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# The Limits of Pluralism

## III

### The Critic as Host

#### J. Hillis Miller

*“Je meurs où je m’attache,”* Mr. Holt said with a polite grin. “The ivy says so in the picture, and clings to the oak like a fond parasite as it is.”

“Parricide, sir!” cries Mrs. Tusher.

—*Henry Esmond*, bk. 1, chap. 3

At one point in “Rationality and Imagination in Cultural History” M. H. Abrams cites Wayne Booth’s assertion that the “deconstructionist” reading of a given work “is plainly and simply parasitical” on “the obvious or univocal reading.”<sup>1</sup> The latter is Abrams’ phrase, the former Booth’s. My citation of a citation is an example of a kind of chain which it will be part of my intention here to interrogate. What happens when a critical essay extracts a “passage” and “cites” it? Is this different from a citation, echo, or allusion within a poem? Is a citation an alien parasite within the body of its host, the main text, or is it the other way around, the interpretative text the parasite which surrounds and strangles the citation which is its host? The host feeds the parasite and makes its life possible, but at the same time is killed by it, as “criticism” is often said to kill “literature.” Or can host and parasite live happily together, in the domicile of the same text, feeding each other or sharing the food?

Abrams, in any case, goes on to add “a more radical reply.” If “deconstructionist principles” are taken seriously, he says, “any history which relies on written texts becomes an impossibility.”<sup>2</sup> So be it. That is

1. *Critical Inquiry* 2, no. 3 (Spring 1976): 457–58. The first phrase is quoted from Wayne Booth, “M. H. Abrams: Historian as Critic, Critic as Pluralist,” *ibid.*, p. 441.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 458.

not much of an argument. A certain notion of history or of literary history, like a certain notion of determinable reading, might indeed be an impossibility, and if so, it might be better to know that, and not to fool oneself or be fooled. It might, or it might not. That something in the realm of interpretation is a demonstrable impossibility does not prevent it from being “done,” as the abundance of histories, literary histories, and readings demonstrates. On the other hand, I should agree that “the impossibility of reading should not be taken too lightly.”<sup>3</sup> It has consequences, for life and death, since it is inscribed, incorporated, in the bodies of individual human beings and in the body politic of our cultural life and death together.

“Parasitical”—the word is an interesting one. It suggests the image of “the obvious or univocal reading” as the mighty, masculine oak or ash, rooted in the solid ground, endangered by the insidious twining around it of ivy, English or maybe poison, somehow feminine, secondary, defective, or dependent, a clinging vine, able to live in no other way but by drawing the life sap of its host, cutting off its light and air. I think of the end of Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*: “God bless you, honest William!—Farewell, dear Amelia—Grow green again, tender little parasite, round the rugged old oak to which you cling!” Or of Hardy’s “The Ivy-Wife,” of which here are the last two stanzas:

In new affection next I strove  
 To coll an ash I saw,  
 And he in trust received my love;  
 Till with my soft green claw  
 I cramped and bound him as I wove . . .  
 Such was my love: ha-ha!

By this I gained his strength and height  
 Without his rivalry.  
 But in my triumph I lost sight  
 Of afterhaps. Soon he,  
 Being bark-bound, flagged, snapped, fell outright,  
 And in his fall felled me!

These sad love stories of a domestic affection which nevertheless introduces the uncanny, the alien, the parasitical into the closed economy of the home, the *Unheimlich* into the *Heimlich*, no doubt describe well enough the way some people may feel about the relation of a “deconstructive” interpretation to “the obvious or univocal reading.” The parasite is destroying the host. The alien has invaded the house, perhaps to kill the father of the family, in an act which does not look like parricide, but is. Is that “obvious” reading in fact, however, so “obvious”

3. Paul de Man, “The Timid God,” *The Georgia Review* 29, no. 3 (Fall 1975): 558.

or even so “univocal”? May it not be already that uncanny alien which is so close that it cannot be seen as strange, as host in the sense of enemy rather than host in the sense of open-handed dispenser of hospitality? Equivocal rather than univocal and most equivocal in its intimate familiarity and in its ability to have got itself taken for granted as “obvious” and “univocal,” one-voiced?

“Parasite” is one of those words which calls up its apparent “opposite.” It has no meaning without that counterpart. There is no parasite without its host. At the same time both word and counterword subdivide and reveal themselves each to be fissured already within themselves and to be, like *Unheimlich*, *unheimlich*, an example of a double antithetical word. Words in “para,” like words in “ana,” have this as an intrinsic property, capability, or tendency. “Para” as a prefix in English (sometimes “par”) indicates alongside, near or beside, beyond, incorrectly, resembling or similar to, subsidiary to, isomeric or polymeric to. In borrowed Greek compounds “para” indicates beside, to the side of, alongside, beyond, wrongfully, harmfully, unfavorably, and among.<sup>4</sup> The words in “para” form one branch of the tangled labyrinth of words using some form of the Indo-European root *per*, which is the “base of prepositions and pre-verbs with the basic meaning of ‘forward,’ ‘through,’ and a wide range of extended senses such as ‘in front of,’ ‘before,’ ‘early,’ ‘first,’ ‘chief,’ ‘toward,’ ‘against,’ ‘near,’ ‘at,’ ‘around.’”

I said words in “para” are one branch of the labyrinth of “pers,” but it is easy to see that the branch is itself a miniature labyrinth. “Para” is an “uncanny” double antithetical prefix signifying at once proximity and distance, similarity and difference, interiority and exteriority, something at once inside a domestic economy and outside it, something simultaneously this side of the boundary line, threshold, or margin, and at the same time beyond it, equivalent in status and at the same time secondary or subsidiary, submissive, as of guest to host, slave to master. A thing in “para” is, moreover, not only simultaneously on both sides of the boundary line between inside and outside. It is also the boundary itself, the screen which is at once a permeable membrane connecting inside and outside, confusing them with one another, allowing the outside in, making the inside out, dividing them but also forming an ambiguous transition between one and the other. Though any given word in “para” may seem to choose unequivocally or univocally one of these possibilities, the other meanings are always there as a shimmering or wavering in the word which makes it refuse to stay still in a sentence, like a slightly alien guest within the syntactical closure where all the words are family friends together. Words in “para” include: parachute, paradigm, parasol, the French *paravent* (screen protecting against the wind), and *parapluie* (umbrella), paragon, paradox, parapet, parataxis, parapraxis,

4. All definitions and etymologies in this essay come from *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, ed. William Morris (Boston, 1969).

parabasis, paraphrase, paragraph, paraph, paralysis, paranoia, paraphernalia, parallel, parallax, parameter, parable, paresthesia, paramnesia, paregoric, parergon, paramorph, paramecium, Paraclete, paramedical, paralegal—and parasite.

“Parasite” comes from the Greek, *parasitos*, etymologically: “beside the grain,” *para*, beside (in this case) plus *sitos*, grain, food. “Sitology” is the science of foods, nutrition, and diet. “Parasite” was originally something positive, a fellow guest, someone sharing the food with you, there with you beside the grain. Later on, “parasite” came to mean a professional dinner guest, someone expert at cadging invitations without ever giving dinners in return. From this developed the two main modern meanings in English, the biological and the social. A parasite is (1) “Any organism that grows, feeds, and is sheltered on or in a different organism while contributing nothing to the survival of its host”; (2) “A person who habitually takes advantage of the generosity of others without making any useful return.” To call a kind of criticism “parasitical” is, in either case, strong language.

A curious system of thought, or of language, or of social organization (in fact all three at once) is implicit in the word parasite. There is no parasite without a host. The host and the somewhat sinister or subversive parasite are fellow guests beside the food, sharing it. On the other hand, the host is himself the food, his substance consumed without recompense, as when one says, “He is eating me out of house and home.” The host may then become the host in another sense, not etymologically connected. The word “Host” is of course the name for the consecrated bread or wafer of the Eucharist, from Middle English *oste*, from Old French *oiste*, from Latin *hostia*, sacrifice, victim.

If the host is both eater and eaten, he also contains in himself the double antithetical relation of host and guest, guest in the bifold sense of friendly presence and alien invader. The words “host” and “guest” go back in fact to the same etymological root: *ghos-ti*, stranger, guest, host, properly “someone with whom one has reciprocal duties of hospitality.” The modern English word “host” in this alternative sense comes from the Middle English (*h*)*oste*, from Old French, host, guest, from Latin *hospes* (stem *hospit-*), guest, host, stranger. The “pes” or “pit” in the Latin words and in such modern English words as “hospital” and “hospitality” is from another root, *pot*, meaning “master.” The compound or bifurcated root *ghos-pot* meant “master of guests,” “one who symbolizes the relationship of reciprocal hospitality,” as in the Slavic *gospodi*, Lord, sir, master. “Guest,” on the other hand, is from Middle English *gest*, from Old Norse *gestr*, from *ghos-ti*, the same root as for “host.” A host is a guest, and a guest is a host. A host is a host. The relation of household master offering hospitality to a guest and the guest receiving it, of host and parasite in the original sense of “fellow guest,” is inclosed within the word “host” itself. A host in the sense of a guest, moreover, is both a

friendly visitor in the house and at the same time an alien presence who turns the home into a hotel, a neutral territory. Perhaps he is the first emissary of a host of enemies (from Latin *hostis* [stranger, enemy]), the first foot in the door, to be followed by a swarm of hostile strangers, to be met only by our own host, as the Christian deity is the Lord God of Hosts. The uncanny antithetical relation exists not only between pairs of words in this system, host and parasite, host and guest, but within each word in itself. It reforms itself in each polar opposite when that opposite is separated out, and it subverts or nullifies the apparently unequivocal relation of polarity which seems the conceptual scheme appropriate for thinking through the system. Each word in itself becomes separated by the strange logic of the “para,” membrane which divides inside from outside and yet joins them in a hymeneal bond, or allows an osmotic mixing, making the strangers friends, the distant near, the dissimilar similar, the *Unheimlich heimlich*, the homely homey, without, for all its closeness and similarity, ceasing to be strange, distant, dissimilar.

What does all this have to do with poems and with the reading of poems? It is meant, first, as an “example” of the deconstructive strategy of interpretation, applied, in this case, not to the text of a poem but to the cited fragment of a critical-essay containing within itself a citation from another essay, like a parasite within its host. The “example” is a fragment like those miniscule bits of some substance which are put in a tiny test tube and explored by certain techniques of analytical chemistry. To get so far or so much out of a little piece of language (and I have only begun to go as far as I mean to go), context after context widening out from these few phrases to include as their necessary milieux all the family of Indo-European languages, all the literature and conceptual thought within those languages, and all the permutations of our social structures of household economy, gift-giving and gift-receiving—this is a polemical implication of what I have said. It is an argument for the value of recognizing the great complexity and equivocal richness of apparently obvious or univocal language, even the language of criticism, which is in this respect continuous with the language of literature. This complexity and equivocal richness, my discussion of “parasite” implies, resides in part in the fact that there is no conceptual expression without figure, and no intertwining of concept and figure without an implied story, narrative, or myth, in this case the story of the alien guest in the home. Deconstruction is an investigation of what is implied by this inherence of figure, concept, and narrative in one another. Deconstruction is therefore a rhetorical discipline.

My little example of a deconstructive strategy at work is meant, moreover, to indicate, no doubt inadequately, the hyperbolic exuberance, the letting language go as far as it will take one, or the going with a given text as far as it will go, to its limits, which is an essential part of the procedure. Its motto might be Wallace Stevens’ couplet, his version of

the way the prison-house of language may be a place of joy, even of expansion, in spite of remaining an enclosure and a place of suffering and deprivation: "Natives of poverty, children of malheur, / The gaiety of language is our seigneur."<sup>5</sup> My little example is, finally, about what it exemplifies. It provides a model for the relation of critic to critic, for the incoherence within a single critic's language, for the asymmetrical relation of critical text to poem, for the incoherence within any single literary text, and for the skewed relation of a poem to its predecessors.

To speak of the "deconstructive" reading of a poem as "parasitical" on the "obvious or univocal reading" is to enter, perhaps unwittingly, into the strange logic of the parasite, to make the univocal equivocal in spite of oneself, according to the law that language is not an instrument or tool in man's hands, a submissive means of thinking. Language rather thinks man and his "world," including poems, if he will allow it to do so. As Martin Heidegger, in "Building Dwelling Thinking," puts it: "It is language that tells us about the nature of a thing, provided that we respect language's own nature."<sup>6</sup>

The system of figurative thought (but what thought is not figurative?) inscribed within the word parasite and its associates, host and guest, invites us to recognize that the "obvious or univocal reading" of a poem is not identical with the poem itself, as perhaps it may be easy to assume. Both readings, the "univocal" one and the "deconstructive" one, are fellow guests "beside the grain," host and guest, host and host, host and parasite, parasite and parasite. The relation is a triangle, not a polar opposition. There is always a third to whom the two are related, something before them or between them, which they divide, consume, or exchange, across which they meet. Or rather, the relation in question is always a chain, that strange sort of chain without beginning or end in which no commanding element (origin, goal, or underlying principle) may be identified, but in which there is always something earlier or something later to which any part of the chain on which one focuses refers and which keeps the chain open, undecidable. The relation between any two contiguous elements in this chain is that strange opposition which is of intimate kinship and at the same time of enmity. It is therefore not able to be encompassed in the ordinary logic of polar opposition, nor is it open to dialectical synthesis.

Moreover, each "single element," far from being unequivocally what it is, subdivides within itself to recapitulate the relation of parasite and host of which, on the larger scale, it appears to be one or the other pole. On the one hand, the "obvious or univocal reading" always con-

5. "Esthétique du Mal," XI, 10–11.

6. *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York, 1971), p. 146; from "Bauen Wohnen Denken," *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Pfullingen, 1967), 2:20: "Der Zuspruch über das Wesen einer Sache kommt zu uns aus der Sprache, vorausgesetzt, dass wir deren eigenes Wesen achten."

tains the “deconstructive reading” as a parasite encrypted within itself, as part of itself, and, on the other hand, the “deconstructive” reading can by no means free itself from the metaphysical, logocentric reading which it means to contest. The poem in itself, then, is neither the host nor the parasite but the food they both need, host in another sense, the third element in this particular triangle. Both readings are at the same table together, bound by that strange relation of reciprocal obligation, of gift- or food-giving and gift- or food-receiving, which Marcel Mauss has analyzed in *The Gift*. The word “gift,” in fact, in various languages, contains puns or figures which reform the logic or alogic of the relation of parasite and host I am exploring here. *Gift* in German means poison. To receive or give a gift is a profoundly dangerous or equivocal act. One of the French words for gift, *cadeau*, comes from the Latin *catena*, little chain, rings bound together in a series. Every gift is a ring or a chain,<sup>7</sup> and the gift-giver or gift-receiver enters into the endless ring or chain of reciprocal obligation which Mauss has identified as universally present in “archaic” or “civilized” societies. Martin Heidegger has appropriated this image in one of his most splendidly exuberant word plays as the necessary figure for the formulation of the perpetual interchange or mirror play among the fourfold entities making up “the world”: earth, sky, man, and the gods. The gift is the thing mirrored, passed back and forth among these, so brought into existence as a thing, as a present, as present, as a ring becomes a gift, currency, when it passes current between one person and another, for example as a wedding present:

Nestling, malleable, pliant, compliant, nimble—in Old German these are called *ring* and *gering*. The mirror-play of the worlding world, as the ringing of the ring, wrests free the united four into their own compliancy, the circling compliancy of their presence. Out of the ringing mirror-play the thinging of the thing takes place.<sup>8</sup>

A chain, however, is precisely not a ring, but a series of rings, each ring open to receive the next, enclosed by the next, and the whole possibly open-ended, always open to the possibility of having another link added. The play between the enclosed exchange within the ring of like for like, in intimate “nestling” domesticity, and the chain which

7. On the chain linking chain, gift, ring, anniversary, party, festival or feast, present (in both senses), and parash or flourish of the pen, see Jacques Derrida, *Glas* (Paris, 1974), p. 271a.

8. “The Thing,” *Poetry, Language, Thought*, p. 180; from “Das Ding,” *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, 2:53: “Schmiegsam, schmiedbar, geschmeidig, fügsam, leicht heisst in unserer alten deutschen Sprache ‘ring’ und ‘gering.’ Das Spiegel-Spiel der weltenden Welt entringt als das Gering des Ringes die einigen Vier in das eigene Fügsame, das Ringe ihres Wesens. Aus dem Spiegel-Spiel des Gerings des Ringen ereignet sich das Dingen des Dinges.”



opens the ring of the domestic enclosure to the alien, to the host in the sense of hostile, is my subject here. My argument is that the parasite is always already present within the host, the enemy always already within the house, the ring always an open chain.

That ring of gift-giving and gift-receiving, the mutual obligation to give and to take certain kinds of gifts at certain times, at weddings, at birthdays, at “coming-out” or “growing-up” parties, or when one is a guest in another man’s house (what is called a “bread-and-butter” present), operates in its own way as strongly in “advanced” societies like our own as in the more “archaic” ones Mauss discusses, for example in the highly formalized social relations represented so splendidly in the Norse Sagas. Gift-giving is the binding or sealing of that relation of reciprocal obligation expressed in the word “host,” but it is also apotropaic, the warding off of the evil the parasite may do you or the evil your host may somehow do you if you do not recompense him for feeding you. A parasite in the wholly negative sense is the one who does not make this recompense and so goes through the world blocking the endless chain of gifting, so keeping it going. At the same time the gift itself may be the poison, the dangerous parasite, the paying back for an injury, even if that injury is no more serious than putting your friend, your guest, or your host in possession of what is known as a “white elephant,” the sort of useless present which gathers dust in the attic. It is the gift itself which is the blocking agent, keeping the chain in perpetual self-generation. The gift is the thing always left over which obliges someone to give yet another gift, and its recipient yet another, and so on and on, the balance never coming right, as a poem invites an endless sequence of commentaries which never succeed in “getting the poem right.”

The poem, in my figure, is that ambiguous gift, food, host in the sense of victim, sacrifice, that which is broken, divided, passed around, consumed by the critics canny and uncanny who are in that odd relation to one another of host and parasite. The poem, however, any poem, is, it is easy to see, parasitical in its turn on earlier poems, or contains earlier poems as enclosed parasites within itself, in another version of the perpetual reversal of parasite and host. If the poem is food and poison for the critics, it must in its turn have eaten. It must have been a cannibal consumer of earlier poems.

Take, for example, Shelley’s “The Triumph of Life.” It is inhabited, as its critics have shown, by a long chain of parasitical presences, echoes, allusions, guests, ghosts of previous texts. These are present within the domicile of the poem in that curious phantasmal way, affirmed, negated, sublimated, twisted, straightened out, travestied, which Harold Bloom has begun to study and which it is one major task of literary interpretation today to investigate further and to define. The previous text is both the ground of the new one and something the new poem must annihilate by incorporating it, turning it into ghostly insubstantiality, so that it may

perform its possible-impossible task of becoming its own ground. The new poem both needs the old texts and must destroy them. It is both parasitical on them, feeding ungraciously on their substance, and at the same time it is the sinister host which unmans them by inviting them into its home, as the Green Knight invites Gawain. Each previous link in the chain, in its turn, played the same role, as host and parasite, in relation to its predecessors. From the Old to the New Testament, from Ezekiel to Revelation, to Dante, to Ariosto and Spenser, to Milton, to Rousseau, to Wordsworth and Coleridge, the chain leads ultimately to "The Triumph of Life." That poem, in its turn, or Shelley's work generally, is present within the work of Hardy or Yeats or Stevens and forms part of a sequence in the major texts of Romantic nihilism including Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger, and Blanchot, in a perpetual re-expression of the relation of host and parasite which forms itself again today in current criticism. It is present, for example, in the relation between "univocal" and "deconstructionist" readings of "The Triumph of Life," between the readings of Meyer Abrams and Harold Bloom, or between Abrams' reading of "The Triumph of Life" and the one I have implicitly proposed here, or, in a perhaps more problematic way, between Harold Bloom and Jacques Derrida, or between Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man, or within the work of each one of these critics taken separately.

The inexorable law which makes the uncanny, "undecidable," or "alogical" relation of host and parasite, heterogeneity within homogeneity, enemy within the home, re-form itself within each separate entity which had seemed, on the larger scale, to be one or the other, applies as much to critical essays as to the texts they treat. "The Triumph of Life," as I hope to show in another essay, contains within itself, jostling irreconcilably with one another, both logocentric metaphysics and nihilism. It is no accident that critics have disagreed about it. The meaning of "The Triumph of Life" can never be reduced to any one "univocal" reading, neither the "obvious" one nor a single-minded deconstructionist one, if there could be such a thing, which there cannot. The poem, like all texts, is "unreadable," if by "readable" one means open to a single, definitive, univocal interpretation. In fact, neither the "obvious" reading nor the "deconstructionist" reading is "univocal." Each contains, necessarily, its enemy within itself, is itself both host and parasite. The deconstructionist reading contains the obvious one and vice versa. Nihilism is an inalienable alien presence within Occidental metaphysics, both in poems and in the criticism of poems.