

Editor's Column: Position Paper

FOR THE LAST FEW YEARS, I HAVE HAD TO TRAVEL TO EUROPE at least two or three times a year, and the experience of getting there has become so familiar that it has begun to acquire the comfortable regularity of a script. I have never been able to sleep in airplanes, toward which, as toward the ocean, I feel a barely surmountable dread. There is always in these invariably nocturnal flights a moment near the end of the journey in which I see the horizon faintly announce a sunrise at what for me is still the middle of the night. My eyes itch from the lack of sleep and the effort of reading more and longer than usual. Not much later the flight attendants begin to distribute the customs declarations, which always produce in me the anxiety of a guilty person, although I have nothing to hide or declare—at least, not on the way over there. After landing and en route to the customs station, I exchange an awkward look of recognition with the passengers with whom I have shared the last eight or so hours and whom I will probably never see again. Again anxiety the moment my eyes meet those of the customs officers and, after I am cleared for entry into the country, relief coupled with resentment that they had the power to make me feel so guilty when they had nothing on me. Taking a taxi to the hotel is a welcome respite from the trip and the long customs lines, but the relaxation is quickly supplanted by the realization that one's body never feels as dirty as when one has been traveling all night inside an airplane. The first "day" is dominated by the effort to resist tiredness and so to hasten adaptation to the new time frame, an effort that takes me from what seem moments of supreme lucidity to equally intense stupors. Then come the dreams, by which I will be visited every night until my body adapts to local time: rich, vivid, multilayered, and recollected in glorious detail, dreams such as I never have back home, where I hardly ever remember my dreams.

Jet lag is, of course, a reaction to the experience of wrenching your body from its usual time frame and depositing it in another. Jet travel allows us to move throughout space as if it were a horizontal plane in which all points were equivalent to one another. But jet lag is a reminder that we have left something behind, or perhaps that we have brought something with us that makes for an uneasy insertion into the new context in which we now find ourselves. And yet, after the requisite number of days pass, we adjust to the new time zone, renewed in our belief that it is indeed possible to move in space at will, and the slight inconvenience of jet lag seems then a transitory and minor disturbance. We go on with our business, admiring and a little proud of the bewildering geographic expansion of the venue in which we can sell our intellectual and professional wares. We are—in a term coined by someone who once boasted, more than informed me, that he had traveled away from his campus nine times during a semester—turboprofs!

The expanded geographic dimensions of academic travel nowadays is to some extent a result of what has been called the “academic star system,” but the breadth of the phenomenon and the large number of participants in it show that it is not merely a manifestation of that new professional order of things. Neither is it just a translation of economic globalization into professional terms—our meager way of participating in the New World Order. I believe that it has much more to do with the application to our professional personas of a conception of space that derives from and expresses a conception of the subject informing the most influential critical paradigms of the last thirty years. Criticism has not merely used this idea of the subject instrumentally to address texts—hence the emergence of interdisciplinarity and cultural studies, the breaking down of disciplinary lines of demarcation, and the collapsing and leveling of discursive realms. We have also borrowed this fluid idea of the subject and its attendant reconceptualization of space to redefine our academic mi-

lieus and our professional behavior—hence our jet-setting professional displacement to all corners of the world as a way of transcending our institutional, national, or geographic circumstance. In his 1990 book *The Critical Romance: The Critic as Reader, Writer, Hero*, Jean-Pierre Mileur argues, in fact, that contemporary academic criticism articulates itself from within a romancelike narrative in which the critic has displaced the Romantic subject as the heroic protagonist of the tale. We are turboprof critical heroes, and we travel far and wide through an academic network that offers us the allure of being the decentered, multitasking subject in permanent movement at the core of our contemporary critical heroics. But we never stop to consider that the entire exercise is predicated on the privileging of voice, of personal presence.

The understanding of space to which I refer derives from a concept of the subject linked to the linguistic revolution inaugurated by Ferdinand de Saussure’s insights on signification, and more specifically to their elaboration by post-structuralist critics. The leveling of the plane of the signifier and the accompanying endless displacement of meaning throughout the chain of signification find their spatial metaphoric correlative in the idea of space as a plane in which all points are not just equivalent to one another in value but also finally equidistant from one another, however separated they actually are, since it is impossible to designate any given displacement between points as a standard of measurement. In other words, the idea that meaning is forever elsewhere in language has been translated spatially into a level field extending infinitely in all directions, like the universe—already occupying everything yet always expanding because we cannot identify a point of reference from which to ascertain absolutely its momentum or displacement.

Thus, the conception of the subject as decentered and multiple, or as a mere discursive effect that poststructuralism has bequeathed us, arises clearly from this understanding of signification

as a phantasmatic operation in which meaning is diffused throughout language, fated never to acquire solidity or closure except through the willful violence of representation. Poststructuralism posited the subject either as a virtual reality created by a superposition of discursive practices or as a mirage of substantivity created by the arbitrary suppression of the disseminatory nature of language. The subject became merely the point of intersection of a series of discourses that define it, that interpellate it. Louis Althusser, for instance, effectively showed that even the subject's belief in its own autonomy is an ideological operation of interpellation through which it is constituted from the outside, from a beyond that is not localizable and to which it will never have access or appeal. This conceptualization of the subject became a fulcrum for moving an entire philosophical and cultural edifice, which we then demolished, even while we were rigorously aware of being condemned to live among its ruins. The capability to undermine the solidity of essences and certainties, as well as to dismantle assumed hierarchies, has provided the assumptions and the leverage for a number of critiques that are the coin of the contemporary academic realm. For the last thirty or so years, this critical and philosophical paradigm has been the dominant one; indeed, one could argue that it defines the horizon in which our entire critical enterprise is inscribed nowadays, *para bien o para mal*.

The metaphoric move toward space as a conceptually privileged category also resulted in the abandonment of tropes and categories that assumed experience to be place-based or that centered on the subject's relation to the world—however one defines the latter term. As Edward Casey says in *The Fate of Place*, “[T]he slow legwork of being in a place may seem parochial, or merely irritating, in contrast with the grandomania occasioned by the ecstatic outlook onto cosmic or ‘universal’ space” (338). Thus, for instance, we have seen a movement away from the study of exile and the surfacing of nomadism in its stead: the nomadic experi-

ence—the celebration of the opportunities and openings that pure movement affords—is contrasted with the nostalgia that characterizes the exilic project, in which the subject is always measuring its displacement from a lost origin to which it persistently endeavors to return. Some have invoked non-Newtonian paradigms, such as the one subtending chaos theory, to engage the errant, wayward, and jagged movements of the nomadic subject profitably.

And yet, in a number of works published in the last ten years, one can see a retreat from unbounded, indeterminate space and from the destabilizing possibilities that it inaugurates and instead a reconsideration of and a return to place as a fundamental category for critical and philosophical discourse. This development, already having repercussions in our critical praxis, is motivated in the broadest terms by a perceived need to provide an ideological ground for contemporary critical discourse. The valorization of space that marked poststructuralist thought has given way to an affirmation of place as a means to anchor the subject in relational specificity. The manifestations of this change are several, and one can only hint at the possible reasons for it.

First, it seems that poststructuralism reduced critics to plying their critiques in a purely textual universe and confined the results and ramifications of criticism to that realm as well. Related to this fact is the emergence of a gnawing dissatisfaction with the difficult, self-referential, and playful language of the theoretical discourse that furnished the foundation of poststructuralist critique. Furthermore, it seemed that even after the most radical dismantling of the monuments of Western literature and epistemology, there always remained one unexamined locus of authority: the one occupied by the critic. The conception of subjectivity as a phantasm, coupled with this seeming transference of the subject's prerogatives to the critic, created an unacceptable impasse for ideologically minded critiques. How could an effective locus of resistance to hegemonic discourses and practices be

identified when all subjectivities could be shown to be equally illusory effects of discourse? How could the subaltern's experience of oppression be properly acknowledged and recognized? Or, to put it in the most general terms, how was agency to be salvaged, let alone articulated, in a universe of simulacra?¹ By the same token, how could critics avoid perpetuating hegemony when their relation to power was left unchallenged? Was not critics' authority to an extent complicit with the larger structures and discourses that sustained hegemony in their society?

All these concerns have given rise to a fundamental reconsideration of the nature and status of the subject in contemporary critical practice. The aim in most critiques of this type is not so much to abandon the poststructuralist concept of the subject altogether as to suffuse its most radical implications with place-based categories and concerns. To argue that the subject is produced as a discursive effect does not address the fact that this production takes place in specific historical circumstances and through historically bound institutions. It also does not account for the reality that discourses create hegemonic relations that render individual subjects incommensurate with one another; subjectivities are not interchangeable, even if in the abstract they may all have in common their essentially discursive nature.

The most visible manifestation of the rejection of the poststructuralist concept of the subject has been the recent turn toward the inscription of the personal in critical studies. The substantial number of literary critics who have published or are writing their intellectual or critical biographies is one of the most significant phenomena of recent criticism. The impasses and shortcomings enumerated earlier have led to an examination of the critic's own relation vis-à-vis the text, the material, and the subjectivities that are addressed in the critic's work. These preoccupations have manifested themselves in the postulation of a category that subsumes all aspects of this relation: positionality. The relent-

less investigation of the critic's location has brought about a reconceptualization of the critical act as an "intervention"—as an operation with clearly defined parameters and sustained by a discrete institutional framework that endows it with interpretive authority and closure.

The refiguration of the critical act as an intervention relativizes it thoroughly by associating it with two qualities that derive from the interventionist optics. First, the contingency of the critical act becomes visible, as it were, through the underscoring of its reliance on an institutional network that sustains it. Equally important is the novel understanding of the critical act as a performance, an activity that occurs at a given place and time and is dependent on—to continue the analogy—a theater of representation to give it context and authority. This rethinking of the critical act as a discrete and contingent performance has provided an opportunity for the inscription of the personal in it, since the specificity of performance can best be vouched for by as rigorous a description of the performer's being as possible; local politics has its most irreducible kernel in the individual, understood now not as a warrantor of singularity and self-sameness but as a subject so keenly aware of its contingency that that very fact makes it into a possible site of contestation. The reemergence of ethics and ethical questions in recent literary criticism also has its roots, I believe, in this move toward positionality and place in contemporary critical practice.

In its most intelligent renditions, the concern with the determination of one's position as a critic has introduced a healthy institutional self-awareness in present-day criticism. One can point in my field, for instance, to the appearance of the term *Latinamericanism* to describe a pernicious discursive situation that implicates all of us who speak about Latin America in academic circles in the United States. My concern, however, is with the dangers of a narrow identification of positionality with the subjectively personal.

On reading a number of critics' memoirs or on encountering those discrete moments of self-reflection that seem to ritually accompany contemporary critical performances, one is struck by a quality they all share: the more detail, distinguishing facts, and specificity one provides about the self, the more accidental (in the Aristotelian sense), the more contingent, one's position is meant to be understood as. "Personal" information is offered in these performances as a way to de-essentialize experience, as an attempt to depersonalize it, as proof that the critic's position is—pardon the oxymoron—essentially contingent. This formulation turns on its head the major conceit, the implicit pact, of autobiographical discourse, in which the detail provided in the depiction of personal experience is the narrative warrant of individual exceptionalism and uniqueness. Striking as it may be, this reversal points to a structural circumstance that is, in fact, rhetorical: the effort to identify one's positionality acquires in critical discourse of this sort the rhetorical function that the trope of sincerity has in autobiographical narrative. For such critical performances deploy an asymptotic strategy in which the accumulation of personal detail paradoxically is supposed to bring the subject ever closer to its own rhetorical death as an autonomous and exceptional individual. Self-critique and self-examination are supposed to lead to an ideological transparency that will in the end undermine any claim to the singularity that authorized the performance in the first place. Woodrow Wilson's famous advice "Never murder a man who is committing suicide" helps us comprehend why most of these works tend to leave the reader—at least this reader—caught in an ultimately generic quandary: whether to admire the critical rigor and "personal" commitment that led, nonetheless, to such an unsatisfying rendition of the autobiographical genre and its readerly pacts.

In the end, the difficulties associated with the exploration of one's location as a critic arise from the circumstance that one's positionality

can never be fully available to oneself, not just because the absolute transparency that the operation assumes is impossible to achieve but also because *the personal* will always be partly an effect of language. I do not underscore this fact to cast aspersions on the project by proposing that since it never can be completely successful, it should be abandoned. Such a mode of arguing would be tantamount to saying that—as Clifford Geertz has reminded us in another context—since "a perfectly aseptic environment is impossible, one might as well conduct surgery in a sewer" (30). An introjection of the personal into our works must begin with the recognition that it is framed in and through linguistic structures and is therefore inevitably caught in the rhetorical crosscurrents of any construct that purports, in the words of Paul de Man, to posit "voice or face by means of language" (81). Furthermore, self-examination is commendable if it leads to renewed questioning but not if it becomes a propitiatory self-cleansing and self-absolution before an engagement in the tangled act of critical interpretation.

This issue of *PMLA* features an interview with the French critic Julia Kristeva on forgiveness, as well as responses that engage the implications of her remarks. All the concerns about positionality surveyed above reach their essential distillment and their limit when considered in the context of pardoning and forgiving, since in the act of forgiveness the personal, the social, and the historical intersect and demand their sometimes incompatible dues. The increased opportunities for physical displacement and instant communication that characterize our world have also expanded our ability to incur a debt to others, to impose on them our peremptory needs and desires. Kristeva's intervention and the thoughtful commentaries and rejoinders from scholars who accepted the invitation by *PMLA*'s Editorial Board to address it remind us of this inescapable fact. They also compel us to consider the general unfairness and inhospitableness

of the universe—the natural one as well as the one we have created—and our imperative to make both ever a little less so.

Carlos J. Alonso

NOTE

¹For an excellent account of this problematic, see Steele.

WORKS CITED

- Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. London: NLB, 1971. 123–73.
- Casey, Edward. *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1997.
- de Man, Paul. "Autobiography as De-facement." *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*. New York: Columbia UP, 1984. 67–81.
- Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic, 1973.
- Mileur, Jean-Pierre. *The Critical Romance: The Critic as Reader, Writer, Hero*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1990.
- Steele, Meili. *Theorizing Textual Subjects: Agency and Oppression*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1997.