

that the resistance to theory is the triumph of theory, because (if I understand him right) history and “the material base” are fictions too, theories. The upshot of his argument appears to be that critical theory must become required reading, must become “the texts” for all teachers of language and literature, along with those other texts that got us interested in the study of literature in the first place.

I am not about to condemn such a proposal, and I don’t deserve to be caught in a crossfire between the deconstructionists and the new historians, since I am one of those theory-illiterates Miller castigates. I am not totally unfamiliar with theory, but whenever I have tried to read it, I find that it does not require my services as a reader. And this is why I write: it may be that this very response is the one that motivates the new historians and the archivists and the people on the “so-called left and right.” It may be that they have discovered some bad writing that justifies itself by parading its complexity. It is appalling to analyze a sentence in a journal article and discover that, far from enlightening, it is full of little darkneses. Here is such a sentence:

Derrida uses the terms *rupture* and *disruption* to mean at least two things: the radical break of every event with every other, seen thus when comprehended structurally and hence synchronically instead of historically and hence diachronically; and the radical break that such a mode of thinking causes with the tradition of metaphysics and “onto-theology” (Derrida’s term).

This sentence (by Robert Detweiler in *Contemporary Literature* 13 [1972]: 277) occurs in an article about Hemingway’s “The Snows of Kilimanjaro,” and it is a cruel thing to inflict on someone who loves Hemingway’s prose.

There may be brilliant writers in the field of critical theory or among those who apply theory to texts, and I intend to keep looking for them. But I stumble over phrases such as Miller’s “male or female reproduction.” I stagger when I try to figure out how civilization can be both “not there” and “powerfully imposed” on its incommensurate substratum, *the material base*. I begin to fear my services are not needed. It is not difficult to appreciate the vast erudition of Stanley Fish, but it is disheartening to realize that the same theorists who sneer at “impressionistic” criticism are applauding Fish for asking, “What does the work *do*?”

We have gone beyond the “nothing is real” philosophy that underlies Miller’s address and have progressed to an awareness of the power of choice. I once taught a humanities seminar in a Catholic college, in which one student repeatedly turned in papers describing his Catholic beliefs instead of addressing the subjects in the reading assignments. Ignoring my pleas to address the proper subjects, he made the following idea the thesis of his final paper: “My Catholic beliefs and practices are a way of honoring my parents, and of connecting myself to the past.” There was no mention of the “truth” of those be-

liefs. I gave the paper a D, impressed, all the same, with its profundity.

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To the Editor:

J. Hillis Miller uses poetic license when he writes, “Gertrude Stein’s notorious aphorism about California is true also of America in general: ‘There’s no there there’” (287). Stein, here, was speaking only of Oakland, her childhood home: she did not intend to include all of the great state of California. Stein’s aphorism, however, can be put to even better use as the motto for the Great State of Deconstructionism: “There is no there [author] there [text].”

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*Reply:*

I am grateful for the thoughtful and on the whole good-humored and constructive responses to my Presidential Address. They have given me something to think about, including the question of the there that is not there in Oakland. The letters are also evidence that my talk provoked thought in others. Sometimes, not surprisingly, that thought took the form of a desire to reaffirm as quickly as possible convictions and preconceptions that I was trying to unsettle a little.

William Benzon, for example, writes of “the boring sameness of deconstruction’s results.” In fact, on the contrary, the work of Jacques Derrida, for example, is dazzlingly various, never remaining for long with the same terminology, or topics, or authors, always bringing something new to light in the author discussed in a given essay, as he does in the recent small books on Joyce and C elan. Paul de Man, to give another example, was always able to point to things in particular works that are seen to be indubitably there, and crucially important, once he has identified them, though they have never been identified before. And his work as a whole is a conspicuous example of constant change, development, and deepening. Both Derrida and de Man, in short, are distinguished *readers*, which is what, in my opinion, our teachers and students of literature ought to be. The boring sameness is in what is mistakenly said over and over again, about deconstruction, not in the work of the deconstructionists.

William Benzon says that for younger scholars now “deconstruction was just one intellectual option among others.” One of the paradoxical effects of what I called in my talk the “triumph of theory” is that “theory” begins to be taught as another subject, like Renaissance poetry or the Victorian novel, in smorgasbord courses with