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LITERARY STUDIES IN THE POSTMODERN CONDITION

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We are witnessing the end of literary criticism. I recognised this remarkable fact six months ago, when I was rereading a book on Shakespeare. The argument, very broadly, concerned the dramatisation of stories that were already well known, Troilus and Cressida, Antony and Cleopatra, for example, and the struggle of Shakespeare's characters to inhabit identities that were culturally pre-scripted for them. The book, which was published by Harvard University Press, was not more than two years old. It was stylish, witty and persuasive; the argument unfolded logically and intelligibly; it drew on the insights of recent theoretical developments; and it made me aware of aspects of the plays that I had never seen before. Given all this, I couldn't account for a mounting feeling of dissatisfaction as I read. What more did I want, after all? It's unusual enough to get that particular combination of pleasures from a single volume. In fact, I find that simple literacy is increasingly rare these days. And this book was both literate and intelligent. «But it's still», I heard myself say, as I put it down to reflect on my own ungracious response to a good book, «but it's still only literary criticism».

I felt like St Paul on the road to Damascus. What I suddenly knew, in a blinding flash, was that literary criticism is a thing of the past, and that we've entered, irreversibly, a new epoch.

Literary criticism *was* officially the desire to illuminate the text, and only that, to give an account of it, explain its power. It was reading for the sake of reading. But thoughtful critics knew they could not stop there. In the first place, the text had to be worth it: to *exercise* a power that needed to be accounted for. And in the second place, since language was understood to be a medium, an instrument, the explanation of its power had to be located elsewhere, beyond the text itself, in a realm of ideas which was, paradoxically, more substantial than words. In its heyday, therefore, literary criticism had two main preoccupations: aesthetic value as justification for the study of the text, and the Author as explanation of its character. Traces of the Author remain, not

just in critical biographies, but in examination papers which divide the syllabus under author's names, and in the resulting discussions students conduct about their revision plans. «I'm not doing Dickens: I thought I'd concentrate on George Eliot». The implications of this division of the available material were that the natural way to make sense of a text was to locate it in relations of continuity and discontinuity with other works by the same author. And the implications of that assumption in turn were usually that texts were intelligible primarily as expressions of something that preceded them, a subjectivity, a world view, a moral sensibility, a rhetorical skill. Literary criticism of this kind was neither, it turned out, criticism nor particularly literary: on the contrary, it was a quest for an origin which was also an aetiology, an identification of an explanatory source prior to the text: insight, creativity, genius.

This last category was the one that linked the Author with aesthetic value. How deep an insight? How much creativity? What degree of genius? To us, in these days of quality control, the notion of grading literary works begins to seem as vulgar as assessing commodities, or indeed departments of literature. In the UK the British government and its quangos seem preoccupied with classifying us. They, or our colleagues on their behalf, rate our teaching as excellent, satisfactory or unsatisfactory (since almost no department is unsatisfactory – even those who are willing to do the assessing seem to have some residual capacity for professional loyalty – satisfactory has come, by an interesting semantic shift to mean unsatisfactory). Our research, meanwhile, is graded by a national committee on a scale from 1 to 5, though it's thought that these categories may not do justice to the full range of our inadequacies, and next time round more refined levels of humiliation may be available. If this kind of evaluation seems gross as applied to academic departments, how much more offensive to do it to Authors, some of whom are, after all, alleged to be geniuses, in possession of insight and creativity.

It was the practice of making aesthetic judgements on Authors which vindicated the construction of the canon, and literary criticism has been brought into disrepute, as everyone has become aware, by the process of unmasking the ideological element inscribed in the ostensibly disinterested list of canonical texts. The Western canon, we now know, is the location of political as well as aesthetic values. Only the purest formalism has been able to escape the recognition of its own investment in the works selected for approval, and the blindness to misogyny, imperialism and heterosexism which has characterised not so much the texts themselves, since they are often more ambiguous than their admirers allow, as the criticism which endorses them.

In my own case, it was feminism, alongside Marxism, that played the largest part in the process of unmasking. In 1970 Kate Millet's witty and devastating accounts of Henry Miller, Norman Mailer and, above all, D. H. Lawrence began to ensure that my reading life would never be the same again. What was at stake was injustice. This was not primarily injustice on the part of the authors themselves. What, after all, was to be gained by blaming them? Some of the most culpable ones were dead, and the others probably beyond reconstruction. The point was that they themselves were products of their culture. Exit, therefore, the Author, and enter a mode of reading which was closer

to cultural history. The next move was that texts, like history itself, began to be perceived in consequence as the location of conflicts of meaning. Unity was no longer a virtue – where, after all, was the special merit in a monologic misogyny? – and coherence ceased to be grounds for praise. The text, we discovered, might display symptoms of resistance to its own propositions, might be open, in its undecidability, to more than one interpretation. Moreover, what perpetuated injustice was not so much Lawrence's anti-feminism (say), as the way criticism reaffirmed the misogyny readers were already in danger of taking for granted, by praising his work without drawing attention to its implications for sexual politics. Exit, therefore, the idea of criticism itself as a transparent practice in the service of literature, and enter a new attention to the institution of literary studies and the power relations confirmed by the knowledges it produced.

Since then we have learned to identify injustices of other kinds. Homoerotic and post-colonial criticism are currently leading the field. The universal wisdom attributed to canonical texts was, we now know, white, Western and homophobic, as well as bourgeois and relentlessly patriarchal. The voices silenced for so long by the grand narrative of a humane and humanising literary tradition are now insisting on being heard, offering new readings of the canonical texts, and drawing attention to works the canon marginalised. Suddenly, we can't get enough of incitements to acknowledge injustices, past and present. As we repudiate the illusion of impartiality, the goal of objective interpretation and the quest for the final, identifiable meaning of the text, Literary studies has found itself entering the postmodern condition.

Restored by my recognition of the terminal state of literary criticism, I returned to the elegant book on Shakespeare, and found that I'd radically misjudged it. The conclusion made clear that this was a book about identity on the eve of the Cartesian moment; it was about subjectivity as always and inevitably pre-scripted, and about the longing for total individuality and self-determination which in those circumstances can never be realised. Mercifully, it wasn't literary criticism at all. Instead, it was an extremely skilled and sophisticated reading of some very complex and sophisticated texts, locating them in the cultural history of the emergence of what was in due course to become the American dream – and the political implications of that for all of us can hardly be overstated¹.

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The backlash, of course, was inevitable, and it is by no means over. The inappropriately named humanism of literary criticism has been singularly reluctant simply to lie down and die, though it is beginning to look very long in the tooth. Some of the outcry against the new developments is journalistic and trivial, knockabout stuff, based on a radical failure or, worse, refusal to understand the issues, or the theoretical positions that define them. Some of it represents no more than a cry of anguish from white heterosexual men who have reached a point on the salary scale when they ought, in the

normal course of things, to have expected a certain deferential attention, only to find that they have been upstaged by lesbian critics half their age, or poststructuralists doing unspeakable things which render familiar texts suddenly impenetrable².

Most of it depends on a reaffirmation of the autonomy of the aesthetic. Wily conservatives do not make their politico-literary agenda explicit, any more than they ever did. What is at stake for them is officially the submergence of great art in a welter of the second-rate. Politics, it is argued, has supplanted purely aesthetic values; sympathy with injustice has taken over from imaginative experience; the quest for novelty has replaced true appreciation of literature. Students are therefore being encouraged, the conservatives argue, to waste their time reading bad books – bad aesthetically, that is. When it comes to defining the aesthetic, the assertions become rather more mysterious: what has been lost, apparently, is «response», «feeling», «inwardness with the work». I have to confess that I'm not sure what these things are and, as far as I can tell, the wielders of the backlash are not willing to tell me. If you can't recognise them when you see them, you might as well forget it, apparently. We have not advanced much, it seems, beyond the «plainly» or «clearly» which tended to preface the murkiest and most polemical pronouncements of F. R. Leavis.

The temptation with most of this backlash material is to leave it unread and uncontested: there is, after all, a great deal of serious analysis still to be done. But I wonder whether here too the some of the reactionary texts might be shown to say more than their authors appear to know. I hope it goes without saying that I welcome the new developments, the plurality of voices now audible in the institution, and the challenges to the narrowness of what used to constitute the body of texts worth reading. Indeed, I take it so much for granted that the entry of literary studies into the postmodern condition marks a much-needed improvement on the bad old days, that I want to risk pausing to consider the unlikely possibility that we have something to learn from the cries of pain that we hear so regularly and repeatedly. I want, in other words, to take the backlash seriously.

Because of its centrality, its relative intelligence and its widespread exposure, I'd like to invoke as an instance Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon*, published in 1994 in America and the following year in the UK. My impression of the British reviews in the newspapers and weeklies was that they just about broke even between rapture and ridicule. James Wood in *The Guardian* loved it; Peter Conrad in *The Observer* thought it was the silliest thing he'd ever read. A lot depends on your point of view. The book is in part an elegy for the dear, dead days beyond recall, when you could put a Shakespeare play on the high school syllabus, and still have enough energy left over to get the children to think about the merits of *Paradise Lost*. And in part it's also an elegy for the 1970s, when Bloom's own book, *The Anxiety of Influence*, first formulated the challenging hypothesis that made Bloom himself a star. This was the idea that strong writers are those who have been impelled to overthrow the influence of a powerful precursor, and that their work is intelligible as a struggle against this literary father. The Western canon, Bloom now argues, consists of these great writers, all of them survivors

of the Oedipal struggle, all of them in turn identifiable as powerful precursors for the next generation. There are 26 of them, none of the names very surprising, with Shakespeare, who is nearly everyone's precursor, at the centre. Bloom concludes with a canon of world books, beginning with *Gilgamesh* and *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*, and ending with a list of American works, a number of which, I'm ashamed to say, I've never heard of. Among those I have, Toni Morrison is there for *Song of Solomon* and Ursula Le Guin for *The Left Hand of Darkness*, but not *The Dispossessed*. I was impressed to see that Jeanette Winterson is included for *The Passion*. At the level of personal taste, I'm with Bloom to a high degree. I couldn't help thinking that it would make a good party game to give people marks for guessing which authors are listed, and for which of their works. Then they could make their own lists...

The principles of selection, Bloom insists, are resolutely aesthetic. What makes a work great, which is to say strong and deep, is not ideology or metaphysics. He entirely acknowledges what the last twenty-five years has brought to our attention: that most canonical works are politically incorrect:

The silliest way to defend the Western Canon is to insist that it incarnates all of the seven deadly moral virtues that make up our supposed range of normative values and democratic principles. This is palpably untrue. The *Iliad* teaches the surpassing glory of armed victory, while Dante rejoices in the eternal torments he visits upon his very personal enemies. Tolstoy's private version of Christianity throws aside nearly everything that anyone among us retains, and Dostoevsky preaches anti-Semitism, obscurantism, and the necessity of human bondage. Shakespeare's politics, insofar as we can pin them down, do not appear to be very different from those of his Coriolanus, and Milton's ideas of free speech and free press do not preclude the imposition of all manner of societal restraints. Spenser rejoices in the massacre of Irish rebels, while the egomania of Wordsworth exalts his own poetic mind over any other source of splendor.

If we read the Western Canon in order to form our social, political, or personal moral values, I firmly believe that we will become monsters of selfishness and exploitation.

The final injustice of historical injustice is that it does not necessarily endow its victims with anything except a sense of their victimization. Whatever the Western Canon is, it is not a program for social salvation³.

I have quoted Bloom at some length to demonstrate in the rhythms of his prose how much he owes to a powerful precursor whose influence is not, perhaps, adequately overthrown. Matthew Arnold also believed that literature had no obligation to put right specific injustices, and that critical judgement was not a matter of agreeing with the propositions of the text.

The rule may be summed up in one word, – *disinterestedness*. And how is criticism to show disinterestedness? By keeping aloof from what is called «the

practical view of things»; by resolutely following the law of its own nature, which is to be a free play of the mind on all subjects which it touches. By steadily refusing to lend itself to any of those ulterior, political, practical considerations about ideas, which plenty of people will be sure to attach to them, which perhaps ought often to be attached to them, which in this country at any rate are certain to be attached to them quite sufficiently, but which criticism has really nothing to do with. Its business is, as I have said, simply to know the best that is known and thought in the world...⁴.

What Bloom takes from Arnold is an «authority» derived from the illusion of a personal speaking voice. The mode of address is direct, casual at times, allusive, and then almost colloquial. Bloom also borrows Arnold's habit of repeating words and sentences, the reiterated structures often leading to a summarising parataxis or an epigrammatic closure. These are the rhythms of oral rhetoric, the imitation of speech in written prose simulating for a phonocentric culture authenticity, integrity, resounding conviction.

Here is Arnold again, arguing that criticism is failing in its crucial task:

It is because criticism has so little kept in the pure intellectual sphere, has so little detached itself from practice, has been so directly polemical and controversial, that it has so ill accomplished, in this country, its best spiritual work; which is to keep man from a self-satisfaction which is retarding and vulgarising, to lead him towards perfection, by making his mind dwell upon what is excellent in itself.⁵

Bloom's case, meanwhile, is that what he calls the School of Resentment, broadly, Marxists, feminists and multiculturalists, has vulgarised literary studies by distracting criticism from its proper object, which is to enhance «the mind's dialogue with itself». «The true use», he says, «of Shakespeare or of Cervantes, of Homer or of Dante, of Chaucer or of Rabelais, is to augment one's own growing inner self»⁶, «to enlarge a solitary existence»⁷.

The problem here for both Arnold and Bloom is that what takes the place of the despised polemic and controversy in their scheme of values, what rises above the merely contingent, is an individualist self-cultivation, which is itself deeply political. Arnold, optimistic about the possibilities for the future, manages, as liberals often do, to evade specificity by reference to a not very clearly defined «criticism of life». Bloom, however, who sees it all slipping away, is correspondingly more impassioned and more revealing. The literature he admires is, he tells us, not only «strong», but also «deep» and «dark», individual, («solitary»), «competitive» and «free» – which brings us right back again to the heart of the American dream for the second time, but now uncritically. (Bloom also indicates that his favourite characters from Shakespeare are Falstaff and Lear: passionate, patriarchal, imperious, solitary and ultimately desperate old men.)

What then is there to take seriously here? The personal and political investments are barely disguised; the prose, however vigorous, is also derivative; the definition of criticism has been familiar for at least 130 years. The logic of Bloom's position requires, however, that if what makes literature strong, deep and dark is not a matter of content, morality, ideology, then the value that elicits his passionate defence, literature's aesthetic autonomy, must reside at least in part elsewhere. What is aesthetically exciting, his book reiterates, is not only meaning, but form, language, the signifier itself. As a self-proclaimed Romantic⁸, Bloom repudiates any theory that would enable him to account for the power of the signifier, or to identify its materiality, so the textuality of the text is necessarily collapsed back into a property of the Author, recuperated as a psychological propensity, a «will to figuration»⁹, and barely differentiated from the signified, the meaning as insight or understanding. But the signifier is named, none the less, and repeatedly, as a constituent of «aesthetic strength», which is said to reside in «an amalgam: *mastery of figurative language*, originality, cognitive power, knowledge, *exuberance of diction*»¹⁰. «Shakespeare and Dante are the center of the Canon because they excel all other Western writers in cognitive acuity, *linguistic energy*, and power of invention»¹¹. Shakespeare demonstrates «a verbal art larger and more definitive than any other, so persuasive that it seems to be not art at all but something that was always there»¹². And again, «Rhetorically, Shakespeare has no equal; no more awesome panoply of metaphor exists»¹³.

Bloom's vocabulary is impressionistic, not analytical: as he sees it, the language of literature is masterful, exuberant, energetic, large, awesome. And yet there is a consistency here which takes the place of precision: Bloom's own signifying practice invests literature with the kinds of qualities we might attribute to an epic hero or to one of the gods: an exceptional vigour, power, grandeur. The relation of the critic to creative writing is devout, fervent and perhaps inspired. The text, or rather, in Bloom's terms, the Author, is an object of veneration for a secular world.

Arnold also saw literature as a secular replacement for a discredited religion, and was so pleased with this insight that he opened «The Study of Poetry» by reiterating his own earlier formulation:

The future of poetry is immense, because in poetry, where it is worthy of its high destinies, our race, as time goes on, will find an ever surer and surer stay. There is not a creed which is not shaken, not an accredited dogma which is not shown to be questionable, not a received tradition which does not threaten to dissolve. Our religion has materialised itself in the fact, in the supposed fact; it has attached its emotion to the fact, and now the fact is failing it. But for poetry the idea is everything; the rest is a world of illusion, of divine illusion¹⁴.

Arnold too affirmed the importance of the signifier. His vocabulary here is more limited than Bloom's, but his accounts of literature display the same emphasis on what he

calls «style and manner». These qualities are not to be defined, he insists: on the contrary, they are better «felt» and «recognised» than analysed. And they are not to be seen as independent of meaning: «Both of these, the substance and matter on the one hand, the style and manner on the other, have a mark, an accent, of high beauty, worth, and power». The signifier precisely signifies, and what it signifies is power. Power, indeed, is the distinguishing quality of true poetry: familiarity with the famous touchstones will enable us to be thoroughly «penetrated» by it – like Adam, perhaps, animated by the breath of God¹⁵.

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If I have an anxiety about literary studies in the postmodern condition, it is that we may have neglected the signifier. There is, perhaps, a tendency for current readings to go straight to the signified, to uncover the content of the text, whether conscious or unconscious, and ignore the mode of address. How ironic if postmodernity, so conscious of surfaces that it is often accused of taking style for substance, should generate a criticism which, though often eminently stylish in itself (I think here particularly of American New Historicism, for example), takes little or no account of the signifying practices of the texts it interprets. This is a loss. I am not, of course, asking for an empty formalism, a descriptive account of register or structure. But conventions, and breaches of convention, do signify; genres, and generic surprises, constitute something of the meaning of the text. How ironic if poststructuralism, which draws attention to the opacity of language, should be invoked in support of a new assumption of its transparency.

The mode of address offers the reader a specific subject position in relation to the text's explicit propositions. It might be important to recognise, for instance, that Arnold's prose owes part of its authority to the illusion of expressiveness, the use of the first-person pronoun, and the casual, direct phrase invading the regularities of the rhythm, so that the text appears to mimic the process of reflection itself. And its persuasiveness owes something, too, to the repetition of specific words and phrases: «the fact» four times in one sentence, or a single term woven through a whole essay («disinterestedness», «high seriousness», «the criticism of life») to the point where the words seem to invoke an already familiar, already taken for granted, «obvious» value. And it might be useful to acknowledge that the section of the British press which greeted Bloom's book with such rapture was responding, at least in part, to a genuine familiarity which was not named, a recognition, conscious or not, of the diction of Arnold with a difference, which is also the diction of our «best» journalists.

To put a case for attending to the rhetorical strategies of the text is not, of course, to defend the canon. On the contrary, if the signifier has such persuasive power, the most useful thing we can do for our students is alert them to the modes of address that characterise the artifacts they encounter daily: news bulletins, Mills and Boon romances, Hollywood movies and advertisements. This is not, contrary to popular belief, to af-

firm that corn flakes packets are as good as *King Lear*, but simply to take into account the possibility that corn flakes packets may have designs on us. If people in democratic societies subscribe to the most extraordinary values, and after 17 years of right-wing government in the UK, it is clear to me that they do, it might be because something in their culture coaxes and cajoles them into beliefs that would be unaccountable in a world where language was a neutral instrument of communication. Right-wing political rhetoric doesn't just peddle policies: it elicits deference to an authority which will do our political thinking for us. Advertisements don't just sell shampoo or cars: they identify happiness with consumption. If English departments don't attend to the seductions of the signifier across a range of practices, who will?

But rhetorical strategies are not all that is at stake in attending to the signifier. Arnold and Bloom treat the language of literature with an awe that is commonly reserved for the heroic or the supernatural. Postmodernity is inclined to a greater scepticism, but not, I want to propose, indifferent to the issue they identify. Bloom is more loquacious about it than Arnold, but also more diffuse. One emphasis, however, running through his book, is that literature promotes an encounter with the unexpected, the alien, an effect he calls «weirdness»¹⁶. This seems to be more than what the Russian formalists meant by defamiliarisation, though it shares some of the same ground. What is the common quality, Bloom asks, that makes his 26 writers great?

The answer, more often than not, has turned out to be strangeness, a mode of originality that either cannot be assimilated, or that so assimilates us that we cease to see it as strange. Walter Pater defined Romanticism as adding strangeness to beauty, but I think he characterized all canonical writing rather than the Romantics as such. The cycle of achievement goes from *The Divine Comedy* to *Endgame*, from strangeness to strangeness. When you read a canonical work for a first time you encounter a stranger, an uncanny startlement rather than a fulfilment of expectations. Read freshly, all that *The Divine Comedy*, *Paradise Lost*, *Faust Part Two*, *Hadji Murad*, *Peer Gynt*, *Ulysses*, and *Canto general* have in common is their uncanniness, their ability to make you feel strange at home¹⁷.

(The recurrence of «strangeness» here closely resembles Arnold's affirmative repetitions.) The uncanny, a sensation beyond pleasure, resembling, no doubt, the frisson that delayed A. E. Housman if he thought of a line of poetry when he was shaving, because it made his skin bristle¹⁸. Conversely, Shakespeare, Bloom says, renders the unfamiliar familiar, «making us at home out of doors»¹⁹. In Shakespeare what is most outlandish becomes obvious; Shakespeare, Bloom proposes, «largely invented us»²⁰.

Paradoxically, this confrontation with otherness, with what is irreducibly deep and dark, is said to bring its own kind of comfort. Like Arnold, who found in poetry «a consolation and stay», a capacity to «interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us»²¹, Bloom argues that the canon reconciles us to the nature of things. In this sense, great books have a lesson to teach, though the lesson is neither moral nor political:

The study of literature, however it is conducted, will not save any individual, any more than it will improve any society. Shakespeare will not make us better, and he will not make us worse, but he may teach us how to overhear ourselves when we talk to ourselves. Subsequently, he may teach us how to accept change, in ourselves as in others, and perhaps even the final form of change. Hamlet is death's ambassador to us...²².

What is the connection between the uncanny power of literature and its capacity to sustain? Death, it appears, plays a part.

Bloom's purchase on current theory is distinctly shaky. He seems to believe that Michel Foucault wrote «The Death of the Author»²³, that Roland Barthes argues in favour of the pleasure of an easy read²⁴, and that Jacques Lacan sees the unconscious as a structure of phonemes.²⁵ But Bloom *has* read Freud, and especially Freud on the uncanny. In Freud's account, the uncanny is what ought to have remained hidden but has come to light. The *Unheimliche* is the unhomely but familiar secret, which has become unsecret and is experienced as unfamiliar; it is, in other words, the return of the repressed. Literature, in Bloom's account, offers us a sense of the strangeness of the familiar, or of familiarity with what is strange. It invites us to confront what might, or should have remained hidden, to encounter a secret which is otherwise repressed. And this deep, dark secret is constitutive for the reader: Shakespeare «largely invented us». Bloom then backs away from the possibilities of his own recognition: the weirdness must, he decides, be accountable in some other way, at the level of the signified. In Shakespeare it is attributable to character, it turns out, and the banality of that proposition surely indicates that something serious is being kept at bay. «No other writer has ever had anything like Shakespeare's resources of language, which are so florabundant in *Love's Labour's Lost* that we feel many of the limits of language have been reached, once and for all. Shakespeare's greatest originality is in representation of character, however»²⁶.

But there is nothing particularly uncanny in Bloom's account of Shakespeare's characters, and the gap between what he says about the limits of language and his character sketches might be read psychoanalytically as itself a mark of repression. Suppose, then, we follow the path opened by Bloom's attention to the signifier and its power to disturb? According to the poststructuralist theory that Bloom so vehemently rejects, the subject is what speaks, or rather signifies, and it signifies always and only from the place of the Other. The imperatives of the organism that we also are return to us alienated, from outside, from the language that precedes us and makes us subjects. Subjectivity, identity is learnt; it is an effect and not an origin; it depends on the signifier.

In daily life it is possible to repress this recognition to the degree that we seem to master the language that constitutes us. In as much as language appears transparent, an instrument that we use, the subject is able to imagine itself given in nature, an essence, the origin of its own desires, and in possession of the objects of its knowledge, repudiating, which is to say disavowing, the precariousness which results from its linguistic

composition. But to encounter language at the limits of mastery, to confront the signifier as difficult, errant or opaque, is to risk coming face to face with the Other, the material of our own identity, and the insubstantial character of subjectivity itself. The Other is the non-full, non-present, non-existent source of meaning and truth, the ungrounded guarantee of the knowledges we seem to possess, and it is constitutive for the subjects we are. No wonder the encounter is experienced as disturbing, awe-inspiring, beyond pleasure; no wonder Bloom finds it deep, dark and uncanny.

To reach the limits of language is to stand at the edge of what we know, on the threshold of the undefined and unknowable, though we can name it: Lacan's real, Jean-François Lyotard's event. In one sense we do this every day. I encounter the unknown every time I listen to the football results or the shipping forecast, both of which I find utterly impenetrable. But the uncanny moment is not there. These are discourses that I could learn – with whatever difficulty. The Freudian uncanny, at least in fiction, is also a moment of undecidability, when it is impossible to be sure of the genre of the text. Supernatural beings are disturbing when they invade an apparently mimetic text: *The Turn of the Screw* is uncanny; *Julius Caesar* is not. Similarly, the poetic frisson results from the unexpected, not the unintelligible. Like the anamorphic skull in *The Ambassadors*, an uncanny phrase or figure disrupts our seamless mastery of the text, takes it in an unpredicted direction, or leaves us undecided between possible interpretations. It invites us suddenly to read from another position, and thus draws attention to the subject as precisely *positioned*, making sense from a specific and limited place. This place is at once located – in history, in culture, in this moment as opposed to that – and dislocated, other than it is, beside itself, outside the comfortable, confident command of the text, and of the objects of knowledge, the mastery that was always imaginary.

The place is above all subject to mortality. «Hamlet is death's ambassador to us...», Bloom says, and again, «The Canon, far from being the servant of the dominant social class, is the minister of death»²⁷. (Is Bloom, I wonder, who includes non-fictional prose in his canon, making a bid with this resounding phrase, for canonical status for his own book?) It is surprising how many of Arnold's touchstones in «The Study of Poetry» allude in one way or another to mortality. Death is the supreme example of what can be named but not known. As Freud points out, it is a well known fact that all human beings are mortal, but although we perfectly understand the premise of the syllogism, there's a sense in which we don't really grasp its application to ourselves at the level of experience²⁸. Elsewhere he puts it differently: «It is indeed impossible to imagine our own death; and whenever we attempt to do so we can perceive that we are in fact still present as spectators»²⁹. Derrida makes a similar point in *Aporias*³⁰. In Lacanian terms, death is the moment when the organism finally rejoins the unknowable but inextricable real. There is therefore a sense in which the subject knows nothing of death because it is not the subject that dies. On the contrary, what dies is precisely the organism, which is something other than the subject³¹. At the same time, the (living) subject is always destined for death, since its existence depends on difference. Subjectivity ceases to be

when the organism dies, and that cessation is both inevitable and impossible, nameable and unintelligible. Death is thus one kind of instance of the signifier at its most opaque.

But death is in my view an example of the uncanny, not its origin. Indeed, it is not death itself which disturbs in fiction, but ghosts and revenants, figures who contradict the meaning of the term. Contradiction, paradox, oxymoron: these are all cases where we might feel that «the limits of language have been reached», as Bloom puts it. They are also recurrent features of Arnold's touchstones: «In cradle of the rude imperious surge» is one of the Shakespearean cases he cites; «Darken'd so, yet shone / Above them all the archangel» from *Paradise Lost*; and «Absent thee from felicity awhile», where it is death that is defined as felicity, and life is identified as an absence.

In *Paradise Lost*, to invoke a single instance of my own, Milton's Satan asserts:

my self am hell;
And in the lowest deep a lower deep
Still threatening to devour me opens wide (IV. 75-7).

In the lowest a lower still: Satan's acknowledgement of a subjectivity encountering an infinite regress of loss demonstrates that representation, not experience, not imagination, is the location of meaning. His agonised affirmation of a lower deep within the lowest makes sense, even while it defies visualisation, logic, grammar itself: everyone knows that it is not possible to exceed the superlative. There is no referent here, and no imaginable concept. But meaning is neither referential nor psychological: on the contrary, it is an effect of language. Language is not transparent to an imaginable reality on the other side of signification; it is not, precisely, a medium. Satan's unimaginable horror, his affirmation of a subjectivity which is forever ungrounded, makes sense by enlisting the non-transparency of language, which is in turn the subject's only (insubstantial and dis-located) ground.

From a religious point of view, it might well be that the proper response to the opacity of the signifier, or to signifying practice that brings us face to face with the Other that made us, is awe, a sense of the ultimate mystery of things. Both Arnold and Bloom inhabit, it seems to me, a profoundly supernatural world, though for them formal religion is secularised as art. We do not need to share their metaphysics in order to recognise the possibility that there are instances of language which invite us to confront our own uncanny double, the Other which is the condition of our existence as subjects, and in the process to acknowledge the experience as frightening. I don't want to attribute these cases to genius, or invoke them in defence of the canon. On the contrary, it seems to me that they are likely to be culturally relative, and to be found in quite unexpected places. But I think we could usefully take them into account when we think of the role of literary studies in the postmodern condition. No other discipline confronts the strangeness of language in a way which enables us to glimpse the corresponding strangeness of the subject to itself.

It remains to account for the fact that people choose these uncanny encounters, that they enjoy the frisson. Arnold finds poetry consoling; Bloom believes literature

reconciles us to death. It is possible that the signifier protects us from a relation to death, from a *direct* relation, to the degree that to name is always to misrecognise or, in Derridean terms, to defer the signified³². Derrida's différance (with an a) ensures that meaning is always relegated, supplanted, distanced and postponed by the signifier, which takes the place of the imagined absence or presence. (As is so often the case, Shakespeare also invented this point: «the worst is not / So long as we can say, 'This is the worst'»³³) The signifier, which in its opacity brings the subject to the edge of a confrontation with its own relativity, paradoxically also permits it to back away again, reaffirms the distance between the subject and the unthinkable condition of its existence³⁴.

Arnold had no vocabulary for the analysis of the experience he identified; Bloom refuses to engage with the theory that would enable him to go beyond a Romantic relation to textuality. But then both Arnold and Bloom are confined within the discipline of literary criticism. Literary studies in the postmodern condition, however, has no excuse for evading the implications of the uncanny power of the signifier that both Arnold and Bloom, as well as others, have brought to our attention. The frisson engendered by certain signifying instances is not best understood either as a Romantic self-indulgence, or as an encounter with a mystery that can be named and relegated as genius. On the contrary, it can more usefully be read as a reminder of our own linguistic constitution as subjects, and our consequent vulnerability to the meanings and values in circulation in our culture. Whether our motive in reading is solitary self-cultivation or contending against social injustice, we should, in my view, do well to remember what we are, and the relativity of the place we speak from.

¹ Linda Charnes, *Notorious Identity: Materializing the Subject in Shakespeare*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993.

² For a recent example, see Hilton Kramer and Roger Kimball, «Farewell to the MLA», in *The New Criterion*, February 1995, 5-16.

³ Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*, London: Macmillan, 1995, p. 29.

⁴ Matthew Arnold, «The Function of Criticism at the Present Time», in *Poetry and Prose*, ed John Bryson, London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1967, 351-74, pp. 360-61.

⁵ Arnold, «Function», p. 362.

⁶ Bloom, *The Western Canon*, p. 30.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 518.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 29 (my italics).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 46 (my italics).

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 49.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

¹⁴ Arnold, «The Study of Poetry», in *Poetry and Prose*, 663-85, p. 663.

- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 670-71.
- ¹⁶ Bloom, *The Western Canon*, p. 26.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- ¹⁸ A E Housman, *The Name and Nature of Poetry*, Cambridge: CUP, 1933, p. 47. Housman also insisted that poetry was not a matter of meaning, but of language, and that its effects were unaccountable. True poetry appealed to «something in man which is obscure and latent, something older than the present organisation of his nature, like the patches of fen which still linger here and there in the drained lands of Cambridgeshire» (p. 46).
- ¹⁹ Bloom, *The Western Canon*, p. 3.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 40.
- ²¹ Arnold, «The Study of Poetry», pp. 664, 663.
- ²² Bloom, *The Western Canon*, p. 31.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 60.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 30.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 371.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 47.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 32.
- ²⁸ Sigmund Freud, «The 'Uncanny'», in *Art and Literature*, ed. Albert Dickson, Penguin Freud Library, vol. 14, London: Penguin Books, 1985, pp. 335-81.
- ²⁹ Sigmund Freud, «Thoughts for the Times on War and Death», in *Civilization, Society and Religion: Group Psychology, Civilization and its Discontents and Other Works*, ed. Albert Dickson, Penguin Freud Library, vol. 12, London: Penguin Books, 1985, 57-89, p. 77.
- ³⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993, p. 22.
- ³¹ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 76.
- ³² Cf. *ibid.*
- ³³ *King Lear* 4.1.27-8.
- ³⁴ Cf. Lyotard's account of the Burkean sublime: the sublime in Burke is kindled by terror of privation, death, the fear of «nothing happening»; art, meanwhile, suspends this menace by making something happen. Strange combinations in art are shocking, and the shock is the evidence of «something happening» (Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991, pp. 99-101).