

WRITING BEYOND THE PALE: LITERATURE, LITERARY THEORY, AND THE LAW OF GENRE

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Abstract - It has sometimes been claimed that certain texts written by literary theorists defy categorisation. Neither critique nor fiction, and not even identifiable as a hybrid of both, such texts resist efforts to identify their generic affiliation. These texts might have been allowed to stand merely as indicators of their creators' whimsy were it not for the fact that their content and form, not to mention their problematic relationship with what literary theorists profess elsewhere, represent a provocation to literary criticism's established approaches and procedures. This paper reviews one such text, namely Jacques Derrida's *The Post Card*, and more particularly the section entitled "Envois", in the light of his essay "The Law of Genre". It asks whether texts like "Envois" repay critical scrutiny which speaks of a-genericity and multi-genericity, and assesses their implications for the future of literature and literary criticism.

Introduction: Can theory attempt the literary?

This paper departs from a simple enough question. What happens when literary theorists attempt to write literature? The question might appear to contain a contradiction. Literary theorists have sometimes been demonised as analogues of the character of Clevinger in Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, a man 'who knew everything about literature except how to enjoy it' (Heller 1963 : 79). According to this perspective, a proper response to literature is impossible unless it places aesthetics above every other consideration. Milan Kundera's excoriation of the theoretical response to literature, in his book *The Art of the Novel*, expresses the point with devastating effectiveness:

To be without a feeling for art is no disaster. A person can live in peace without reading Proust or listening to Schubert. But the misomusist does not live in peace. He feels humiliated by the existence of something that is beyond him, and he hates it. There is a popular misomusy just as there is a popular anti-Semitism. The fascist and the Communist regimes made use of it when they declared war on modern art. But there is an intellectual, sophisticated misomusy as well: it takes revenge on art by forcing it to a purpose beyond the aesthetic. [...] The professors for whom a work of art is merely the pretext for deploying a method (psychoanalytic, semiological, sociological, etc.) [sic]. The apocalypse of art: the misomusists will themselves take on the making of art; thus will their historic vengeance be done (Kundera 1988 : 140)

The ‘professors’ – the implied reference to ‘theorists’ is, at best, thinly veiled – are made accountable for the perceived apocalypse of literary art. For Kundera, this apocalypse manifests itself in the contemporary fortunes of the novel. His book regards the death of the novel as emblematic of the death of literature. This death is not ‘a fanciful idea’. Indeed, ‘*it has already happened*’, to the extent that the novels appearing now are ‘*novels that come after the history of the novel*’ (Kundera 1988 : 14).

If Kundera were right, it would follow that the issue which this paper attempts to address is riven by a contradiction. The contradiction is expressible in this way: how can a theorist write literature if s/he is a misomusist? In other words, how can somebody who hates an object which is most itself when it is enjoyed, actually contrive to produce it? More fundamentally, how can a theorist who has colluded in the apocalypse of literary art write literature, which in any case is already dead *at his or her own hand*?

Kundera’s outlook may be unwarrantably negative about theory. It is also arguable that his logic is flawed, and that his diagnosis of the death of the literary is too absolute. His words nevertheless mount a powerful indictment of the alleged complicity of theory in the death of literature. To respond by adapting Mark Twain, and saying that reports of the death of literature are greatly exaggerated, does not constitute an adequate rebuttal. Nor would it lead very far to oppose Kundera by insisting that literature is alive and well, sustained by the appearance of texts whose claim on the literary is self-evident. That will only lead to an impasse, to protracted and sterile stand-offs over whether today’s writers are worthy inheritors of the great traditions of the novel and, beyond that, of literature. In that impasse, the intractable issue of the alleged misomusy of theorists would persist – especially since the allegation is liable to protestations that theorists are in fact demonstrably committed to the literary, and that if anything it is they who have posed the most searching questions concerning literariness and its safeguarding.

In this regard, reactions to the views propounded by George Steiner in *Real Presences* illustrate what is at stake. Taking deconstruction as symptomatic of the malaise in literary studies which theory has supposedly caused, Steiner argues that:

...the classics of deconstruction, in Derrida or Paul de Man, [...] address themselves to philosophical linguistics and the theory of language. The masks they seek to strip off are those worn by Plato, by Hegel, by Rousseau, by Nietzsche, or Saussure. Deconstruction has nothing to tell us of Aeschylus or Dante, of Shakespeare or Tolstoy (Steiner 1989 : 128)

Steiner’s words have become a rallying call for anti-theorists. Conversely, they have been dismissed by others who have pointed to intriguing deconstructionist interpretations of writers as diverse as Friedrich Hölderlin, Stéphane Mallarmé, James Joyce, Marcel Proust, William Butler Yeats, Edmond Jabès and Antonin

Artaud. Again, an impasse between two irreconcilable and doctrinaire camps is inevitable. It might even be said that the situation is a 'differend', "*a case of conflict, between (at least) two parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgment applicable to both arguments*" (Lyotard 1988 : xi). It is not difficult to see why, in the circumstances, M. H. Abrams was led to acknowledge that the divergence between humanist and poststructuralist ways of 'doing things with texts' (see Abrams 1991 : 269-96) does not stand '*much chance of being overcome by rational argument; in each instance, the initiating position, or founding intuition, is too thoroughly implicated in an overall outlook to be vulnerable to counter-reasoning from an alternative outlook*' (Abrams 1995 : 30).

Keeping literature and theory distinct

In the circumstances, to ask what happens when literary theorists attempt to write literature demands dispassionateness. This is far from easy. As Kundera's and Steiner's statements indicate, there exists a substantial body of critical opinion convinced of the mutual exclusiveness of the theoretical and the literary. It would be illusory to try to ignore the fact that to anybody with such an outlook the question which heads this essay is a provocation. This makes it all the more important for any answer to try to emancipate itself from the tones of a polarised critical climate. Such an answer would have to conduct itself in a manner which sees no *prima facie* contradiction in the question, but which also remains aware of the *possibility* of the contradiction.

I believe that such responsibility is feasible if the focus is allowed to fall on the implications of the final sentence of the long quotation taken from *The Art of the Novel*, above. The sentence reads: '*The apocalypse of art: the misomusists will themselves take on the making of art; thus will their historic vengeance be done*' (Kundera 1988 : 140). Theorists who after the eclipsing of literature take upon themselves the responsibility for literary art must, according to the logic of Kundera's statement, perforce be producing something which, in being 'post-literature', is necessarily *not* literature. It is precisely because of this that texts by literary theorists which defy categorisation as essay or story, as critique or fiction, as ideology or poetry, as 'philosophy of literature' or straightforward unalloyed 'Literature' are so crucial to a deeper engagement with Kundera's statement. Mindful of that relevance, I refer below to texts by Derrida which appear to take upon themselves '*the making of art*'. Both in theory and practice, the texts problematise concepts of genericity and categorisability within literature. They thereby destabilise the Kunderan notion that the literary is partially definable through its antithetical relation to the theoretical.

A preamble to that review is however necessary, since one must be fair to Kundera. It is right and proper to respect the experiences from which he writes of the death of the novel. Having '*lived through the death of the novel, a violent death (inflicted by bans, censorship, and ideological pressure)*', he can testify more

painfully than most that *'the novel was mortal'* (Kundera 1988 : 13). Yet the novel can die 'in spirit', as well as physically. This is doubtless the death that most traumatises Kundera. To witness him speaking nostalgically of the *'depreciated legacy of Cervantes'* (Kundera 1988 : 20), a legacy now beset by a *'whirlpool of reduction where [...] being is forgotten'* (Kundera 1988 : 17; author's emphasis), is to realise that the death of which he speaks is in his view but one casualty following upon the emergence of a *'world grown alien to [the novel]'* (Kundera 1988 : 16). This familiar position, which postmodernists theorise in terms of the *'depthlessness'* of the contemporary (Jameson 1991 : 6), is one with which every reader who harbours some loyalties to the European cultural tradition from which the novel sprung must have some affinity.

Up to that point, I follow Kundera. He speaks with feeling of *'the endless babble of graphomaniacs'* and of the contemporary novel's immersion in *'a present that is so expansive and profuse'* that it reduces the novel to *'one current event among many, a gesture with no tomorrow'* (Kundera 1988 : 18-19). I must seek another path, however, when he takes to task the kind of theoretical response *'for [which] art is only a derivative of philosophical and theoretical trends'* (Kundera 1988 : 32). If I diverge, it is because I am not persuaded that theory operates misomusistically against literature. Indeed, I believe that theory *can* operate through the spirit of the *'art'* of which Kundera speaks. If what emerges from that operation is not recognisable as art to Kundera and to like-minded commentators, it is because the texts which result are not works which lend themselves to designations like 'novel' or 'critique', 'literature' or 'theory'. It could hardly be otherwise, since the texts question quite deliberately the very 'ordering' of the literary. This ordering should here be understood in the twin senses of delimitation and of prescriptiveness. The delimitation of literature's integrality and separability in relation to that of other modes of discourse, and the prescribing of what literature ought to be and what it can be allowed to include, are doctrinal in their essence. Kundera's 'ordering of the literary' amounts, in fact, to a laying down of the law of literature. One of the edicts of that law is that the interpenetrability of literature and theory – assuming the integrality of each of those entities is definable at all – has no place.

I find this exercise in proscription intriguing. The status of the literary is, of course, foreclosed to various texts through a number of factors. These include the processes of canonicity, the politics of literary reputation, marketing demands, and – lest we forget, mired as literature is in cynicism and ideological games of every kind – intrinsic worth. But I am nonplussed by a proscription which appears, after all that criticism and history have taught us about the dangers of essentialism and the inescapability of hybridity, to be confident that literature and theory belong to two distinct orders which are not interpenetrable. It leads me, even simply as a thought-experiment, to inquire into the implications if one writer were to be discovered – just one – whose work suggests that it might, in fact, be otherwise: that

theory is not complicit in the death of literature, and that the two orders (to go along, for the moment, with the view that they are straightforwardly distinguishable) can coincide in a text governed by a both/and rather than either/or dynamic: both literature and theory, rather than either literature or theory.

Perhaps no writings demonstrate the interpenetrability of art and theory more uncontroversially than those of Maurice Blanchot. Blanchot is not a writer who could be accused of perpetrating '*historic vengeance*' upon art. It would be a churlish commentator indeed who would apply the word *misomusist* to the author of such mysterious and luminous texts as *Thomas the Obscure*, *Death Sentence* or *The Madness of the Day* (published, respectively, in 1941, 1948 and 1973). What, then, hangs upon the identification of these texts as literature, especially coming as they do from a pen which is at least as famous for the sensitiveness of its literary criticism as for its creative powers (I am excluding, for the purposes of this paper, considerations relating to the vexed issue of Blanchot's politics)? I believe that the stakes raised by the very existence of Blanchot's work are high. Blanchot's work enables the question which heads this essay to be answerable in ways which allow theorists' claims on the literary to acquire the legitimacy of possibility, rather than to be prejudged by the presumption of their impossibility. The rest of this paper will seek to demonstrate how such an answer can be mounted, showing how Blanchot's *The Madness of the Day* acquires exemplary importance in the Derridean critique of the integrality of literature and its categories, and linking it to texts by Derrida himself which very deliberately set out to place themselves beyond those categories.

Literary categories and the challenge of Limit-Texts

If the answer promised above can be attempted at all, it must be because Blanchot's writings are particularly amenable (in a way which will need to be specified) to any thought-experiment examining the (in)compatibility between theory and literature. It must be, then, because some of his writings resist classification in ways that are singular. After all, other theorists before and after Blanchot have written fiction, and other novelists and short-story writers have turned out criticism. Clearly, therefore, there must be some quality in his work which sets it apart from the work of, for instance, David Lodge, Malcolm Bradbury and Charles Palliser. Lodge, Bradbury and Palliser have taught and written about literary theory, and their campus novels provide a literary exploration of theory's foibles that would accord with Kundera's outlook (though admittedly their techniques of pastiche and parody debunk indulgently rather than detract intemperately). There must be in Blanchot, then, a singular elusiveness that is not encountered in more straightforward literary excursions by theorists. For instance: Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, Foucault's *Pendulum* and *The Island of the Day Before*, Julia Kristeva's novels *The Samurai*, *The Old Man and the Wolves*, and *Possessions*, and Terry Eagleton's novel *Saints and Scholars* are all recognisable as novels. One might wish to talk, in their regard, of 'metafiction' or of 'faction': of novels which, while blending fiction

with factuality, construct the critical outlook essential to their interpretation within the narrative itself while remaining, recognisably, novels.

Blanchot's texts, by contrast, frustrate classification. It will therefore come as no surprise to discover that Derrida, in an essay called 'The Law of Genre' which assesses the viability of the concept of genericity very closely, founds his critique on a reading of Blanchot's *The Madness of the Day*. Blanchot's text is there described as enacting '*the madness of a fiction which no decidability can interrupt*' (Derrida 1992a : 239). Derrida demonstrates how criticism's investment in determining to which genre a text belongs to gathers scant dividends from *The Madness of the Day*. In this sense, Blanchot's text is akin to works like Philippe Sollers's *H*. (1973), or the strange mathematical-cum-literary productions of the Oulipo (Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle). What unites such works, through the shared play of *multi-genericity* and *a-genericity*, is their resistance to appropriation by literary criticism's established approaches and procedures.

The laws of literature are put out of countenance by such texts. The epithets by which such texts are typically described – 'experimental', 'marginal', 'idiosyncratic', 'offbeat' – are alibis for criticism's failure to engage with texts which put its canons, protocols and laws into question. They are alibis, in other words, for criticism's *failure to decide* what such texts are or might want to be. Criticism's response to those texts, if it amounts to merely lumping together texts which resist recuperation into a category called 'Uncategorisable', does not lead very far. That is a response with very little to tell us, for instance, about a text like Roland Barthes's *Roland Barthes*. In that book, the theorist notorious for conceptualising the death of the author writes an autobiography of himself *as* author. Is that text a work of autobiography, or fiction, or theory, or perhaps all of these at once and none at all? Such a text is calculated to bemuse those who insist on the survival of the author, on the integrality of genre, and on the separability between literature and theory. This is because such insistence is supremely insensitive to poststructuralists' capacity for irony and for teasing, riddling language which is self-debunking as well as self-referring. A text like *Roland Barthes*, which calls into question the categories which might seek to contain it, therefore calls for critical approaches which, rather than applying themselves to it, allow it to apply itself to them. It is in that spirit that Derrida, taking the poetry of Francis Ponge as an example of texts whose singularity destabilise the foundations of criticism, speaks of the importance of attempting to be Pongean about what is irreducibly and singularly Pongean (Derrida 1984 : ix and 70-72). With singular texts, in other words, the critical response itself seeks singularity, compelled by the text in such a way that an ethic of 'limit-criticism' is called forth, uniquely and unrepeatably, by the 'limit-text'.

Yet the 'will to categorise' is not easily suppressed. The constant reinvention of criticism, in the face of the repeated encounter with the unrepeatable singularities of limit-texts, is evidently impracticable. Is there no characteristic, common to all

limit-texts, which allows some purchase to criticism's protocols? For the sake of pragmatism, might it not seem that the best way to approach texts like *Roland Barthes* or *The Madness of the Day* (substantially different though they might be) would be one which acknowledges that both are, *simultaneously*, literary theory with aspirations to narrative, and narrative with designs on the theoretical? Unfortunately, that distinguishes only imprecisely between *The Madness of the Day* and, for instance, *The Samurai*. Both texts are describable in such terms, but what is required is an approach true to the greater elusiveness and enigmatic quality of the former.

Such an alternative approach starts to shape itself in the promise inherent in these words by Derrida, which suggest that an oxymoronic a-generic multi-genericity has become an objective for some theorists:

Still now, and more desperately than ever, I dream of a writing that would be neither philosophy nor literature, nor even contaminated by one or the other, while still keeping – I have no desire to abandon this – the memory of literature and philosophy. [...] You will say, and quite rightly, that this is the dream of every literary work. (Derrida 1992b : 73)

To *dream* of a writing which exceeds boundaries is practically to concede the impossibility of creating texts that are autonomous of disciplinary and generic affiliations. It is to fantasise about overcoming recuperative attempts to circumscribe texts within disciplinary and generic confines: a fantasy entertained more in *The Madness of the Day* than in *The Samurai*.

Derrida's admission that attempting to exceed such confines is a dream characteristic of literary works suggests that a predisposition towards the literary exists in the case of texts which resist formalist appropriation in terms of genre. One should not conclude from this that any text which challenges categorisation should be classed as literary. That is itself open to the dangers of the formulaic, to which Derrida is alive. In *Positions*, he equated with formal idealisation the idea of '*isolating in order to shelter it, a formal specificity of the literary which would have its own proper essence*' (Derrida 1981 : 70). Placing uncategorisability above all other benchmarks for the literary would only institute yet another critical protocol, with all its doctrinal strategies of inclusion and exclusion. Deconstruction's compulsion towards the aporetic stands as a corrective. Its well-documented investment in a logic of undecidability predisposes it not only to recognising and valuing texts which are marginal to canons and their prescriptions, but also to *producing*, itself, works whose genericity resists the decisiveness of categorisation. The thought then arises that deconstruction's response to the 'will to categorise' has itself to be an attempt to write itself beyond the pale – and thereby to place itself outside the agency of categorisation.

Writing deconstruction beyond the pale

What was contemplated above is fine in theory, but how does it work in practice? It could only pass muster, as a position, if deconstruction has itself produced (in the manner of Barthes or Blanchot, and perhaps even more radically) texts which approximate somewhat more precisely to the standard of being ‘neither philosophy nor literature’ – while keeping the memory of both. This is why it becomes important to identify deconstructionist texts capable of loosening the constrictions of generic and disciplinary affiliations. I nominate one such text, by Derrida, capable of undertaking that challenge: *The Post Card. Together with Glas*, it tends towards:

textual configurations that were less and less linear [...] typographical forms that were more daring, the intersection of corpora, mixtures of genera or of modes, changes of tone [...], satire, rerouting, grafting, etc [...] (Derrida 1983 : 46; my emphasis).

In this regard, it resembles certain postmodern narratives whose experimentation with the sculptability of print and/or with multiple claims on different genres has become notorious, as exemplified in Julio Cortázar’s *Hopscotch*, Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* or Georges Perec’s *Alphabets*.

Yet *The Post Card* challenges the protocols and structures of critical review more trenchantly than even those narratives. Unexpectedly for such a ludic text, it contains seminal essays on Freud and Lacan. But it is the first section, entitled ‘Envois’ and heralded by Derrida as ‘*the preface to a book that I have not written*’ – a book which ‘*would have treated that which proceeds from the [...] postes of every genre*’ – which render it peculiarly aberrant (Derrida 1987 : 3). The ‘Envois’ consist of a series of letters – or rather fragments of letters. This in itself flouts philosophical and, indeed, even deconstructionist conventions of argumentation. Literarily, too, the ‘Envois’ are recalcitrant, frustrating attempts to establish a feature indispensable to the epistolary genre: the identity of the correspondents and, even more fundamentally, their number.

Can genre be unambiguous in such conditions? The ‘Envois’ emphasise their own conflictual concern with genre: ‘*I would like to write to you so simply, [...] erasing all the traits, even the most inapparent ones, the ones that mark the tone, or the belonging to a genre [...] (Derrida 1987 : 11).*’ Significantly, the ‘Envois’ later equate multi-genericity with literature: ‘*Mixture is the letter, the epistle, which is not a genre but all genres, literature itself*’ (Derrida 1987 : 48). The dislocating effects of this merging have been indicated by Catherine Belsey:

What is the genre of this text as a whole? Is it an epistolary novel? Is it, as Derrida’s blurb claims, a satire on epistolary fiction? Is it an “apocryphal text, doubtfully attributed to a philosopher, like Plato’s letters, perhaps? Or is it

(tempting, tantalizing thought, which must of course immediately be resisted as 'unsophisticated') the coded remainder of the real correspondence that it (fictionally) claims to be? (After all, 'real' figures appear in it: Hillis [Miller], Jonathan [Culler] and Cynthia [Chase], Neil Hertz, Paul de Man. But the text takes account of that.) (Belsey 1994 : 68-69)

To show how 'the text takes account of that', Belsey footnotes the following extract from the 'Envois':

In several places I will leave all kinds of references, names of persons and of places, authenticatable dates, identifiable events, they will rush in with eyes closed, finally believing to be there and to find us there when by means of a switch point I will send them elsewhere to see if we are there, with a stroke of the pen or the grattoir I will make everything derail (Belsey 1994 : 216 / Derrida 1987 : 177)

The reader is therefore warned. Interpretations of 'The Envois' which seek to construct subjects and contexts on the basis of the tantalising allusions are misguided. Interpretive protocols applicable to the correspondence of Madame de Sévigné or John Keats, or to the exegesis of a work like James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, are irrelevant to the 'Envois'. The text neutralises and even debunks in advance such approaches. An onus is thereby placed on the reader to come up with an interpretation mindful of the inappropriateness of imposing any sort of determination. Once again, the 'Envois' themselves signal the challenge to the reader, addressing him/her to *regret that you [...] do not very much trust my signature* (Derrida 1987 : 6), and berating *'the bad reader: [...] the reader in a hurry to be determined [...]*.

Clearly, then, there is method behind the multi-generic madness of the 'Envois'. What, however, drives that method? While the relevance of postmodern fictional analogues to the 'Envois' is not in doubt – within contemporary narrative alone, one thinks of A. S. Byatt's *Possession*, Adam Thorpe's *Ulverton* or Martha Cooley's *The Archivist* as fictional corollaries for *The Post Card's* ironisation of the epistolary and/or 'diary' novel – it would be blinkered to think that the 'Envois' represent merely the reworked inscription of contemporary fictional strategies within a theoretical text. The literary propensities of the 'Envois' do not detract from their theoretical weight. That weight exerts its presence both within the 'Envois' as well as within the broader framework of *The Post Card*:

The existence of this correspondence assumes an absence, the separation of the lovers. [...] The love letter demonstrates the impossibility of communication as the transmission of im-mediate transparent meaning. All signification is at the mercy of 'the Postal Principle as differential relay' [...]: meaning and truth are

necessarily differed and deferred, 'differentiated' by the intervals, time difference, delays which interfere with transparency. (Belsey 1994 : 69-70)

The 'Envois' can therefore be seen as a dramatisation of the more overtly theoretical concerns of *The Post Card's* other sections. They seek to provide a literary counterpoint to the discussion of the Freudian *fort/da* and of Freud's 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle': a discussion that shapes the section in *The Post Card* called 'To Speculate – On Freud', and the immensely influential commentary on Lacan in 'Le facteur de la vérité'. This structure is foregrounded in the 'Envois' themselves: '[I] am thinking more and more of making this epistolary iconography into a beveled preface to the reading of *Beyond the PP [sic] and Freud's correspondence*' (Derrida 1987 : 93). Consequently the whimsicality of the 'Envois' does not diminish their integrality to the larger framework of *The Post Card*. In Deborah Cook's words, '*Fort/da: this is also the structure governing the speculation about the postal era in the 'Envois'. Derrida's own name is written there, as is his history and self-analysis, and these are [...] called into question in their very inscription*' (Cook 1987 : 295). The linguistic play on themes concerning nomination, debt and deferral which pervades the entire text of the 'Envois' – involving punning and paragrammatic effects on the onomastic echoes of 'j'acceptel/jacques sept' and 'derrière DÉJà' (see Derrida 1987 : xiii ff. and *passim*) – is but the more visible aspect of the letters' centrality to *The Post Card's* shaping concerns.

Beyond this, the 'Envois' amplify earlier concerns in Derrida's previous texts and also anticipate emerging interests. They intensify the critique of presence and logocentrism in *Of Grammatology* and extend the reading of Freud begun in *Writing and Difference* (Derrida 1978 : 196-231). Christopher Norris has shown how they are also indicative of Derrida's 'growing interest in [...] the deconstructive uses of certain ideas broached by thinkers like Austin and Ryle' (Norris 1986 : 14). It is also worth noting that the 'Envois' – which remark on 'the entire book being dedicated to 'to' [...] – to the dative' – anticipates certain issues concerned with giving, explored more fully in *Given Time, I: Counterfeit Money and The Gift of Death*. The 'Envois' cannot therefore be dismissed as a capricious exercise which eccentrically prefaces more intense essays. They are structurally connected to those essays, and intertextually associated with other Derridean texts.

This suggests that *The Post Card*, despite its deployment of devices associable with postmodern fiction, would be inadequately served by interpretations which focus on those associations while downplaying its deconstructionist credentials. Gregory Ulmer is surely correct to point to *The Post Card* as a text which institutes new ways of writing criticism: a reworking of the very *genericity* of the critical (Ulmer 1985 : 125ff.). Accordingly, this essay (which set out to consider whether and to what extent any text of Derrida could be seen as subverting the boundaries instituted by formalist criticism as challengingly as Blanchot's *récits*) seems driven

to conclude that *The Post Card* exemplifies one of those 'hybrid texts considered to be partly literary and partly referential' (de Man 1984 : 3). While that is no doubt pertinent, the identification of a formal *métissage* in *The Post Card* remains evasive unless it is informed by a deeper engagement with Derrida's own theoretical investigation of genre. After all, a deconstructionist who explores a-genericity and multi-genericity so creatively, while keeping intact the specificity of the literary and the referential, must have some thought-provoking things to say about respecting, flouting and resisting the precepts of genre and generic criticism.

Deconstruction and genre

It is here that it becomes important to return to Derrida's essay 'The Law of Genre', significantly founded on a reading of Blanchot's *The Madness of the Day*. Derrida there remarks:

Every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text, there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging. (Derrida 1992a : 230 ; Derrida's emphasis)

Within this outlook *The Post Card*, though it exemplifies 'free, anarchic and unclassifiable productivity' (Derrida 1992a : 230) in regard to genre, is not significantly multi-generic compared to other texts, which are themselves ambiguous in their 'belonging' to (a) genre. This may seem anomalous. In the same way that Nabokov's *Pale Fire* belongs less readily to the novelistic genre than *Lolita*, there is a sense in which it is intuitive that *The Post Card* is less obviously a work of theory than *Of Grammatology*. Derrida, however, arrives at the point quoted above pursuing a complex line of argumentation. He argues initially that 'as soon as genre announces itself, one must respect a norm, one must not cross a line of demarcation, one must not risk impurity, anomaly or monstrosity' (Derrida 1992a : 224-25). If that is the case, then *The Post Card* (which is generically impure, anomalous and even monstrous) appears well placed to provide an example of the crossing of genre-demarcating lines. It does this, paradoxically, by lending definition to states of generic normalcy by defaulting on those states. Another way of putting this is to say that *The Post Card* shows that there can be no transgression without law. The pristineness of genres, at least conceptually, must exist if crossing their demarcations is to have any meaning. As Marjorie Perloff has put it, 'the more radical the dissolution of traditional generic boundaries, the more important the concept of genericity becomes' (Perloff 1988 : 4). Derrida seems to endorse this in 'The Law of Genre':

And if it should happen that [genres] do intermix, by accident or through transgression, by mistake or through a lapse, then this should confirm [...] the essential purity of their identity. (Derrida 1992a : 225)

In a typically deconstructionist move, however, Derrida turns this consensual view on its head:

What if there were, lodged within the heart of the law itself, a law of impurity or a principle of contamination? And suppose the condition for the possibility of the law were the a priori of a counter-law, an axiom of impossibility that would confound its sense, order and reason? (Derrida 1992a : 225)

Always and already there is mixture and contamination of genres; transgression of the boundaries beyond which lie, and have always lain, impurity, anomaly, monstrosity. *The Post Card's* multi-genericity is therefore an enabling condition for the conceptuality and prescriptions of the law of genre. It is a question not of no transgression without law, but of no concept of law without transgression. The law of genre, as read by Derrida, can therefore be re-formulated to base itself on '*a principle of contamination, a law of impurity, a parasitical economy*' (Derrida 1992a : 227). Impurity, anomalousness and monstrosity are what found it, and what make its prescriptions possible. Ironically, within this perspective *The Post Card* becomes an exemplary law-abiding text in one sense – demonstrative of what founds the law – even while it is outlawed in another.

The destabilising effect of this is less final than may be supposed. 'The Law of Genre' deconstructs the concept of genericity, but also acknowledges its practical relevance. Derrida asks whether it is feasible to '*identify a work of art [...] if it does not bear the mark of a genre*' (Derrida 1992a : 229). He regards that identification as dependent on the recurrence in the text of a trait common to works participating in a specific genre, a trait by which one recognises a membership in a class (Derrida 1992a : 228). The foregrounding of that '*distinctive trait*' is termed a '*re-mark*' (Derrida 1992a : 229). Now, since the 'Envois' court multi-genericity they are imprinted with more than one re-mark, signalling thereby their membership in more than one class. Derrida's subsequent comments about the re-mark – the mark of genre and of generic designation – consequently take on a special resonance for the *The Post Card*:

It gathers together the corpus and, at the same time [...] keeps it from closing, from identifying itself with itself. [...] This inclusion and this exclusion [...] form what I shall call the genre-clause, a clause stating at once the juridical utterance, the designation that makes precedent and law-text, but also the closure, the closing that excludes itself from what it includes [...]. The clause or floodgate of genre declasses what it allows to be classed. [...] Without it, neither genre nor literature come to light, but [...] at the very moment that a genre or a literature is broached, at that very moment, degenerescence has begun, the end begins. (Derrida 1992a : 231; Derrida's emphasis)

Degenerescence begins because the mark itself is not part of the genre it signals. The mark is a-generic, debarring itself from participation in a genre the moment it re-marks it. The problem with this somewhat precious point, as far as the 'Envois' are concerned, is their multi-genericity, which implies that declassing occurs in them more than once. Degenerescence and '*the end*' therefore begin recurrently in this text, where genre as an institution, but also the categories of literature, theory and philosophy (among others) end up broached more than once. It would follow, then, that *The Post Card*, which contains the end-inducing 'Envois' as a preface, is a text which returns recurrently upon itself to raise, repeatedly, the question of its own generic affiliation *even as it performs its own degenerescence*.

This self-repeating degenerescence is unthinkable within the orders of linearity, categorisability and generic orthodoxy. Those orders remain lawful within that law of genre which is observed by those who, like Kundera, are driven in their commentaries by a distinct idea of what the literary is (and is not), what the critical is (and is not), what their different genres are (and are not), and how those genres can be kept apart and pristine, with their demarcations uncrossed and untransgressed. On the other hand, those orders are deviant within the law of genre as alternatively formulated by Derrida. This alternative formulation, it must be stressed, is an alternative *of* the law of genre, not *to* the law of genre. In other words, the genericities of literature and of the writing proceeding from what Kundera refers to as 'the professors' can be approached differently: with an openness to the possibility of their hybridity, as well with an appreciation of their integrality. This is the way that deconstruction works: a binary opposition – in this case 'pure vs. impure genres and literary categories' – is subverted, but the subversion is accommodated alongside the subverted, thinking it otherwise rather than displacing it.

It is because deconstruction writes itself otherwise, *performing* this subversion in texts like *The Post Card* rather than merely theorising it, that Derrida can continue to hope in the realisation of the hypothetical work, '*neither philosophy nor literature*', which he dreamt of. Perhaps wishfully, Derrida speaks of the possibility of such a text becoming '*an institution forming its own readers, giving them a competence they did not possess before: a university, a seminar, a colloquium, a curriculum, a course*' (Derrida 1992b : 74; Derrida's emphasis). The idea is more wishful than realistic because of the disbelief that such a competence-instituting text could be a work of theory, rather than a work of literature like Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* or, indeed, like *The Madness of the Day*. Kundera's suspicion of 'professors' taking upon themselves '*the making of art*' is succinctly expressive of that scepticism, which insists upon criticism remaining a second-order activity, dependent on and derivative from the primary and higher order of verbal art. Derrida, by contrast, is reluctant to forego the possibility that it might be otherwise, pointedly contending that the space of texts as institutions forming their own readers is '*the space in which The Post Card is involved. It did so in a certain fashion, at the same time general and singular*' (Derrida 1992b : 75).³

The qualification – ‘in a certain fashion’ – may be an implicit acknowledgement that multi-generic and a-generic texts will always be subject to recuperation. There is a sense in which *Pale Fire* will always remain a novel, *The Madness of the Day a récit*, *The Post Card* a work of critical theory. For all their unorthodoxy, those texts can never quite extract themselves from the orbits of generescence to which they have been detailed by readers, reviewers, and critics, all ‘in a hurry to be determined’. This does not mean, however, that what is contained within those orbits is always easily mappable. As Christine McDonald has pointed out, there are two divergent tendencies in a multi-generic work: ‘*First, the paradoxical notion of the singular book as itself the ultimate genre [...] [secondly], a movement to replace past genres [...] with others that transgress or surpass them*’ (McDonald 1985 : 37). In both cases, certainty over affiliation is made to tremble, for singularity and surpassed classes would render definitive statements about what can be allowed to count as art academic – in all senses of the word. Ultimately, therefore, what multi-generic texts always come up against is undecidability about their own proper affiliations. It is this which perhaps renders them particularly amenable to deconstructionist analysis (predicated as this is on undecidability) and even, perhaps, to being written by deconstructionists. Once that undecidability is no longer allowed its play, once the *decisiveness* of genre starts to be *determining*, recuperation and academicism set in.

Perhaps, then, Kundera should have reserved greater respect for those ‘*professors*’ who, in this sense, refuse to be academic. Derrida’s comment that ‘*genre has always [...] been able to play the role of order’s principle*’ arrives tellingly here, particularly in view of his comment that Maurice Blanchot’s *The Madness of the Day* subverts the principle of generic order in order to expose ‘*the madness of genre*’ (Derrida 1992a : 252). The ‘madness of genre’ is mad because it *decides*. With the pathological neatness of the cataloguer, it *determines* to which genre a text belongs. In ordering, it necessarily overlooks the fact that the preciousness of a text might lie *in its dis-ordering of the literary*, in its subversion of neatness. By presuming that they can specify what genre a text belongs to, as well as what literature and criticism should and should not be allowed to be, the great classifying systems of formalist criticism, to adapt Kundera’s words and perhaps to make them rebound, ‘take revenge upon’ the limit-texts which undo the neat separability of literature and criticism. It is not only the ‘professors’, then, who might be misomusist. The realisation dawns that one risks becoming a misomusist when most convinced that one’s claims as upholder of the tradition and spirit of literature are most justified, and when one is most prescriptive about what constitutes literature as an order apart.

It will now appear more evident why Blanchot’s name was seen as so central earlier in this essay. Blanchot’s self-declassing *récit*, *The Madness of the Day*, announces its intention to distance itself from the category of narrative in its famous closing words: ‘*A story? No. No stories, never again*’ (Blanchot 1999 :

199). By foiling the imposition of any re-mark of genre, *The Madness of the Day* indicates that the will to classify – the ‘will to genre’, so to speak – is ever so slightly pathological in the imposition of its protocols. The rigidity would then lie with those who insist on those protocols as a means to preserving a ‘purity’ of the literary, and to keeping that separate from the specificity of the critical, the philosophical, the political, etc. As Derrida shows, that idea becomes suspect if one accepts, even momentarily or *just as a thought-experiment*, that the law of genre is constituted on the basis of a principle of contamination rather than of purity, so that all genres and classes of the literary are always and already impure. In this view, then, a text like *The Madness of the Day* or *The Post Card* is a text which is more respectful of the necessarily hybrid and impure nature of the literary than any statement which, arrogating to itself foreknowledge of the essence of the literary, then goes on to say that what we have now comes after the history of the novel and of literature.

Conclusion

Does this account of genericity convince? Is the implied answer to Kundera which it contains – an answer suggestive of the idea that it is not exclusively what is decreed as ‘literature’ that is literary – persuasive? Or is it simply a symptom of theorists’ desperate ingeniousness whenever they stake a claim upon the literary?

Reactions to poststructuralists’ merging of genres and disciplines has been mixed. Jacques Bouveresse has seen that mixture as indicative of a wish ‘to compensate for the absence of properly philosophical argumentation by means of literary effects’ (Bouveresse 1993 : 15). Jurgen Habermas, in an essay which considers the affinities of the postmodern fiction of Italo Calvino with theoretical outlooks, deplors the transgression of intergeneric and interdisciplinary boundaries: ‘*Philosophers and historians, Geisteswissenschaftler in general, believe that they can dispense with arguments and are beginning to speak in fictions*’ (Habermas 1992 : 226). An indication of why such tendencies disturb so many commentators is provided by John Gross, who has expressed worries that the ‘*critic turned theorist [...] can persuade himself that he, too, is engaged in a form of artistic creativity*’ (Gross 1991 : 15). Clearly what is most upsetting about this is the possibility that artistic activity that is textual (rather than, say, musical or sculptural) may gravitate from what is conventionally classed as literature to what has long been seen as the subsidiary activity of what, traditionally, goes under the name of literary criticism.

This Kunderan loyalty to the integrality of such orders is understandable. How will it react, however, to the renewed forces of destabilisation as theory *and literature itself* explore new ways of writing beyond the pale? That transgressiveness is discernible in the work of critics like Gregory Ulmer or George Landow. They identify, in the development of contemporary technologies, unprecedented possibilities for literature and criticism. Their work on multi-mediatc art, digital literature and hypertextuality is not so much futurology as an exploration of what has already been done in these fields.

Deconstruction is itself proleptic of unsettling developments in this area. Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida's *Jacques Derrida* contains a photograph of Bennington and Derrida in which the former stands behind the latter, both men looking ahead in the direction of Bennington's pointing left arm. The photograph, as readers of *The Post Card* will immediately have realised, stands in ironic relation to the image of Plato and Socrates that is taken from the manuscript of Matthew Paris's thirteenth-century fortune-telling book, which proved so fateful an influence in Derrida's work. Unlike Plato and Socrates, what Bennington and Derrida seem concerned with is the screen of an Apple Macintosh Plus. There is purpose in this. A remark is inserted in the text to the effect that the '*guiding idea came from computers: G. B. would have liked to systematize J. D.'s thought to the point of turning it into an interactive program [...] accessible to any user*' (Bennington : 1 and 10). In the light of this, the remark in the 'Envois' that the '*end of a postal epoch is doubtless also the end of literature*' (Derrida 1987 : 104) takes on an added significance. It is anachronistic and short-sighted to fret over intergeneric and interdisciplinary boundaries being transgressed when the more urgent challenge facing the conceptualisation of writing today derives from what Derrida terms actuvirtuality and artifactuality (see Derrida 1994), and from the claims (some admittedly exaggerated) being made for hypertextuality and digitalism. It might be blinkered and even irresponsible to insist on the purity and untransgressability of literature and theory's genres and categories at a time when the digitisation of literature and criticism is under way, deconstituting those genres and categories in a writing which goes beyond the pale in ways that would have been unimaginable even up to a few years ago. It is in this sense that critical theory and literature might now be following – to adapt Kundera's words again – upon the history of theory and literature, adjusting themselves not so much to a world which has grown alien to them as to one which demands – to now adapt Derrida's words – that they live on borderlines rather than within what the borderlines delimit (see Derrida 1986 : *passim*). Writing beyond the pale, then, takes on the character of an ethical call. The story of the answer to that call cannot be broached here because – to adapt, this time, Blanchot's words – the story of the possibility of '*no stories, never again*', never again in the mode of the decidability of what lies within literature's and criticism's borderlines, cannot be fore-told. •

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Notes

1. See, on this theme, Jacques Derrida, 'This Strange Institution Called Literature: An Interview with Jacques Derrida', in *Acts of Literature*, edited by Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 1992); Gérard Genette, *The Work of Art: Immanence and Transcendence*, translated by G. M. Goshgarian (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); and for specific comments on the relations between theory and literature, Paul de Man, *Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).
2. See the studies on the mentioned authors in Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, translated by Alan Bass (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978) and in *Acts of Literature*, and in Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979) and in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).
3. For an indication of the kind of responses generated by *The Post Card* (particularly its instigation of poststructuralist commentaries on the work of Edgar Allan Poe), see the essays collected in John P. Muller and William J. Richardson, *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988).

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