, "writing aloud is not expressive . . . it is carried by the grain of the voice, which is an erotic mixture of timbre and language, and can therefore also be, along with diction, the substance of an art: the art of guiding one's body."[16]

By showing the new directions that literature has to take if it seeks to assert itself as an art in the increassingly "immediate ' contemporary world, these texts also indicate the only alternative that remains open for the critical activity. If the language of literature is moving towards the "zero of the signified"[17] if the pleasure of the text now depends on "value shifted to the sumptuous rank of the signifier;"[18] and if significance "is meaning insofar as it is sensually produced,"[19] there seems to be no future for criticism as a systematic activity. Criticism has always regarded literature as a "signifying corpus," whose "signified" — be it identified with immitative accuracy, expressive authenticity, didactic effectiveness of structural diagrammability — surpasses the level of the mere 'signifier" and must be discovered in order to be either evaluated or analyzed. Since the "text of bliss" is not designed to be intellectually apprehended, but to be sensed with the body,[20] one "cannot speak 'on such a text, but "only 'in' it, in its fashion."[21] Consequently, it

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12 Barthes, p. 56
13 Barthes, p. 56 and passim
14 Barthes, p. 66
15 Barthes, pp. 66-67
16 Barthes, passim
17 Barthes, pp. 41, 67.
18 Barthes, p. 65
19 Barthes, p. 61
20 Barthes, p. 17
21 Barthes, p. 22

seems that criticism can survive only if the literary work, making its language absorb its metalanguage, and incorporating within its own system the system that would transform it into something different from itself, becomes its own critical text. In other words, by looking at itself critically, by de-constructing itself, the literary work will be able to accomodate within its own boundaries the evaluative, interpretative and/or analytical gesture of the critical activity.

However, what deserves close attention is the view of the function of literature that these new theories entail. If the literary work is to become a "text of bliss," an "anagram of our erotic body,"[22] it can no longer be a source of intellectual enjoyment, but of physical pleasure;[23] and, as such, it cannot encourage "disinterested contemplation;" rather, it has to demand "sensual absorption."[24] Therefore, in order to fully respond to a "text of bliss," a reader shoud be able to keep his mind in a state of absolute "neutrality" – which is the same as annulling a part of himself which has as much importance, independence and vitality as the body itself. Needless to say, this state of mental obliteration would prevent the reader from approaching the literary work with his entire being.[25] Also, the idea that the literary work must be regarded only in terms of its physical dimensions is dangerously reductive. It allows one to say that Barthes' "text of bliss" is as "closed" as his "readerly text," which is the "text of pleasure:"[26] the latter prevents the reader from participating in his world by directing his mind along one single axis of signification; the former, by guiding his body through a maze of purely corporeal pulsations. The "text of bliss' thus becomes a dehumanizing text. It can survive only at the expense of part of the life of its reader: to preserve and apprehend its integrity, the reader has to sacrifice his own.

In conclusion, it could be said that if these texts allow us to envision a future for both the literary activity and the critical enterprise, they also warn us against the danger of viewing the literary work as being still subjetct to our control or "super-vison." And, in ultimate analysis, they affirm that literary creations have attained a state of "objectual immediacy" which provides them with an individuality that rivals and challenges our own. In fact, verbal artifacts are now "bodies. '

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22 Barthes, p. 17
23 Barthes, passim
24 Barthes, pp. 66-67
25 As Barthes himself puts it: "The pleasure of the text is that moment when my body pursues its own ideas – for my body does not have the same ideas as I do." (p. 17)
26 Barthes, p. 19

And, as "bodies," they seek to defend the area of their egos against any outside advances or interferences. Yet, it is still encouraging to think that it is the self-containedness with which man endows these works that allows them to proclaim their independence and demand our recognition.

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