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Masters of the Universe: Deconstruction and the Yuppies

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The big game these days among the five-year-old set is the drama played out by a group of superhuman characters called Masters of the Universe. The battle between He-Man and Geldor is positively Manichaean in its absoluteness and intensity. No less absolute and intense is the battle engaging the thirty-five-year-old set in English departments at American and British universities: the battle between he-men Althusser, Derrida, and Lacan, and the pathetic, outmoded, retrograde, humanist wimp geldings who have exerted their cultural imperialism over literary studies for the last couple of thousand years. The reign of these villains is coming to an end, however—so we are told. Only a few last academic Armageddons remain to be fought, and then the veils of empiricist ideology will fall away, laying bare the literary universe in its true horror—a system of gaps and lacunae, linguistic differences, and "unconsciouses" of texts that reveal the true history of the capitalist mode of production. Fasten your seatbelts, everyone; we are in for quite a landing.

The two games—Masters of the Universe and what is commonly called deconstruction—are deeply similar; they both foster an illusion of limitless power in the players. (Since all activity, in some circles, is merely an arrangement of linguistic differences, it is no denigration to call deconstruction a game.) This illusion doesn't worry me in relation to Masters of the Universe; its emotional appeal is clearly connected with the stories of monsters and maidens, giants and plucky young men with which children have always satisfied their wish to be bigger and stronger than their parents. (I do hope that my five-year-old friends do not know what "geldor" means, however—all they need is more castration anxiety.)

Deconstruction is another story. As a retrograde and outmoded member of a large and embattled English department, I would like to ask three basic questions about deconstruction: What are its internal flaws? How is it a manifestation of the cultural and political condition of the present? And finally, can a persuasive argument be made against it in terms that go beyond academic dispute? There is no shortage of attacks on the internal logic of deconstruction in its many forms. Frederick Crews discusses both the pretension and the illogic of the new theories in his review, "The House of Grand Theory." Several essays in *Rhetoric and Form: Deconstruction at Yale* also treat deconstruction less than kindly, Barbara Johnson going after sexism in "Gender Theory and the Yale School," and Barbara Foley, as a straightforward Leninist, attacking Derrida's politics of ineffectuality. George Watson and David Hirsch challenge deconstruction's theories of language and alleged revolutionary newness in the Summer 1985 issue of the *Sewanee Review,* and John Searle, in the *New York Review of Books,* does a superb job of pointing out the gross historical falsehoods on which Derrida's theories are based. Above all, E. P. Thompson takes on Althusserian "Marx-
ism in The Poverty of Theory, a book too little known in English departments. I cannot add a lot here; therefore I will concentrate on the cultural meaning of this latest form of literary criticism.

In order to avoid duplicating the works I have mentioned, and to limit a potentially endless discussion, I shall refer most frequently to what has become a virtual handbook in many English departments, Catherine Belsey's Critical Practice. It is not the best or the brightest of the new theoretical books, but it has been widely accepted and clearly presents some of the basic tenets of the New Program. The New Program is nothing less than a new way of reading providing an escape from the "authoritarianism" and "cultural imperialism" of what has been received as literature, and enabling the properly trained, truly rigorous reader to "deconstruct" texts in order to discover what Belsey calls the "real knowledge of history," the history of ideologies which are necessitated by enslaving modes of production? Everything that readers (and listeners, presumably, in nonliterate cultures) have thought they were doing is wrong. Dupes, fools, falling for the tricks and traps of ideology dished up as poetry and fiction, they have idiotically believed that they were selves, characters, hearing about other characters. They have remained in their mental chains for aeons. But the time for liberation is at hand.

WHAT BELSEY AND COMPANY consider their twentieth-century beginning is the linguistic work of Saussure. To hear Belsey tell it, he is a reincarnated Bishop Berkeley, asserting the absolute primacy of mind over matter—asserting, in fact, the nonexistence of matter except as a product of mind:

The most revolutionary element in Saussure's position was his insistence that language is not a nomenclature, a way of naming things which already exist, but a system of differences with no positive terms. He argued that far from providing a set of labels for entities which exist independently in the world, language precedes the existence of independent entities, making the world intelligible by differentiating between concepts. What Saussure actually says, however, is something quite different.

Psychologically our thought—apart from its expression in words—is only a shapeless and indistinct mass. Philosophers and linguists have always agreed in recognizing that without the help of signs we would be unable to make a clear-cut, consistent distinction between two ideas. Without language, thought is a vague, uncharted nebula.

There are no pre-existing ideas, and nothing is distinct before the appearance of language. It is not the same to say that language precedes ideas, and that language precedes independent entities. The leap from linguistics to ontology, from a theory of language to a theory of being, the leap on which the prevailing deconstructionist theories are based, is a fanciful addition to Saussure. The removal of this prop alone leaves the system mighty shaky.

Are Ms. Belsey and friends actually such natural-born idealists that they genuinely believe that nothing exists except as it is differentiated by language? Does not one of them own a dog whose preferences, for people, places, foods—preferences that are certainly not the products of linguistically created differences—might give him or her pause about this "idea"? Saussure does not say what Belsey says he does, and even if he did, why hasn't the evidence easily available to her and to all other living beings driven her to second thoughts?

One possible answer is that all commonsense evidence is disdained by Belsey and other deconstructionists; this disdain is traceable to a much newer demigod, Louis Althusser. From him comes the idea that the goal of true thought is the destruction of empiricism, a.k.a. science, a.k.a. common sense, a.k.a. idealism, a.k.a. ideology. As Belsey puts it,

Common sense proposes a humanism based on an empiricist-idealistic interpretation of the world. In other words, common sense urges that "man" is the origin and source of meaning, of action, and of history (humanism). Our concepts and our knowledge are held to be the products of experience (empiricism), and this experience is preceded and interpreted by the mind, reason or thought, the property of a transcendent human nature whose essence is the attribute of each individual (idealism).
This is dubious enough. Althusser is even more obscure:

_I must nevertheless compare the conception which underlies the prescribed religious reading with another just as lively conception, and one which to all appearances is its secular transcription, the empiricist conception of knowledge. I use this term in its widest sense, since it can embrace a nationalist empiricism as well as a sensualist empiricism, and it is even found at work in Hegelian thought itself, which, in principle, and with Hegel's own approval, can be regarded in this respect as the reconciliation of religion and its secular `truth'. _"^{11}

This is fancy footwork, indeed, to make empiricist Galileo and his religious persecutors coconspirators in the perpetration of the imprisoning ideologies of empiricism and religion.

The deconstructionist attack on empiricism—the scientific method—is based on a misunderstanding of science. Common sense tells us that the earth is flat; religion tells us that it is the book of God; science is radically different from both in what it tells us. To suggest, as Belsey does, that true new science, as opposed to bad old empiricist science, has eliminated the possibility of limits, units, wholes of any sort, is simply wrong. Here her source is specifically Lacan, to whom Althusser also frequently tips his hat:

_Linguistic change, therefore, any alteration of the relationship between man and the signifier, “changes the whole course of history by modifying the moorings that anchor his being.” . . . And this discovery of a world without fixity, a cosmos permitting infinite movement, constitutes the Copernican revolution which Lacan attributes to Freud . . .

_The scientific revolution of the Renaissance was not, of course, the work of a single individual. In the same way, as Lacan suggests, the modern Copernican revolution is taking place in a number of areas simultaneously. Althusser, drawing attention to the implications of Lacan’s reading of Freud, points also to the parallels with Marxism._^{12}

The alleged parallel between the Copernican revolution and the “revolution” illuminated by Lacan’s version of Freud and Althusser’s version of Marx (which Belsey extends into the physical world) is entirely bogus. The whole point of the Copernican revolution is that a new theory explained previously inexplicable empirically observed phenomena, and that once the theory was proposed, it eventually gained virtually total acquiescence. Belsey’s implication, that belief in a cosmos containing elements of fixity (like the “self”) and operating by physical laws now has the same intellectual status as the Ptolemaic image of the solar system, is unsustainable.

Although scientists do now accept the recent discovery by physicists that matter is constituted of particles unimaginably small and in constant motion, they have not therefore cancelled the sciences of biology, astronomy, and geology, which deal with matter in larger units and treat it as solid; Belsey’s wish to cancel all large and fixed units in literature, particularly characters, on the basis of a fanciful linguistic and psychological theory has no parallel in science whatsoever. More than one thing is true at once in science: electrons, atoms, molecules, tissues, bodies, families, continents, planets, solar systems all exist. No total change from an old bad empirical science of fixed objects to a new good theoretical science of infinite movement has taken place. In science, theory and empiricism are partners, not ideological enemies; whatever Belsey, Lacan, and Althusser are doing, it is certainly not the science that they claim it is.

**STILL, WE MIGHT GRANT** the possible value of a flawed system of thought that is intellectually coherent and yields unusual insights. Belsey’s system, however, is a pastiche of exactly what she claims to be discovering in the literary texts which are now, for the first time in history, being examined correctly: contradictions. The first, most striking one is the simultaneous attack on the “authoritarianism” of all literary texts except those few “writerly” texts that the avant-garde—Brecht, Barthes—have pronounced “interrogative” and enlightened, and the unquestioning obsequious to another set of authorities—Lacan, Saussure, Althusser, Barthes, Derrida. Belsey gives a partial pat on the back to reader-response criticism as “a rejection of authorial tyranny”; virtually every page of *Critical Practice* contains a scathing phrase of this nature. Why, then, are the French demigods not subject to her critical “interrogation”? The tone in which the deconstructionist authorities are referred to is extraordinary; no other academic, discussing
earlier authorities such as Frye and Booth (despised, of course, by the deconstructionists), has ever referred to them more slavishly.

Post-Saussurean work on language has challenged the whole concept of realism; Roland Barthes has specifically proclaimed the death of the author; and Jacques Lacan, Louis Althusser, and Jacques Derrida have all from various positions questioned the humanist assumption that subjectivity, the individual mind or inner being, is the source of meaning and of action. In this context the notion of a text which tells a (or the) truth, as perceived by an individual subject (the author), whose insights are the source of the text's single and authoritative meaning, is not only untenable but literally unthinkable, because the framework which supported it, a framework of assumptions and discourses, ways of thinking and talking, no longer stands. To proclaim is not to prove; to question is not to disprove. Why are these "authors" and their proclamations sacrosanct among deconstructionist literary critics? Mr. Althusser in particular, who recently died in a hospital for the insane where he had been incarcerated for murdering his wife, might be worth a second thought or two. It is not impossible that these authorities might actually stand up to the most rigorous examination; my point is only that deconstructionist literary critics have not examined them, but have treated them as mouthpieces of the Divine Word and quoted them without external corroboration—allegedly for the sake of undermining the idea of authority.

A second large-scale contradiction lies in the conflict between what deconstructionists say it is desirable to "produce" from the language of literary texts and the language in which they write their own criticism. Bad is unitary, simple, clear, logical, centered; good is multiple, indeterminate, unexpected. The object of criticism is to "liberate" texts:

The object of deconstructing the text is to examine the process of its production—not the private experience of the individual author, but the mode of production, the materials and their arrangement in the work. The aim is to locate the point of contradiction within the text, the point at which it transgresses the limits within which it is constructed, breaks free of the constraints imposed by its own realist form. Composed of contradictions, the text is no longer restricted to a single, harmonious and authoritative reading. Instead it becomes plural, open to re-reading, no longer an object for passive consumption but an object of work by the reader to produce meaning.

Why, then, is the whole school of criticism, of which Belsey's book is merely one representative, composed of clones? Here are a few samples that have crossed my desk—memos from colleagues, dissertation abstracts, critical books by famous people.

In the Saussurean perspective meaning is the product of a linguistic system, the effect of a system of differences. To account for meaning is to set forth the relation of contrast and the possibilities of combination that constitute a language.

In general usage, poststructuralism implies at least four things. First, it implies a recognition that social reality—its divisions, structures, objects and subjects—is discursively constituted.

This course will address the following questions: what is an author, what is ideology, what is culture. It will then move on to such issues as the role(s) literature plays in a culture; how literature produces, furthers, and interrogates dominant and authorized ideologies, and the relationship between ideology and aesthetic form. It is a novel that threatens to crack open the powerful ideology of realism as a literary mode, and throws into question the whole enterprise of narrative.

The course is a postmodern transdisciplinary inquiry into narration as a mode of intelligibility. It investigates the way in which narratives of various kinds (film, historical accounts, novels, traffic signs, bulletins, conversations . . .) form our cognitive environment and provide us with patterns of perception, organisation, and interpretation of our experience in culture. The focus of the course is on the place of narration in the signifying practices that generate the ideological production and circulation of the "real" in culture and on narrativity as the enabling condition of knowing (and thus its inscription in the politics of cognition and construction of "knowledge") in such human discourses as psychoanalysis, film, science, "literature," philosophy, and literary theory.
Peas in a pod, birds of a feather. Where's the great liberated multiplicity here? Same stilted sentence structure, same code words, same authorities. If you put the despised "realists"—Dickens, Austen, Eliot—next to each other, they don't sound the same. If you put the pre-poststructuralist critics—Booth, Frye, Williams, Moers—next to each other, they don't sound the same.

Deconstructionist theory, which claims to be on a quest for differences, which asserts its ability to liberate texts, has eliminated differences and become a critical machine. It could be argued that the unanimity among deconstructionists follows naturally from the decentering and dissolution of the false ideological construct, "the self." But according to their theory, the deconstruction of the self is supposed to be another form of liberation; it is supposed to release multiplicity, not produce robots.

All of these objections would fall by the wayside if deconstructive readings yielded interesting new ideas about literary texts—even partial and flawed new ideas. All literary practices are partial and flawed. Since I admit to having read only a sample of this criticism, I must concede the possibility that somewhere someone may be doing something dazzling with it, unbeknownst to me; but to return to Catherine Belsey—mighty Cathy has struck out. She hands her critics the best possible weapon in choosing for deconstructive analysis two genuinely radical texts (among others): The Winter's Tale and "The Scholar Gypsy"; in reading them, she denies all radical intention to their authors and ignores their most interesting passages. Instead, she concentrates on "lacunae" in the texts, moments of self-contradiction, passages where the texts apparently turn on their own processes. Never, never, does she concede the possibility that Shakespeare and Arnold might have had some very explosive things to say about the political worlds they inhabited.

BESEY DOES GRANT The Winter's Tale privileged status as an "interrogative" text because of what she considers the inexplicability of Leontes' mad jealousy in the first half and the many reminders in the second that ballads, plays, and stories are fictions. "In this way it challenges the realist concept of art, and invites the spectators to reflect on fiction as a discursive practice and the ways in which discourse allows them to grasp their relation to the real relations in which they live."18

On the first point, Belsey is simply wrong, a careless and disrespectful reader who is blind to Shakespeare's care and subtlety. It is true that we cannot ever know all the reasons that Leontes becomes possessed with the idea that his wife and his best friend are lovers—but Shakespeare tells us so much! The extraordinary intimacy developed during Polixenes' long visit would almost inevitably lead to sexual desire, even if that desire was repressed in the interest of fidelity. Also, the verbal joking of Hermione and Polixenes activates sexual fantasy in Leontes' mind, fantasy that quickly gets out of control. Polixenes lovingly remembers his sinless, sexless boyhood friendship with Leontes, and declares they were free from original sin at that time. Hermione answers, "By this we gather / You have tripped since" (1. 2. 75–76); they play back and forth with the idea that married sex is sin, and that both kings are now married. But all Leontes hears is his wife's,

The offenses we have made you do we'll answer
If you first sinned with us, and that with us
You did continue faith, and that you slipped not
With any but with us. (1. 2. 83–86)

The ambiguity of that "us" begins Leontes' madness. And the final bit of information that Shakespeare gives us in the scene is that Leontes still remembers how long it took him to win Hermione, and still suffers from the memory:

Three cradled months had soured themselves to death
Ere I could make thee open thy white hand
And clap thee self my love. (1. 2. 100–102)

This ancient pain has made him insecure, vulnerable to jealous madness.
One part of the true radicalism of *The Winter's Tale* lies in the way Shakespeare retains our sympathy for Leontes even while showing him drawn into mad, murderous jealousy; our continuing sympathy finally lets us imagine a world where mental sickness is understandable, curable, and forgivable. It is a world as radiantly and radically free from evil as that of the American transcendentalists, a true break with Renaissance conceptions of man's sinful nature. Where else in Renaissance literature do we see two kings—powerful, bossy, privileged men—becoming murderous toward members of their families (for in the second half of the play Polixenes becomes as mad as Leontes) and being corrected by women, children, shepherds, even a thief. The two kings are liberated from the enclosed and destructive worlds of male power in their courts and forced into a more loving and egalitarian world. Who needs lacunae, textual interrogations, when they have lines like these?

This child was prisoner to the womb, and is
By law and process of great nature thence
Freed and enfranchised.

I was about to speak and tell him plainly
The selfsame sun that shines upon his Court
Hides not his visage from our cottage but
Looks on alike.

Now he thanks the old shepherd, which stands by like a weather-bitten conduit of many kings' reigns.

Which is more liberating, to contemplate the “fictivity” of fiction, or to imagine that nature bestows freedom and political rights and to remember that a king does not have much of a kingdom without the shepherds and old stone conduits that keep the agricultural world going? The proverbial Great Chain of Being is dissolved in *The Winter's Tale*; as much as any Leveller or Digger, Shakespeare has turned the hierarchical Renaissance world upside down. Lacunae indeed.

Arnold’s “Scholar Gypsy” is not in the same class as *The Winter's Tale*, but here too the purported “liberation” of Ms. Belsey’s deconstructive reading goes astray. She does not classify this poem as an interrogative text, but demotes it to the category of a text needing deconstruction. Still, she does grant it a smattering of interrogative validity: “The dissatisfaction of the text with the logic of its own argument in this central section is everywhere apparent.” It is true that the poem hedges on the reality of poetic vision; so does most nineteenth-century poetry. But when Ms. Belsey says, “Finally the image of the Tyrian trader produces an illusion of closure, an ad hoc optimism only tenuously related to the total organization of the poem,” I can think only that she does not know what a Tyrian trader is, or what Arnold's last stanzas mean. After beckoning the dubiously real Scholar Gypsy in the first half of the poem, Arnold's speaker sends him away in the second, to keep him safe from the ills of modern life. That is easy enough. The unusual parts of the poem are the two disturbing, even revolutionary, comparisons with which the speaker warns the Gypsy.

Still fly, plunge deeper in the bowering wood!
Averse, as Dido did with gesture stern
From her false friend's approach in Hades turn,
Wave us away, and keep thy solitude.

Then fly our greetings, fly our speech and smiles!
As some grave Tyrian trader, from the sea,
Described at sunrise an emerging prow
Lifting the cool-haired creepers stealthily,
And knew the intruder on his ancient home,
The young light-hearted masters of the wave;--
And snatch'd his rudder, and shoot out more sail!
Arnold's images here are as politically shocking for the nineteenth century as Shakespeare's images of nature and society in The Winter's Tale are for the seventeenth. He has associated the sickness of modern life with Greece and Rome, not as fountainheads of civilization and progress, but as cruel and conquering empires. He has associated the elusive Scholar Gypsy with the conquered peoples: the Carthaginians on whose soil the Romans sowed salt, and the Tyrians who were replaced by the imperialistic Athenians. Most mid-nineteenth-century Englishmen wanted to be imperialists and despised people weak enough to be conquered; Arnold is going after the heart of British foreign policy in this quiet, lyrical poem.

To understand this, a reader needs some faint knowledge of traditional history, not the mystical "true history" that critics like Belsey claim to be finding in the lacunae of texts. The ultimate purpose of deconstructive reading is to deny writers the power to say dangerous things to their readers, and to appropriate for the critic all claims to radical politics. The critic, not the reader; no ordinary human being could possibly expect to know what was going on in a play by Shakespeare or a poem by Arnold without initiation into the higher mysteries of deconstruction.

AND HERE WE CAN BEGIN a second "mode of inquiry," to borrow a fashionable phrase: Why has this strange project, deconstructive reading, engaged so many ambitious young English and American professors? Perhaps the first question is, Why haven't more people objected to it on intellectual grounds? Why don't more professors of literature recognize that what deconstructionists say about science and empiricism is wrong? I can only suggest a variation on a common moan: our educational system stinks. The practitioners of deconstruction are obviously not in the same category as the functionally illiterate victims of inner-city schools; they are the products of reasonably good colleges and excellent graduate schools. So why do they nod in acquiescence when Althusser, or Belsey, says something perfectly loony about science? The excellent graduate schools, to begin with, are so limited in their definition of professionalism and expertise that they do not require any general knowledge from their students. And so students who have managed to get to graduate school without knowing anything about scientific thought will get through, as well. As for the preliminary stages of education, they are still suffering from the mistaken policies of the would-be reformers of the sixties: eliminate requirements, encourage growth and development. And the three disciplines that suffered most from these policies were those requiring patience, discipline, and memory—foreign languages, history, and science. The products of the best graduate schools still share a common culture with the average American voter, who can elect a president who says trees cause pollution. In the sixties science unfortunately became linked with the technologies of war, and lost standing as a part of everyday thought. This widespread contempt for science has allowed similar mental processes to link serious young professors who quote Lacan as proof of a new cosmos of limitless motion to fly and the bureaucrats of the Pentagon who pay no heed to the warnings of scientists that computerized lasers in space will not protect us from hydrogen bombs.

Educational failings and ignorance of science do not, however, explain why so many intelligent people actually like deconstruction. Deconstruction creates passionate, avid converts, not curious dabblers. One reason for its appeal is that it offers the practitioner the illusion of political action—all conducted within the safety of the library and the classroom! Deconstructionists often claim to be Marxists—big, bad, scary Marxists; but the person they quote is not Marx—it is Althusser. And the most pertinent passage in Althusser, though not the one they quote most, is his hypocritical apology to the workers of the world in Reading Capital:

Even when this dichotomy [between theory and practice] is the servant of a revolutionary vision which exalts the workers' cause, their labour, their sufferings, their struggles and their experience in the undifferentiated proclamation of the primacy of practice, it still remains ideological: just as egalitarian communism is still an ideological conception of the aim of the workers' movement. In the strict sense, an egalitarian conception of practice—and I say this with the deep respect every Marxist owes to the experience and sacrifices of the men whose labour, sufferings and struggles still nourish and sustain our whole present and future, all our arguments...
for life and hope—an egalitarian conception of practice is to dialectical materialism what egalitarian communism is to scientific communism: a conception to be criticized and superceded in order to establish a scientific conception of practice exactly in its place. 21

Forget action; what is important now is a scientific conception of practice. So long, workers, it's been good to know you.

Here we can begin to examine deconstruction as a present-day political phenomenon. In transferring politics from the world to the text, and political thought from literature to criticism, deconstruction is the latest, ugliest phase of the academic radicalism that began in the sixties. "Don't trust anyone over thirty" has now become the assault on the "authorities" of literary texts; The Greening of America and the Making of a Counter Culture have, like Spielberg's Gremlins, gone through their cocoon stage and reemerged as books like Critical Practice. They are hard and tough now, no longer soft and sweet—but at the core is the same old dawning of the Age of Aquarius. Except now it's called the end of ideology.

The saddest and most unfortunate connection is that the current textual revolutionaries have followed in the footsteps of their bead-wearing predecessors by staying safely on campus. Even though the best of the radicals of the sixties had genuine political goals—civil rights for black Americans, an end to imperialist war crimes in Vietnam—campus radicals as a group never managed to connect themselves with working citizens. And graduation usually meant goodbye to all that. The radicals of the sixties tried and failed to be activists; following the kindly lead of Mr. Althusser the critics of the eighties do not even pretend to be interested in working people, but proclaim proudly that the deconstructive thought is all that counts.

This brazen, self-righteous coldness in the new utopians is more striking than any quality linking them to their forebears—or even their youthful selves—of the sixties. Whatever their faults, many of the radicals of the sixties had qualities of hope, generosity, kindness, and expansiveness very different from the brittleness, rigidity, and conformity of the deconstructionists of the eighties. One big change in both the economic and academic worlds over the last twenty years that seems deeply connected to the language and method of the new criticism is the ubiquitous presence of the computer. Anyone not using at least a word processor at the university is called retrograde; walk into any commercial office and you hear the soothing click of keys that do not sound like the keys of typewriters; turn on your television and get the message that any child deprived of a computer after the age of two is virtually doomed to a life on skid row. The microchip is said to have revolutionized thought. But it hasn't. Computers can perform only those processes that a thinking person has programmed into them; they cannot originate anything, intuit anything, feel anything.

It might be possible to program a computer to look for gaps in texts as deconstructionists do; it is not possible for a computer to feel whatever Emily Dickinson felt when she said real poetry made her feel like the top of her head was coming off. What deconstructionists have attempted to exclude from literary criticism, emotional and physical response, is what a computer would necessarily exclude. And one of the key words of deconstructionist lingo is also a key word among computer operators: interrogate. That is the way computers, unlike normal human beings, ask questions.

This word also has a more ominous usage, a usage which is also revealing with respect to deconstructionist thought. Torturers and agents of police states also interrogate. Though the word could be used in common conversation as a synonym for ask, it is not. You interrogate not your friends, but your computer and your presumed enemy. And a further meaning is usually contained in the word; torturers interrogate not to find out what they do not know, but to extract an admission of what they presume they do know. Even interrogating a suspect to get a list of other enemies presumes that those enemies exist. And this, in fact, is just what deconstructionist critics like Belsey do. They presume that they already know what a text must reveal—complicity in the capitalist crimes of Western civilization—and apply the thumbscrews and the cattle prods until a text can be made to confess, by revealing its lacunae, gaps, and moments of self-contradiction.

This leads back to the cold and mechanical writing style, the prevalence of the word power in deconstructionist writing itself. Though officially most deconstructionists label themselves leftists, their language reveals an affinity with the kind of police state that can be officially either right or left—authoritarian or
totalitarian, in Jeane Kirkpatrick’s deceptive terminology. The question is, why don’t literary critics shudder when they use words that bring to mind both Pol Pot and Pinochet? What hidden psychological need generates a vocabulary of words like *power* and *interrogation*?

Other dominant words in the new criticism reveal other strange affinities, other ties to the culture that is purportedly being repudiated. *Innovation*, for example, is a close cousin of *interrogation*. An interrogative text is also an innovative text. Pound did not say “make it innovative” in his injunction to poets; he said “make it new.” *Innovative* and *new* are synonyms, but they are not, in fact, used in the same way. A baby is new—but never innovative. An innovation is a gimmick, something added to a product so that it will be saleable to the ever-eager, addicted consumers of capitalist culture. Glossy catalogues are full of “innovations” in tools, collar shapes, skirt lengths, automotive accessories. There is one whole catalogue called simply *Innovations*, devised on the assumption that its products will be automatically desirable, no matter what they are. *Innovation* is an odd word of praise in the mouths of people who claim to be calling into question the very foundations of our culture, putting into “erasure” what we mistakenly consider eternal and self-evident truths. The desirability of “innovations” derives from the Western faith in progress on the basis of which so much money has been produced for capitalism. This belief in progress truly deserves questioning. It is not, after all, shared by the Native Americans whose lands we are occupying, or by the Balinese or the Eskimos or most of the other Third World cultures in whose interests one contingent of deconstructionists claims to be about to topple Western civilization. If anyone is truly interested in toppling an oppressive, exploitative, imperialistic economic system, a good place to start is with the Big Lie we have used to convince the rest of the world that they need our products for a Better Life. As long as deconstruction praises innovation, it had better go easy in its claims of revolutionary political power.

**AFFINITIES BETWEEN** deconstruction and consumer capitalism are not exactly surprising; after all, the former is a product of capitalist culture. A stranger connection is suggested by the vituperative loathing with which the word *humanism* is uttered by deconstructionists. Secular humanism is also the Black Beast, the Scarlet Whore to Jerry Falwell and the religious far right, that brand of Christians who oppose abortion and favor school prayer, who oppose labor unions and favor the ruling party in South Africa. Like utilitarianism and logical positivism, humanism sounds like a sad cry from the distant and unsophisticated past. It can certainly be questioned; those of us who believe whales have as much right to live as people do are not exactly humanists. Yet in the mouths of Belsey, Althusser, Derrida, Falwell, the attack on humanism does not imply a less species-centered concern for the earth and all its creatures. Falwell considers humanism the enemy of God; Belsey and company consider it the enemy of the New Truth. The deep link here between the radical right and the deconstructionists lies in an unquestioning absoluteness of faith, and in a mentality that demands a holy war on other members of our species. The mere claim that other people, no matter what their color or their ideology, are “human too” is no cause for restraint to soldiers in a holy war. The battle between holy warriors of all persuasions and their poor, tired, democratic, humanist opponents is an old one; an early battle cry was “Carthago delenda est.” Humanists have always looked weak, messy, doddering to their fired-up opponents. The humanists of the Weimar Republic look pretty good now, however. History has not been kind to holy warriors and their violence in the cause of purity.

The combination of coldness and violence can be found in other regions currently occupied by Young Urban Professionals; it is not restricted to police states and English departments. The new drug of choice, for example, is cocaine, which has a mystique very different from that of the drugs of the sixties. Marijuana and LSD were supposed to make you open, sensitive, relaxed, artistic, creative, tuned into music and nature. Coke is supposed to make you speedy, sexy, dynamic, and powerful. One major league ballplayer said recently, “It gives them the feeling they can do anything. ‘I can conquer the world,’ like Superman.”

The world is to be conquered, not enjoyed or understood; for deconstructionists, literary texts too have become enemy territory to be conquered.
The same self-directed acquisition of power for its own sake characterizes the entirely legal Yuppie enterprise of body building. A recent issue (September 1985) of *The Sharper Image* catalogue announces on its cover, "Fitness comes home. With a new generation of advanced equipment for body conditioning without compromise." It contains advertisements for radios, toy weapons, fancy coffee makers (for a legal speed trip), and, above all, body-building equipment. Indoor bicycling, indoor rowing, home Nautilus machines. Not hiking equipment, not canoes, not baseball mitts; the whole point is to get strong without any engagement with either the natural world or other people. Strength is good; labor is bad. For those Yuppies who can no longer stand the backbreaking strain of dialing the telephone, we have "Diales I, the astonishing phone with the power to distinguish spoken words and match them with pre-programmed numbers." Once again, the obsession with power and disdain for the material world parallels what goes on in deconstructionist criticism.

This odd assortment of phenomena—cocaine use, body building, and deconstruction—are all part of the cultural narcissism that Christopher Lasch has described; they all include its sickest symptoms. "At the same time they [narcissists] entertain fantasies of omnipotence and a strong belief in their right to exploit others and be gratified." What the sparkling clean *Sharper Image* catalogue conceals, but the prose of Althusser, loaded with images of guilt and murder, reveals, is the rest of the structure of the pathologically narcissistic personality: "Archaic, punitive, and sadistic elements predominate in the superegos of these patients, and they conform to social rules more out of fear of punishment than from a sense of guilt. They experience their own needs and appetites, suffused with rage, as deeply dangerous, and they throw up defenses that are as primitive as the desires they seek to stifle." Both conformity and a wild appetite for power characterize all aspects of the life of Young Urban Professionals. Deconstructionists also display the narcissist's profound Oedipal rage, directed against the bad parents of the past, the literary authorities of the past who have so rudely exerted their power by being called great.

The coldness and sterility of our present narcissism, as displayed in deconstructionist criticism, may be a genuine sign of the economic crisis of the present, which is very different from the economic crises of the past. Young Urban Professionals wear the whitest of all white collars; they are not the managers of factories where someone else is spewing out soot, but the managers of offices where the computer is the instrument of production, and markings on various forms of paper are the main "product." (A few bona fide Yuppies do make things like ten-dollars-a-pint ice cream and Nautilus machines, but most produce paper and services.) *Production* is another key deconstructionist word; it is what Althusser and Belsey most vehemently declare they are providing to the enlightened reader. "Liberated from the fixity of the communication model, the text is available for production in the process of reading," says Belsey.

This is production? One of the most overwhelming and terrifying economic facts of the advanced capitalist societies of the West is that production of material goods is shifting to the Third World as fast as the owners of multinational companies can move their factories. Steel and shoes are from Brazil; clothes are from Hong Kong and El Salvador. Unlike the Japanese, who are producing most of their goods at home, with their own workers, the Americans, English, and French are moving production elsewhere, to places without labor unions, and with lots of women and children to exploit, leaving abandoned factories, ravaged cities, and broken workers behind them. We are told about "service industries" and "high tech" as the bridges over the economic abyss; sure. What computers can't do is make food, clothing, and shelters, the necessities for life in the material world. The "capitalist mode of production" of which Althusser and his followers speak in such sweeping terms is not a static entity; deconstruction belongs to the capitalism of the last few years, not to that of nineteenth-century England.

*Production* and *power*: what do these words really mean to the Young Urban Professionals of whom deconstructionists are merely an esoteric clan? Yuppies can certainly produce money and comforts for themselves, and exert power over secretaries and others unfortunate enough to be below them in the corporate hierarchy. But it seems to me that the deconstructionist obsession with "production" of texts, and the general Yuppie obsession with power have an inverse relationship to genuine economic power to produce goods. English professors are not very far above the five-year-olds with whom I began in actual economic power; powerlessness creates the need to play Masters of the Universe.
Does it matter? Is anyone being hurt by deconstructionism? Deconstructionism is not as important as the destruction of farms, or the transference of industry to the Third World, or the dominance of the industrial war machine. But it does matter. As Mr. Althusser so rightly insists, literature is a culturally active force. And so when a generation of educators chooses to teach a generation of students the “methodology” of deconstruction, the potential results of such indoctrination should be contemplated seriously. As an outmoded and retrograde empiricist, I know how to think about the future in only one way, by thinking about the past. In spite of the bizarre language of deconstruction, and in spite of its connections with a genuinely new form of capitalism, it is also a new outlet for some old impulses, impulses which other people have traced to their inexorable ends.

Though it might surprise those critics who flatter themselves that for the first time in human history a few enlightened minds—their own—are breaking out of the bondage of ideology, in fact a surprising number of deconstructionist ideas, about the oppressiveness of authority, the nonexistence of a stable self, the illusory nature of morality, can be found in earlier literature. I will mention, briefly, two very disparate examples: *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *King Lear*. How far are the aphorisms of Lord Henry Wotton from the declarations of the deconstructionists?

> Names are everything. I never quarrel with actions. My one quarrel is with words. That is the reason I hate vulgar realism in literature. The man who could call a spade a spade should be compelled to use one.

(Ch. 17)

> As for the aged, I always contradict the aged. I do it on principle.

(Ch. 19)

> Conscience and cowardice are really the same things, Basil. Conscience is the trade name of the firm. That is all.

(Ch. 1)

This novel anticipates most of what Lasch says in *The Culture of Narcissism*; it is a portrait, both seductive and frightening, of a society of discontinuity, where the idle rich scorn both parents and children in their quest for infinite variety and freedom in their experiences of pleasure. The book rings truer to me every year: the quest for power and pleasure has a price—violence. The narcissistic hero is fascinated with sadistic characters, such as “Gian Maria Visconti, who used hounds to chase living men, and whose murdered body was covered with roses by a harlot who had loved him” (Ch. 11); from this he proceeds to murder and suicide. Sterile pleasures generate violence. Violence is just below the surface in the perpetual attacks launched by deconstructionist criticism; the liberation it proclaims is anything but joyful.

Wilde’s Lord Henry Wotton is hardly the first literary spokesman for narcissism as an enlightened philosophy; we can go back to the seventeenth century and find such philosophies in the mouths of Shakespeare’s villains: Iago, Edmund, Goneril, Regan.

Deconstructionists are not the first to despise “closure” as one of the falsities of fiction; in *King Lear*, Shakespeare’s Edmund is despising it when he says of his brother, “And pat he comes like the catastrophe of the old comedy” (1.2.145). Edgar, against whom Edmund is plotting, has just entered the room; Edmund laughs at the idea that Edgar could ever really come to seek retribution. He assumes that the endings of old comedies are literary devices that mislead gullible audiences into believing that acts will have consequences. He finds willing converts in Goneril and Regan, who are also happy to believe that they can pursue power in absolute freedom.

The whole play is Shakespeare’s answer to such philosophies, his insistence that even without avenging gods or a sympathetic natural world, retribution is built into our human nature. Power and pleasure again beget violence—poisonings, stabbings, blindings. Albany is right when he warns his wife,

> If that the Heavens do not their visible spirits
> Send quickly down to tame these vile offenses
> It will come.

> Humanity must perforse prey on itself
> Like monsters of the deep.

(4.2.46–50)
We still belong to the animal kingdom, whether we like it or not; the laws of the material, biological world apply, no matter what illusory freedoms the power-hungry human mind concocts.

Both Shakespeare and Wilde might be rejected by an Althusserian, of course. It could be said that their works are ideological devices, pieces of propaganda aimed at making a potentially rebellious class shut up and be good. Maybe. But how can Althusser's theories account for parallel phenomena among noncapitalist, non-Western peoples who are the subjects of anthropological observation? The Ik of Colon Turnbull's *The Mountain People* are devoted to power, will, appetite; they are free from the idea of the coherent self; they have truly escaped from what Althusser and his followers call the circle of ideology. Displaced hunter-gatherers, forcibly removed from their tribal lands, relocated in a place where they do not know how to support themselves, they turn into monsters, just like Goneril and Regan. Free, without beliefs or bonds, they snatch food from the young and laugh at the suffering of the old. When Turnbull gave an old man some food, he was quickly robbed and beaten:

> **Once Lolim, trying to cover his poor head with his bony arms, accidentally caught Arunu in the mouth. Instantly Arunu, with the back of his right hand, slapped Lolim as hard as he could on the side of his face, knocking the old man to the ground. There were shrieks of delighted laughter, but as the old man lay still, not moaning and not even crying, the fun were thin, and when I approached, anthropological detachment having long since departed, they lost interest and went away.**

And the Ik are hardly alone. In a review of *A Poison Stronger than Love: The Destruction of an Ojibwa Community*, by Anastasia M. Shkilnyk, Norman A. Chance discusses the same horror. A tribe loses its ancestral lands and kinship system—and this tribe is also subjected to mercury poisoning—and turns into a group of alien beings: alcoholic, suicidal, murderous, sexually abusive toward children.

> **For the people of Grassy Narrows, as for many native North Americans, land is not just part of nature; it is also endowed with spirit that transcends nature. Land is, in essence, a gift to be held “in trust” for future generations. If that trust is broken, if the land is damaged, assistance is unlikely to be forthcoming. After all, poisoned land, like poisoned people, becomes angry.**

The Ik and the Ojibwa corroborate Shakespeare and Wilde, reminding us that though we do not understand why we need our biological bonds, our rules, our places, we do need them. Once again, we are part of a material world. Being material, we cannot know precisely how we belong to the rest of the world but we can know that if we try to choose a world of detachment and denial, we will pay with our humanity.

Everything in deconstruction and the Yuppie world of which it is a part points the other way. Bonds are ideology; ideology is imprisonment; materiality has no independent order or meaning without our mental acts; our rightful good is mental freedom, total control over our environment, self-created strength. No one can get deconstructionists to examine the counterevidence, since they make a point of disdaining empirical evidence and scientific method, but it is mounting up, evidence that our brave new world of software, high tech, facilitators, innovators, interrogators, and other products of alienated labor is not in good shape. This evidence all finally leads back to the idea of science; Shakespeare and the Ojibwa both demand that we acknowledge our biological place in a natural world that we did not make and can only begin to understand with care, patience, and humility.

Technology is arrogant. Science is humble. Deconstruction claims to be “true science,” but it is technological gimmickry, another delusive weapon in the Yuppie arsenal of control, domination, and denial of the fact that we live in a world we never made, a world that does not play by the mind’s rules. Though the spiritual connections in which the Ojibwa used to believe could not be called scientific, the deep humility of the belief that human life cannot be separate from other life is closer to science than deconstruction is. Science is more closely connected with mystery, reverence, and a faith that we are bound by moral laws we did not choose, than with a maniacal quest for pleasure and power in the absence of all law.
Notes

7. Ibid., 106.
8. Ibid., 108.
13. Ibid., 29.
15. Ibid., 104.
17. Matthew Arnold, “The Scholar Gypsy.” References are to line.
19. Ibid., 102.
20. Ibid., 121.
24. Ibid.
25. Belsey, Critical Practice, 140.
27. William Shakespeare, King Lear. References are to act, scene, and line.