“THE MOST INTERESTING THING IN THE WORLD”

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Let me begin with Derrida’s celebrated reflections, in “Passions: ‘An Oblique Offering,’” on literature and democracy. Derrida describes literature as

*a modern invention inscribed in conventions and institutions which, to hold on to just this trait, secure in principle its right to say everything [tout dire]. Literature thus ties its destiny to a certain noncensure, to the space of democratic freedom, (freedom of the press, freedom of speech, etc.). No democracy without literature; no literature without democracy. One can always want neither one nor the other, and there is no shortage of doing without them under all regimes; it is quite possible to consider neither of them to be unconditional goods and indispensable rights. But in no case can one dissociate one from the other. No analysis would be equal to it. And each time that a literary work is censured, democracy is in danger, as everyone agrees. The possibility of literature, the legitimation that a society gives it, the allaying of suspicion or terror with regard to it, all that goes together—politically—with the unlimited right to ask any question, to suspect all dogmatism, to analyze any presupposition, even those of the ethics or the politics of responsibility. [28]*

This last clause is particularly important, for Derrida is practically unique in connecting the political significance of literature to the status we designate with the term “fiction”: to its suspending or bracketing of reference, including reference to the empirical author. The key role of literature in democracy, its integral relation to democracy, hinges, Derrida argues, on the fact that

*this authorization to say anything paradoxically makes the author an author who is not responsible to anyone, not even to himself, for whatever the persons or the characters of his works, thus of what he is supposed to have written himself, say and do, for example. And these “voices” speak, allow or make to come—even in literatures without persons or characters. [“Passions” 28–29]*

This is an elementary fact about literary discourse—that the views expressed, questions raised, arguments or associations proposed, are not to be taken as propositions endorsed by the author, even when there is no particular character to whom to attach them. It is a feature of literature that Baudelaire is not to be held liable for having dropped a flower pot on the head of a poor glazier, after pushing him down the stairs, as the speaker of “Le mauvais vitrier” recounts having done, or even for the thematic assertion—the apparent moral—that concludes “La fausse monnaie,” that “On n’est jamais excusable d’être

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méchant, mais il y a quelque mérite à savoir qu’on l’est, et le plus irréparable des vices est de faire le mal par bêtise” (to be méchant is never excusable, but there is some merit in knowing that one is; the most irreparable of vices is to do evil from stupidity) [Oeuvres 1: 324]. This feature of literature comes, as I will discuss in more detail later, from what Derrida in Given Time calls “the altogether bare device of being-two-to-speak [être-deux-à-parler],” there always being more than one voice. But of course this irresponsibility of literature, this double-voicedness, is always under attack, and Vladimir Nabokov was lucky to escape being held responsible for the pedophilia of Humbert Humbert in Lolita, whose fiftieth anniversary we recently celebrated in Ithaca.

Derrida continues, “This authorization to say everything (which goes together with democracy as the apparent hyperresponsibility of a ‘subject’) acknowledges a right to absolute nonresponse” [“Passions” 29]. Absolute nonresponse: like, for instance, Bartleby’s “I would prefer not to,” in Melville’s story, which Derrida discussed in a seminar that unfortunately has not been published. The right to absolute nonresponse: this is startling, for this right, like the right to privacy, does not seem to have been incorporated in our Bill of Rights—but it makes a good deal of sense. The right to nonresponse can be an essential feature of democracy, for it is totalitarian to require that one respond, to call one to answer for everything. Earlier in “Passions,” Derrida segues from the problem of responding to an invitation—an invitation to respond to papers about him—to the problem of response in general and its relation to responsibility. He writes,

One always has, one always must have, the right not to respond, and this liberty belongs to responsibility itself, that is, to the liberty that one believes must be associated with it. One must always be free not to respond to an appeal or an invitation—and it is worth remembering this, reminding oneself of the essence of this liberty. Those who think that responsibility or the sense of responsibility is a good thing, a prime virtue, indeed the Good itself, are convinced, however, that one must always answer (for oneself, to the other, before the other or before the law) and that, moreover, a nonresponse is always a modality determined in the space opened by an unavoidable responsibility. Is there then nothing more to say about nonresponse? On it or on the subject of it, if not in its favor? [17]

And of course Derrida determines that there is. After stipulating that literature as the authorization to say anything carries with it an absolute right to nonresponse, Derrida continues,

This non-response is more original and more secret than the modalities of power and duty because it is fundamentally heterogeneous to them. We find there a hyperbolic condition of democracy which seems to contradict a certain determined and historically limited concept of such a democracy, a concept which links it to the concept of a subject that is calculable, accountable, imputable, and responsible. a subject having-to-respond [devant-répondre], having-to-tell [devant-dire] the truth, having to testify according to the sworn word (“the whole truth, nothing but the truth”), before the law [devant la loi], having to reveal the secret, with the exception of certain situations that are determinable and regulated by law (the confession, the professional secrets of the doctor, the psychoanalyst, or the lawyer, secrets of national defense or state secrets in general, manufactur-

1. Let me mention in passing that in a splendid new book, Book of Addresses, Peggy Kamuf reads these paragraphs of “Passions” about literature and democracy and the right of nonresponse and turns them to a fascinating reflection on Clinton’s impeachment and Monica Lewinsky; but my concerns are different.
ing secrets, etc.). This contradiction also indicates the task (task of thought, also theoretico-practical task) for any democracy to come. [29]

Current democracy has certain zones of secrecy, of which the most sacrosanct is perhaps the secrecy of the secret ballot, but this hyperbolic democracy, a democracy to come, is linked to a fictionalized literary subject rather than to the calculable, responsible citizen-subject. This is a surprising result for democratic theory, but we can understand, I think, that the calculable, accountable, imputable subject is already part of a system of power and authority that must be a particular determination of the state. The idea of democracy, especially a democracy to come, is broader, less limited. And I would stress that responsibility in Derrida is thus different from Levinasian infinite responsibility to the other. It is better seen as a responsibility without limits, which means not limited to what you consciously intended, or to the responsibility to or for members of your own group or nation; it can extend to animals and to the inanimate world. Nor is it limited to one’s responsibility to try to calculate how these responsibilities intersect. It is unlimited, undecided.

Not only is this hyperresponsibility of the subject in a hyperbolic democracy linked to the fictionalizing of the subject. Derrida stresses the dependence of what we call real events on the structure of fictionality exemplified in such literary events. In Demeure, a very rich text on Maurice Blanchot’s short narrative “L’instant de ma mort,” Derrida writes, “the possibility of fiction has structured—but with a fracture—what is called real experience. This constituting structure is a destructuring fracture. It is the condition that is common to literature and non-literature . . .” [92]. Literature, we might say, displays the borders and folds that maintain a scene, that open a space, that institute the possibilities then enacted in the nonliterary events of our lives. Fiction is the condition of possibility of nonfiction as well as fiction. Speaking of this “spectral necessity which overflows the opposition between reality and fiction” [92], Derrida argues that “if the testimonial is by law irreducible to the fictional, there is no testimony which does not structurally imply in itself the possibility of fiction, dissimulation, simulacra, lie and perjury—that is to say, the possibility of literature, of the innocent or perverse literature that innocently plays at perverting all of these distinctions” [29]. Literature, whether innocent or perverse—we have an abundance of both—is innocent in the fictional play by which it perverts these distinctions. Literature, which narrates or cites, is the name for a neutrality before decision, conceptuality prior to the oppositions between actual and virtual, serious and nonserious, real and fictional, but a priority we can think of as the permanent possibility of the suspension of reference.

This helps to explain the formulation of my title, which comes from Derrida’s interview with Derek Attridge in Acts of Literature, “This Strange Institution Called Literature.”

Experiencing Being, nothing less, nothing more, on the edge of metaphysics, literature perhaps stands on the edge of everything, almost beyond everything, including itself. It’s the most interesting thing in the world, maybe more interesting than the world, and this is why, if it has no definition, what is heralded and refused under the name of literature cannot be identified with any other discourse. It will never be scientific, philosophical, conversational. [47]

Literature can be “the most interesting thing in the world . . . more interesting than the world” because it exceeds the actual but includes its possibilities, opening their condition of possibility.

2. On the importance of disjoining Derrida and Levinas, see Hägglund’s brilliant discussion.
This is a celebration of literature of a sort not much heard these days, when advanced critical approaches treat literature as one discourse among others, to privilege which would be an elitist mistake. It is important to emphasize that this celebration of literature is not, in fact, a privileging of some distinctiveness of literary language or of aesthetic achievement. Derrida suggests that “there is an experience rather than an essence of literature” [“Strange” 45]—an experience linked to what he calls the suspension of the “thetic”: “literary experience, writing or reading . . . is a non-thetic experience of the thesis, of belief, of position” [“Strange” 46], providing in its fictionality an experience of what belief, position, thesis might be. But while denying it an essence, Derrida nevertheless gives great importance to literary discourse, its engagement with the world, on the edge of the world, and the engagement that it calls forth in readers.

In affirming the importance of literature in these terms, Derrida reminds us of its power and of the centrality of its structures to many other worldly phenomena. In a new book, The Singularity of Literature, largely inspired by Derrida, Derek Attridge writes, “Derrida’s work over the past thirty-five years constitutes the most significant, far-reaching, and inventive exploration of literature for our time” [139]. Not simply of our time, for our time. This is unmistakably true, though it is not widely recognized. One of the more grotesque aspects of the mediatic reception of Derrida in the US is the idea that somehow Derrida’s work and deconstruction generally have constituted an attack on literature. I recall a meeting of the English Institute in Cambridge some years ago at which Alvin Kernan sought to defend literature against what he said were Derrida’s attacks on it, attacks that, he explained, involved the claim that all language was meaningless. “Where does Derrida say that all language is meaningless?” asked an alert member of the audience during the question period. Kernan was visibly taken aback. “Where? . . . Well . . . well . . . everywhere,” he stuttered. It was so obvious a truth that it transcended any source.

Derrida’s writing on and around literature is not so well known as his early work on philosophical texts or even so well known as later engagements with political and ethical texts and issues, such as Specters of Marx. This is particularly ironic, given the fact that Derrida has been most welcomed by members of literature departments, but perhaps it is not so strange after all, since we literary critics have a professional stake in believing that we already know how to read literature and are eager to learn other things from Derrida, such as how modes of analysis attentive to language and to the problematic of language can engage other discourses—of philosophy, ethics, politics, and so on. Perhaps also, the writers on whom Derrida has spent the most time—Blanchot, Ponge, Genet, Celan—seem special cases, so that his writing about them does not seem so easily generalizable into an “approach” to the novel, for instance, or to poetry. “Che cos’è la poesia,” a wonderful text that responds to the question “what is poetry?” put to him by an Italian journal, stresses that to respond to such a question is to dispense with knowledge, to burn the library—such a text does not engage in critical practice. It boldly speaks of “the poem”—the poem in general—as, for instance, “une passion de la marque singulière.” This text, available in Peggy Kamuf’s Derrida reader, Between the Blinds, offers an account of the poem as hedgehog, hérisson, prickly on the outside, rolled into a ball to protect itself, yet entirely vulnerable to being squashed on the highway. Outside this animal fable, it treats the poem as something addressed to an anonymous “you” that asks to be learned by heart, that teaches the heart.

Although this essay certainly sparks thoughts about a theory of the lyric, it does not, any more than Derrida’s writings on Mallarmé, Shakespeare, Kafka, Joyce, or Baude-
laire, provide a method of reading. These Derridean texts cannot be described as a deconstruction of hierarchical oppositions, an inversion and displacement of oppositions (though “La double séance” in *Dissemination* shows how Mallarmé’s text “Mimique” deconstructs the Platonic model of mimesis); nor do they invert or critique the illusions of the aesthetic—as some of de Man’s deconstructive writings about literature seem to do.

It is not easy to say what these essays are—they are as different from one another as, on the one hand, the elaborate pursuit of the paradoxes of mimesis in “La double séance,” on Mallarmé, the aphoristic reflection on proper names and naming of “Aphorism Countertime,” on *Romeo and Juliet,* and the rigorous pursuit of a thematics of the gift and the counterfeit and of textual self-reflexivity in the chapters of *Given Time* on Baudelaire. Nicholas Royle, in his little book *Jacques Derrida,* stresses the radical patience of these essays, and their focus on small units—not Joyce or Mallarmé but a particular sentence [4, 25]. One might say about them that they attempt to respond to the singularity of the texts they treat, and indeed the singularity of the literary work is a major theme of Derrida’s literary engagement. While his critical performances are partly consonant with the traditional notion that the task of criticism is the celebration of the uniqueness of each literary work, he notes that singularity is necessarily divided (*se diffère*), takes part in the generality of meaning, without which it could not be read, and so is not closed in on itself, *ponctuelle,* but iterable [“Strange” 68]. The singularity of a work is what enables it to be repeated over and over in events that are never exactly the same. Stressing this aspect of singularity, as opposed to a traditional notion of uniqueness, Derrida never claims to offer a reading of a text as an organic or self-contained whole but rather to write “a text which, in the face of the event of another’s text, tries to ‘respond’ or to ‘countersign’” [“Strange” 62].

But his response to singularity opens onto the most general questions of meaning and the conditions of experience. The singularity of a work is related to its enlisting of chance, of the contingencies of language, which, for example, in Derrida’s text *Demeure,* on Blanchot’s “L’instant de ma mort,” structure the word *demeure* (“remains” but also “abode” and “abide”—*ce qui met en demeure*—what positions you so you must abide it, and what “remains abidingly”—*à demeure,* abidingly at home). *Demeure,* in Blanchot and elsewhere, also communicates with archaic forms that Derrida recalls, *demourance* (abidance), as well as with the word *meurt* (he dies; *de-meure,* un-die). *Demeure,* “abide,” carries a questioning of stability to the heart of memory, of what remains. Derrida’s essay reads all the instances of this root or this family of words in Blanchot’s text, in what becomes a far-reaching investigation of memory, testimony, and fiction. But again, while this procedure may recall the pursuit of the pharmacological chain in “La pharmacie de Platon” in *La dissémination*—the family of *pharmakon* (poison/remedy), *pharmakeus* (sorcerer), and *pharmakos* (scapegoat)—it is not a model for Derrida’s other engagements with literature, as though to do a Derridean reading were to fasten upon a family of related terms, a play of roots. For instance, the essay on Baudelaire does not attempt any such maneuver but has quite other goals and means.

The establishing of such linguistic connections, though, is part of what makes a text singular and an event, in language, of language, and of thought. And it is a provocation to reading. “Reading,” Derrida writes, “must give itself up to the uniqueness [of the work], take it on board, keep it in mind, take account of it. But for that, for this rendering, you have to sign in your turn, write something else which responds or corresponds in an equally singular, which is to say irreducible, irreplaceable, ‘new’ way: neither imitation, nor reproduction, nor metalanguage” [“Strange” 69–70].

This writing on and in response to literature impinges on literary and critical culture in that it makes the goal of one’s writing on literature not, as various hermeneutics of suspicion and historicisms may have seemed to teach us, one of mastery, in which the critic...
tries to demystify other contextualizations and outflank all other commentators, scrutinizing their assumptions. Rather, you should try to respond with writing that is rich enough and idiomatic enough to provoke responses in its turn—not an easy matter, of course.

“Good literary criticism,” writes Derrida, “the only worthwhile kind, implies an act, a literary signature or countersignature, an inventive experience of language, in language, an inscription of the act of reading in the field of the text that is read” [“Strange” 52]. This is a tall order, not at all easy to do, of course, which helps explain why this critical work on literature has not been a model for literary studies. The reading of Baudelaire’s prose poem “La fausse monnaie” in the last two chapters of *Given Time*—to mention once again a text I will take up shortly—can serve as an example of this procedure. The reading of Baudelaire is inscribed in the field of a larger problematic—not that of the author, the genre, or the period, but that of the gift, with its anthropological and philosophical dimensions.

That responsive engagement—“inscription of the act of reading in the field of the text that is read”—is provoked, Derrida suggests, by an “impassioning” linked to the secret, a theme in a number of his writings on literature, from “Passions” to *Given Time* and “I Have a Taste for the Secret.” Derrida’s early reading of Plato’s *Phaedrus* began, “A text is not a text unless it hides from the first comer, from the first glance, the law of its composition and the rules of its game. Its law and rules are not, however, harbored in the inaccessibility of a secret; it is simply that they never can be booked [livré] in the present, into anything that could be rigorously called a perception” [Dissemination 63]. Here the notion of secret—which is rejected as a model—seems linked to something hidden that could be revealed, made present—which is not the case with a text, whose threads have to be teased out, or articulated in a reading. Twenty years later, in “Passions,” Derrida repeats as a refrain the phrase “il y a là du secret,” there is something secret: the secret now functions as a limit—not a content that might be detected or revealed. And Derrida’s later understanding of literature links it to “a secret without secret,” as what impassions us [Given Time 94]. Literature depends upon the call [appel] of the secret, which, he writes in “Passions,” “points back to the other or to something else . . . the secret impassions us. Even if there is none, even if it does not exist. Even if the secret is no secret, even if there has never been a secret” [29–30].

In Baudelaire’s prose poem “La fausse monnaie,” the narrator recounts that when his friend gave a large coin to a beggar, the narrator said to the friend, “You are right; next to the pleasure of feeling surprise, there is none greater than to cause a surprise.” “C’était la pièce fausse” [It was the counterfeit coin], the friend calmly replied, as though to justify himself for his prodigality.” The narrator speculatively runs over what the friend might have intended, and he concludes that there must have been an attempt to create an event in the life of the beggar, which is excusable, even if it involves a sort of criminal enjoyment, but just as he reaches this conclusion, he is convinced by the friend’s next response—“Yes, you are right, there is no sweeter pleasure than to surprise a man by giving him more than he hopes for”—that on the contrary the friend wanted to do a good deed while making a good deal, to win paradise economically, with counterfeit rather than real coin. But what if the friend’s remark is ironic? The narrator is convinced by the friend’s demeanor that he speaks candidly, but the look of candor that the narrator observes is what an ironist would want to affect.

In reading this text, which is about fiction—counterfeit money—and the gift, Derrida in *Given Time* speculates on the numerous possibilities that the narrator’s speculative inclination invites in his changing views of what the friend must be thinking (the narrator tells us that he has the exhausting faculty of seeking “midi à quatorze heures”—always reading something into everything)—in the course of which speculation and expatiation Derrida poses a question that was not previously attested in the critical literature: what
if the friend is not telling the truth? [96]: “Assuming that he did tell the truth. Assuming that there is any sense in speculating on it! For it is also possible—we will never know and there is no sense in wondering about it in literature—that he gave real money and then boasted to his friend that he gave a counterfeit coin so as to produce a certain effect, not on the beggar but on the narrator” [150]. Under those circumstances, it would be to the narrator rather than to the beggar that the friend passed counterfeit coin. Since the problematic of the false and the counterfeit suffuses the whole text, and since the narrator himself offers radically contrasting conclusions about the friend’s propensity for diabolical adventurousness, this speculation about whether the friend’s remarks can be taken as coin of the realm or a simulacrum, a counterfeit, seems to be a question that one can indeed pose. If the narrator can conclude that the friend wants to create an event in the life of the beggar, by giving him false money that could lead him to prison as easily as to well-being, why not imagine the friend capable of seeking to create an event in the life of the narrator (as he manifestly has done) by falsely claiming to have given the beggar a counterfeit coin? Why does this hypothesis, Derrida asks, “correspond to the most powerful and most interesting speculation? Nothing in what is readable for us here can exclude or limit such a speculation . . .” [151]. Indeed, Derrida goes on to argue that “the readability of the text is structured by the unreadability of the secret, that is, by the inaccessibility of a certain intentional meaning or of a vouloir dire (wanting-to-say) in the consciousness of the characters and a fortiori in that of the author” [152].

The secret of the friend’s intentions tantalizes and generates effects but is not something that could ever be known, is not something that Baudelaire himself could know, though he too could speculate about it and could, of course, have made it function differently. “The interest of ‘Counterfeit Money,’” Derrida concludes, “comes from an enigma constructed out of this crypt that gives to be read that which will remain eternally unreadable, absolutely indecipherable . . . there is no sense in hoping to know one day what the friend did, wanted to do, wanted to say . . .” [152]. This is a secret whose unknowability depends on the superficiality of the literary phenomenon, as a surface without depth, this exemplary secret without secret that assures the possibility of literature. That is what enables Derrida to suggest that, with this prose poem, “we are perhaps witnessing something that resembles the birth of literature” [169]. This secret of what the friend meant to say and do

is constituted by the possibility of the literary institution and revealed by that institution in its possibility of secret only to the extent that it is loses all interiority, all thickness, all depth. It is kept absolutely unbreakable, inviolate only to the extent to which it is formed by a non-psychological structure. This structure is not subjective or subjectible, even though it is responsible for the most radical of effects of subjectivity or subjectivation. It is superficial, without substance, infinitely private because public through and through. It is spread on the surface of the page . . . [170]

This structure of the secret without secret is nevertheless a condition both of literature and of democracy. “If a right to the secret is not maintained,” Derrida writes in “A Taste for the Secret,” “we are in a totalitarian space” [59]. He warns us to mistrust an insistence on transparency: to be compelled to reveal secrets is a feature of totalitarianism. The exemplary secret of literature has to do with the fact that the poetic or fictional sentence detaches itself from the presumed source; that voice is always doubled, in the absolutely bare device of “being-two-to-speak.” “Here we touch,” he writes, “on a structure of the secret about which literary fiction tells us the essential or which tells us in return the essential concerning the possibility of a literary fiction. If the secret remains
undetectable, unbreakable, in this case, if we have no chance of ever knowing whether counterfeit money was actually given to the beggar,” it is, as I have said, first because there is no there there, nothing behind the utterance of the friend [Given Time 153]. This inviolability depends, Derrida writes, “on nothing other than the absolutely bare device of being-two-to-speak and it is the possibility of non-truth in which every possible truth is held or made. It thus says the (non) truth of literature, let us say the secret of literature, what literary fiction tells us about the secret, of the (non) truth of the secret, but also a secret whose possibility assures the possibility of literature” [153].

But this exemplary secret “impassions us,” Derrida writes, even though—or because—“there is no longer even any sense in making decisions about some secret behind the surface of a textual manifestation” [“Passions” 29]. That “impassioning” opens the possibility of a reading that performs “the text’s engagements with linguistic power” [Attridge 98], a reading that countersigns the singular signature of a work.

Thinking the literary text as singularity, a singularity that challenges the generality of truth that it nevertheless makes possible, goes along with thinking of it as an event. Once again, this is scarcely without precedent, but Derrida’s notion of iterability gives him a conception of the work as a temporal event, to be identified not with the experience of a reader, nor with the act of a historical author, but with a linguistic event whose nature is to repeat. Another way to think of this would be that since literature, as fiction, does not presume a reality already given and to be represented but posits its own truth, it inscribes its own context, institutes its own scene, and gives us to experience that instituting. The opening of Moby Dick, “Call me Ishmael,” is only a dramatic version of that performative instituting, whereby readers simultaneously participate in and observe the instituting of the literary scene. What is said is the saying itself. This crucial aspect of literature is succinctly instantiated in apostrophic lyrics—“O wild west wind, thou breath of autumn’s being . . .”—which in addressing something attempt to bring it into being as a potentially responsive agent and thus above all display that saying as something gratuitous and hyperbolic, a testing of poetic power. (Baudelaire wrote that apostrophe and hyperbole are the forms of language that are not only the most agreeable but also the most necessary to the modern lyric—literature as hyperbolic event [2: 164–65].) Not only are literary characters and events brought into being by language, but this performative instituting is foregrounded, as event—an event dependent upon fiction and thus a performance of linguistic power. Whereas we treat much language instrumentally and may experience it as an event, with effects and causes, in literary reading we experience not just the event itself but its happening as linguistic event, in a show of linguistic power.

The concept of iterability, crucial to Derrida’s account of signature, the event, and performativity, gives us a notion of literature as performative—perhaps the aspect of Derrida’s thinking of literature that has become best known, in that his theorization of the performative through iterability has resonated well beyond the realm of literary criticism—in the work of Judith Butler, for example.

Derrida’s account of the performativity of literature speaks of an experience of writing that he calls

“subject” to an imperative: to give space for singular events, to invent something new in the form of acts of writing which no longer consist in a theoretical knowledge, in new constative statements, to give oneself to a poetic-literary performativity at least analogous to that of promises, orders, or acts of constitution or legislation which do not only change language or which, in changing language, change more than language. [“Strange” 55]

4. See Culler, “Apostrophe.” Derrida writes about the address of the lyric in “Che cos’è la poesia?”
This brings us back to the problematic of literature and politics. There is here an analogy between literary and political performativity. There is also, as we saw earlier, an analogy between the role of the secret in literature and in politics—in that democracy, like literature, involves the preservation of secret, and especially the resistance to the compulsion to reveal or determine secrets. But Derrida’s thinking of literature and democracy goes beyond analogy, in the dependency of the nonfictional on the fictional, on the one hand, and on the other, the dependency of the responsibility of the subject of and in a democracy on hyperresponsibility, the responsibility without limits, entailed by the possibility of fiction—of, in Cynthia Chase’s formulation, “productions authorized in advance by no reference and unpredictable in their functioning—they thereby make responsibility responsible without limit, not only to the given but to the indeterminable that possibly is à venir.” In view of such connections, calling literature “the most interesting thing in the world” is obviously not a turning aside from the public sphere to an inner life of the private sphere but on the contrary a deconstruction of the opposition between the public and private, the political and the literary, and a rethinking of what is crucial for democracy.

In the essay of the book *Rogues* entitled “La raison des plus forts” “The Reason of the Strongest (Are There Rogue States?),” reflecting on the ambiguity of the expression *democracy to come*, which is both analytic and messianic, constatively unpacking the concept of democracy and performatively enjoining its advent, Derrida remarks that in playing on the two turns of this phase he may seem to withdraw into irony, but

Is it not also democracy that gives the right to irony in the public space? Yes, for democracy opens public space, the publicity of public space, by granting the right to a change of tone, to irony as well as to fiction, the simulacrum, the secret, literature, and so on. And thus to a certain non-public public within the public, to a res publica, a republic where the difference between the public and the non-public remains an indecidable limit. There is something of a democratic republic as soon as this right is exercised. This indecidability is, like freedom itself, granted by democracy, and it constitutes, I continue to believe, the only radical possibility of deciding and of making come about (performatively) or rather of letting come about (metaperformatively) and thus of thinking what comes about or happens or who happens by, the arriving of who arrives. It thus already opens, for whomever, an experience of freedom, however ambiguous and disquieting, threatened and threatening, it might remain in its “perhaps” with a necessarily excessive responsibility of which no one may be absolved. [92]

It has been proclaimed that 9/11 brought the end of irony. If that were true that would be a worrying indication of the possibility of an end of democracy also, an onset of totalitarianism, as total information awareness would herald the end of the secret. Literature, as the possibility of the secret and of irony, is both indispensable to democracy to come and to the hyperresponsibility to which thinking calls us, especially the thinking of Jacques Derrida.

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