

Criticism as a Social Practice

THE DRAMA OF CURRENT literary criticism lies in the attempt of many talented people to cross a threshold between two conceptions of what it is they are doing. On the one side there is the idea that criticism is an activity or process of the mind that operates upon the literary work as its designated object; on the other side is the idea of criticism as a social and cultural practice—something that goes on in the world or in history rather than in the mind or between a subject and object. The first idea is unmistakably Cartesian-Romantic in character; the second is not so easy to name because it is not so well understood, but it is clearly related to Wittgenstein's reflections on what it means to make sense of anything, when making sense is not an epistemological process but simply a matter of knowing how to do such a thing when the situation calls for it. Think of making sense as something customary rather than as something mental, and you will have an idea of what sort of threshold literary critics now seem prepared to cross. Perhaps not quite *fully* prepared: the wise man probes with his foot.

Take Geoffrey Hartman, the most artful and scrupulous critic now writing.<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey Hartman can be described as a Cartesian-Romantic who, however, knows that everything occurs in history, even those most prestigious events called "acts of the mind." In order to understand what goes on in anyone's mind, one must first understand what goes on in history. "History" here is not history as an object of knowledge but history as a horizon of life. It is not the history conceived and studied by professional historians but history in the sense of "history of philosophy," which is not a history of ideas but a history of philosophical practices—ways of doing what is called "philosophy," such as knowing how to talk about Plato and Kant. To become a philosopher does not require the having of philosophical ideas; rather, what is required is the close and meticulous study of philosophical texts from the Pre-Socratic fragments to Jacques Derrida's *Glas*. To understand these texts (that is, to be able to talk about them in a way that makes sense to those who also read them) is to be a philosopher. Philosophy in this social sense is not something that goes on in the mind; it is something that goes on

in philosophical circles, and these circles are narrow or wide, open or closed, depending on any number of vagrant circumstances. Routinely in his writings Geoffrey Hartman will say that he is not a philosopher, but this means only that he knows the history of philosophy less well than he knows the history of poetry or the history of criticism, where the question of what Hartman knows resolves itself into a question of what it is his custom to talk about. The greater part of his latest book, *Saving the Text*, is given over to a reading of Derrida's *Glas*, which means that Hartman knows how to read a philosophical text—knows, moreover, how to read an *abnormal* philosophical text,<sup>2</sup> which is something that many philosophers cannot do, or anyhow won't try to do, but which is exactly the sort of thing that any talented literary critic ought to be able to manage. Geoffrey Hartman is someone who knows how to practice philosophy when he wants to, or when the occasion requires.

It is hard to think of philosophy (or, for that matter, literary criticism) as a requisite of occasions, but it was roughly in this social and practical way that most eighteenth-century writers understood it. Philosophy was taken to be ethical rather than mental. It was something one chose (or learned how) to do, not so as to do it all the time perhaps, but as occasions seemed to call for it, or as one's life would call for it. This is also the way the eighteenth century thought about the writing of poetry and the study of ancient texts. To be sure, these various things, to be made interesting, had to be done with wit and skill, but to be done at all they required study and learning, reading and practice—and appropriate circles for doing such things, since doing anything on your own was a species of enthusiasm. Across this state of affairs, however, the Cartesian analysis spread like a deep stain, and by the time Samuel Johnson was dead the notion of practice had yielded everything to the notion of operation. Satiric alarm notwithstanding, the whole classical array of humane practices got redefined as so many epistemological processes, each with its own characteristic power (reason, understanding, imagination), its own appointed objects of knowledge, consciousness, or vision, its own claims to meaning and truth, and perhaps most important its own specialized audience. Philosophy, poetry, and criticism were internalized and, therefore, professionalized. This meant that one could not, say, practice philosophy until one *became* a philosopher, which meant (and still means) becoming the product of a certain mental development. To become a poet (or a philologist) would be one of the things that would prevent you from writing normal philosophy. One became a critic, it was said, in despair of becoming anything else.

The first part of Geoffrey Hartman's *Criticism in the Wilderness* is an attempt to understand the history of professional criticism from beginning to end, that is, from Matthew Arnold, who inaugurated the modern notion of criticism with a famous epistemological distinction between criticism and creativity, to, well, Geoffrey Hartman, who wants to undo the distinction by thinking of criticism as a kind of writing rather than as a noncreative mental process. Hartman appears at the end of his own history of criticism as an invisible presence among masters and friends, among them Harold Bloom and Paul de Man. Hartman and his friends are sometimes said to be a school (The Yale School of Critics) and to have a program (Deconstruction), but they are only a circle, and, like all circles, they are circumscribed less by identifiable methods, positions, or doctrines than by a common practice, namely, the practice of criticism, which, next to the keeping of ledgers and lists, is the oldest profession of letters. It is important to remember (in fact, it is the whole point) that something can be common to a group of people without being uniform among them. For Hartman, the chief lesson of the history of criticism is that there is no such thing as a uniform or essential way of practicing literary criticism. Hartman is opposed to any notion of "normal" criticism, where what counts as normal (namely, what gets taught in school, or what one must learn in order to become a critic) obtains as a criterion of what is allowable in the art. Literary criticism has not got an essence which the practice of it must express. It is rather a historically contingent and highly variable discipline of understanding, where understanding means knowing what to say to someone rather than having a concept of something. The norms and methods of criticism, its controversies and desires, its claims and its values, that which it studies and that which it neglects—in short, the diverse theoretical and accomplished ingredients that make up what it is—are in constant alteration, not toward any end, nor as if guided by a developing and intrinsic nature, but just in the sense that they belong to history and so are dependent on what people are doing at any one time. Literary criticism in this sense progresses not by making new discoveries about what it studies—not by formulating and refining everything that can be known about Literature—but by the changes that are always occurring in its customary way of doing things. The history of criticism, in other words, is to be understood on the model of social change rather than, say, on the model of epistemological breakthrough.

In speaking of what criticism does, Geoffrey Hartman does not quite

wish to say that the understanding of what is written is the same as the understanding of the way critics talk about it, and of what they say in consequence, but that is pretty much what he has in mind. After all, consider the likelihood of anyone understanding the work of William Blake without understanding the work of S. Foster Damon, Northrop Frye, David Erdman, and (for that matter) the whole circle of passionate Blakeans whose writings constitute the ongoing tradition of Blake studies. One should not imagine that this circle is closed, except obviously to those who have not taken the time and effort to learn what goes on inside it (namely, talk about William Blake), nor should one imagine that what goes on inside it is uniform or even very stable, because what counts as “normal” discourse about William Blake is contingent and relative exactly in the manner of any social practice. Everything in history is strange, familiar, and strange again by turns, depending on one’s position in it; nothing, however, ever goes on outside it, or independently of it, and this holds true particularly for the understanding of what is written, which is always mediated by culturally specific and socially coherent traditions of doing such a thing.

The world of learning divides naturally into those who fear that history is going to pieces and those who fear it will stop. Geoffrey Hartman inclines toward the latter view, and so he does not simply want to remind us of the natural contingency of traditions of understanding, he wants to intensify this contingency; that is, he wants to hurry history on its way, taking an already unstable situation (literary criticism as it is currently practiced) and destabilizing it further by adopting an attitude of suspicion (or, more accurately, of irony) toward the way criticism gets practiced, but particularly toward the way people talk about criticism, which is a serious business because the way you talk about criticism will determine how you go on to practice it. Hartman’s irony is in subtle contrast to the darker views of his colleague, Paul de Man, who directs a relentless suspicion not only toward criticism and its traditions but toward writing as such, that is, toward the possibility of making sense and, therefore, toward the common assumption that such a thing as understanding can occur at all. For Paul de Man, writing and the understanding of what is written are essentially epistemological functions that cannot be shown to be productive in the way they are commonly thought to be. Hartman’s suspicion, however, never flowers into epistemological skepticism, because he thinks of understanding in terms of practice rather than process. Thus, for example, what skeptics

like de Man call “indeterminacy” (the inability to determine what anything means, or whether something is true) is for Hartman not a condition native to rationality but belongs rather to the artistry of those (writers and readers alike) who are less inclined than in a former time to regard the category of meaning as the governing category of human understanding. In one of the concluding sections of *Criticism in the Wilderness* (“Criticism, Indeterminacy, Irony”), Hartman speaks of indeterminacy as something that one does rather than as something that one suffers:

May I emphasize the following: As a guiding concept, indeterminacy does not merely *delay* the determination of meaning, that is, suspend premature judgments and allow greater thoughtfulness. The delay is not heuristic alone, a device to slow the act of reading till we appreciate (I could think here of Stanley Fish) its complexity. The delay is intrinsic: from a certain point of view, it is thoughtfulness itself, Keats’s “negative capability,” a labor that aims not to overcome the negative or indeterminate but to stay within it as long as is necessary. (pp. 269-70)

Indeterminacy as it is understood here is not (as it is for Paul de Man) an epistemological problem rooted in the figural structure of a text; on the contrary, it is a hermeneutical attitude that one brings to what is written precisely to keep open (one might say, to keep “alive”) one’s understanding of it. Indeterminacy is not a technique or method of reading; it is an openness to the historicity of understanding, or an awareness that one’s understanding of a text goes on in time, under conditions that one cannot always be conscious of, and within situations that are social, open-ended, and contingent—and always made possible by what has gone on before. What Hartman wants is a criticism rooted in this awareness.

What is at issue here, of course, is the question of what it means to understand anything. Our conceptions of rationality incline us toward the view that there can be no understanding at all which has not been fixed in the form of an interpretation, that is, in the form of an explicit statement of understanding that one builds up from the situation in which understanding actually occurs. Interpretation is thus the explicit and formal determination of what is understood. Interpretation is how

we know that understanding has occurred, or has been attempted. What Hartman resists, however, is simply this rational desire to abstract understanding from its historicity or to fix understanding at a particular moment of its life. Hartman, one might say, is a natural adversary of explicitness, at least to the extent that making one's understanding explicit (that is, giving an interpretation of a text) requires the fixing of a position that will stand athwart the future and so close it off to new sources of understanding. However, I think Hartman's fear of fixity is excessive. Interpretation need not be made into a Chinese Wall, because to understand a text is not to possess a fixed view of it in the sense of having a concept of what it means. Indeed, the text is not any sort of object about which one can be said to have concepts, or about which one can maintain fixed views, because it has, after all, a temporality all its own. As Heidegger says in "The Origin of the Work of Art," the work will always resist every effort on our part to grasp it as an object or to turn it into an idea. The temporality of the work is part of its powerful reserve, its ability to close itself up before every attempt on our part to break into it and subdue its contents. The work of art is always able to withstand epistemological conquest. Hartman's own interpretive reserve (his delight in indeterminacy) might be regarded as the critical counterpart of this reserve of art, its monumental self-possession that always exceeds and prolongs indefinitely our understanding.<sup>3</sup> This is why understanding can be more adequately characterized as belonging to traditions rather than to the minds of individual readers; and this is why literary criticism can be more adequately described as a social practice rather than as a mental act.

The problem arises (it arises in Hartman's case) when the critic realizes that in order to make himself understood he must make his understanding explicit; it arises, in other words, precisely when the critic confronts his own historicity or (much to the same point) his own social reality. The critic is always exposed, not only to a private situation of understanding (governed by the old Cartesian-Romantic relation of subject and object), but precisely to that social situation in which he is called upon to get up and say what it is that a text means (or what it is that we can say about it). The critic is always summoned to address the situation in which he finds himself—as Hartman likes to say, the critic is always "answerable" (in the classroom, to his colleagues) to what goes on in the history of criticism, and not the history of criticism only but the human life-world in which this history occurs. Interpreta-

tion in this sense is explicit not because it is conceptually fixed but because it is profoundly social. It is required not so much in behalf of the texts that we study as in behalf of ourselves. Interpretation is the way we make sense to one another when we read. The characteristic relation in literary study is not between the critic and the work, or between reader and text, but between critic and critic, or between critic and world; that is, criticism is formed on the basis of subject-subject, not subject-object relationships. Interpretation in this view is just knowing what to say about what is written, and saying it in a way that will enable those who are disposed to understand you to say, in turn, just what it is that you mean. Here is where Hartman's own inexplicitness—his own reserved or artful style of criticism—sometimes gets him into trouble with his fellow-critics, who complain that Hartman is not always easy to understand.

### Criticism as an Art of Writing

This is a complicated issue, because for Hartman criticism is as much an authorial as a hermeneutical practice. For example, in *Criticism in the Wilderness* ("Literary Commentary as Literature"), he expresses a desire for a criticism that has overcome its hermeneutical task:

What I am saying . . . is that literary commentary may cross the line and become as demanding as literature: it is an unpredictable or unstable genre that cannot be subordinated, a priori, to its referential or commentating function. Commentary certainly remains one of the defining features, for it is hardly useful to describe as "criticism" an essay that does not review in some way an existing book or other work. But the perspectival power of criticism, its strength of recontextualization, must be such that the critical essay should not be considered a supplement to something else. Though the irony described by Lukács [in "On the Nature and Form of the Essay," from which I will be quoting below] may formally subdue the essay to a given work, a reversal must be possible whereby this "secondary" piece of writing turns out to be "primary." (p. 201)

Hartman, in other words, wants criticism to be, not ancillary and, therefore, parasitic, but something originary and *wirklich*—and, therefore, worthy of study—in its own right. He wants to be able to claim for criticism, and specifically for the critical essay, the privilege of the work of art: he wants to characterize it formally as an “art genre” (p. 191).

And why shouldn't the critical essay be privileged as art? We can answer again that, since the Enlightenment, we have been taught to discuss distinctions among genres of writing as if they were rooted in epistemological distinctions, as if each genre corresponded to, and were made possible by, a specific and isolatable mental process (an act of imagination, for example, as against an act of reason). Art, to this way of thinking, is rooted in creativeness, or in the creativity of the mind, whereas the essay originates elsewhere in some ratiocinative or reflective operation upon what has already been created. In the essay “On the Nature and Form of the Essay,” Lukács says that “the essay always speaks of something that has already been given form, or at least something that has already been there at some time in the past; hence it is part of the nature of the essay that it does not create new things from an empty nothingness but only orders those which were once alive.”<sup>4</sup> This way of thinking, however, leaves only two possibilities for the *art* of the essay: (1) since the essay is *not* a creative art, it must be another sort of art, perhaps an art of language or of rhetoric on the ancient model of *techné*; or (2) since the essay is not creative in the same sense that poetry is creative (that is, able to summon things *ex nihilo*, or out of the mind's “vast abyss”), it must be creative in some other way—creative, as in Matthew Arnold's conception, of new contexts or situations or potentialities for what we normally think of as art. Either way, however, the essay as art seems doomed: it can only claim to be art in some sense in which, in the end, it is not quite what it claims to be; that is, it is art only in a certain manner of speaking. It remains, for all that can be said about it, epistemologically determined as a *merely* hermeneutical “art.”

It is time, in behalf of the critical essay, to ask the right question: What counts as art, anyhow? The attempt to define art as a product of a certain kind of mental process will naturally lead us to accept as art only those kinds of production which are intelligible in terms of our descriptions of this process. The circularity here, which can be attacked or defended in various interesting ways, is not at issue. What needs to

be understood is that the Enlightenment privileging of epistemology which supports our talk about art is something that art itself frequently calls into question, as when William Carlos Williams says that “A poem can be made out of anything,”<sup>5</sup> even newspaper clippings. Newspaper clippings do not, normally, count as art, but one does not need a theory of imagination to explain why this is the case; rather, one needs only to understand what goes on in the history of art, where, among other amazing events, newspaper clippings sometimes turn up in poems (as they do, for example, in *Paterson*).

I cannot forbear repeating here the wonderful story that Williams tells (in *Kora in Hell*) about Duchamp: “One day Duchamp decided that his composition for that day would be the first thing that struck his eye in the first hardware store he should enter. It turned out to be a pickax which he bought and set up in his studio. That was his composition.”<sup>6</sup> Notice that here the making of the work of art is not accountable in terms of an epistemological process. Indeed, from an epistemological point of view, Duchamp cannot be said to have produced a work of art at all, because, obviously, his mind has not worked to that effect. Nothing has got “created,” so that, whatever the pickax may be (namely, just a pickax), it cannot be a work of art. Yet that, of course, is just what Duchamp calls it by setting it up in his studio as his composition. The point, however, is that Duchamp is not simply (or without reason) setting up a pickax as a work of art; rather, he is tacitly reformulating the rules for answering the question, “What counts as art, anyhow?” What he presupposes by his audacity are rules that work deliberately and forcefully against an epistemologically-based aesthetics. It is not that Duchamp has found a new way of making art-objects; it is that he has called for a new way of talking about them, a way that does not presuppose a theory of creation and all the vast mental machinery that such a theory requires. Indeed, the theory of creation as a foundation of art is plainly overturned by Duchamp. The wonder is why we still cling to such a theory now that Duchamp’s sort of audacity has become one of the distinctive features of modernism. For we should surely understand by now that a work of art is capable of coming into existence for reasons that have nothing to do with anything mental. Thus the status of the pickax as art is shown to be situational rather than epistemological, in the sense that its status is determined by how it is *taken* rather than by how it is *made*—and how it is taken depends in turn on the local and historical situation in which it makes its appearance. The pickax

as it makes its appearance in a hardware store will not normally be taken as art; the same object situated as a composition in the artist's studio asks to be taken aesthetically, whence it is up to us to judge whether we have reasons at our command for so taking it, or so figuring it. The pickax in any case makes a claim to the privileged seat of art, not by virtue of its production, but by virtue of its appearance in a situation that we recognize (for reasons that have more to do with history and tradition than with epistemology) as aesthetic. Of course, what we are able to recognize as art is more or less what Duchamp wants to test, and so perhaps it will be sufficient for us to speak knowingly of the irony embedded in the situation in which the pickax occurs where an art-object was expected. But the lesson of this irony is that, in this situation, the nature of the thing in question is not at issue; what is at issue are precisely the reasons why anything is taken as art.

On this point of aesthetic recognition there is, it seems to me, an obvious connection to be made between pickaxes and critical essays. What counts against critical essays as art is roughly what counts against pickaxes: namely, prevailing cultural norms, which in this instance are powerfully informed by epistemological notions of how art gets created. Nothing intrinsic to the critical essay prevents it from being taken as a work of art, just as, alas, nothing intrinsic to it will work in its behalf, because generic distinctions are determined socially and historically, pragmatically and provisionally, rather than logically and analytically. The critical essay on this view cannot be said to possess what Lukács called "a form which separates it, with the rigour of law, from all other art forms." No universally reigning distinction (possessing "the rigour of law") between one genre and another, or between art and non-art, can obtain. This I take to be exactly the lesson that we are to learn from Duchamp, Williams, and modern art generally. In other words, *anything goes*, such that newspaper clippings, pickaxes, and (let us say) critical essays can, depending on the situation, be counted as art. The point to understand is that we cannot tell that a thing is art simply by looking at it and describing what we see or analyzing what we find; we have to judge that it is art on the basis of reasons currently in force or (more important) enforceable through the strength of argument—reasons, in short, that will make sense to other people. It may turn out (as, indeed, it seems always to turn out) that people will steadfastly demand that we give epistemological reasons for our aesthetic judgments; or, much to the same effect, they will want us to say just how it is that we *know* that

a thing is art. If this is the situation (your basic Kantian or Cartesian-Romantic situation), then, of course, it will not be easy to argue in behalf of the critical essay as art. The question then becomes: What is to be done about this situation?

This question may help us to explain Hartman's surprising decision to use Derrida's *Glas* as an example of commentary as literature, or of a critical text that overcomes its (normal) hermeneutical task and asks to be taken purely and simply as writing, "Part of the *res* itself, and not about it." Derrida is to philosophy as Williams is to poetry and Duchamp is to painting and sculpture: he removes what he does from its assigned epistemological base and transfers it to the plane of "anything goes." Philosophy, Derrida says, can be made out of anything, even newspaper clippings, or, if nonesuch lie at hand, cuttings from texts by Hegel and Genet will do. That is, such cuttings (of which *Glas* is made) will serve to make the point that philosophy is textual, not epistemological: it is not concerned with knowing but with writing, and it is, therefore, (now get this!) a profoundly conservative discipline notwithstanding its occasionally violent reversals, because it exists only as and in virtue of the history of what it does.<sup>8</sup>

What Derrida wishes to do is not so much to practice philosophy as to cure philosophical writing of its Hegelian desire for the *absolu savoir*, that is, the notion that the history of philosophy is motored by some transcendence that has gone in search of itself. Derrida breaks the millennialist hold on philosophy. Philosophy for Derrida is simply identical with its textual history (a history, by the way, which is not reducible to an official canon of philosophical "works": anything may find its way into this history, even texts by Genet). Philosophy is embedded in its texts, and it is this embedding that Derrida illustrates in *Glas*, in which his own writings lie between texts by Hegel and Genet, thus to produce, not a philosophical work on the model of, say, the *Critique of Pure Reason*, but just a text on the model of, say, the *Glossa Ordinaria*. Normally, of course, we think of philosophy on the Enlightenment or Cartesian model as a future-oriented program advanced by revolutionary turns: philosophy looks forward to that time (the end of time, or the end of its own history) when it will arrive at that which philosophers are born or made to desire, namely, a picture of reality so rigorous and complete, so systematically impregnable, that no further reflections or discoveries or new ways of thinking will be required to correct it. Philosophy will have at last become transcendent. Derrida,

however, turns philosophy around: his “revolution” turns out to be, literally, a conversion. He does not advance philosophy along its normal course but converts it away from its millennialist program and forces upon it (ruthlessly, madly) the textuality of its history. Philosophy has no future; it has only its texts, and it can be said to go forward (or to go on) only insofar as it does things to these texts—understands them, misreads them, breaks them apart, reassembles them, believes them to be true, reinscribes them (as by quotation, allusion, plagiarism), and so on: various infinite ways, Hartman would say, of *saving the text* as a living force as against, for example, preserving it in a library (or a canon) where no harm will come to it and where, by this same stroke, it can do you no injury. In this respect Derrida can be said to have redesigned the history of philosophy so that it resembles literary history rather than the history of technology or the history of science. History on the Cartesian model is like the history of technology, which is a history of progressive obsolescence. It is this model that science has mapped out for itself, which is why the history of science is simply a form of unnatural natural history, or a history of things no one any longer believes or takes seriously, like the theory of ether or the notion of vital spirits. Science exists to protect us from its history, which is simply full of bizarre ideas. Literary history, however, is traditional rather than millennial or progressive. It is, as a matter of disciplinary principle, preoccupied with whatever has been written. Literary history is, for this reason, always a two-edged sword. It can be characterized in terms of what Gadamer calls “effective-history,” in which what is written lays a claim upon us—calls upon us and, Gadamer believes, enables us to enter into the truth of things; or it can be characterized in terms of the oedipal struggle that Harold Bloom has discussed, where preoccupation with what has been written makes the attempt to write a bloody business.<sup>9</sup> Whichever way we regard it, however, what is written cannot adequately be taken as so many museum pieces to be admired from a distance, or in a disinterested (or enlightened) spirit; what is written, insofar as we understand it at all, always impinges on us in diverse troubling and productive ways.

### The Theory of Force

The notion of the breaking down of distance may help us to cope with

the fact that the basic unit of Derrida's writing is finally the insult, as when, in the typography of *Glas*, Hegel is made to couple with Genet. The metaphor of coupling is meant to be taken in an explicitly cruel and sexual way, and it is to be taken at our expense. *Glas* is Derrida's way of arranging for the buggery of Hegel (the position of Derrida's own writing in the text of *Glas* identifies him as the go-between). Many of Derrida's people think this is funny, but Derrida is not being funny, as Hartman is careful to observe (*Saving the Text*, pp. 22-23). The word "play" is commonly used to describe the abnormality of Derrida's texts (and of his philosophical enterprise generally), but Derrida plays to injure rather than, say, to liberate. Hartman compares *Glas* to *Finnegans Wake* in order to emphasize that Derrida's word-play is not meant to make us laugh; it is meant to cause pain. Joyce's word-play is comic; Derrida's is satiric, the more so because it is frequently aimed at someone, as in the case of *Limited, Inc.*, in which Derrida insults the speech-act theorist, John Searle, by deliberately miswriting (among other things) Searle's name—an emphatic case of the breaking down of distance.<sup>10</sup> As usual, Derrida's aggression is both insupportable and tendentious, since we know that misnaming (that is, catachresis, or *abusio*) is Derrida's characteristic figure of speech, a sort of signature. Catachresis, Derrida says (in "White Mythology"), is that which is hidden in all of our positive forms of address, whether in our statements about the world or in our talk among ourselves.<sup>11</sup> We should not think of catachresis merely as a licensed solecism but as something licentious going on all the time in discourse—and, if you want to know the terrible truth, something that allows discourse to go on, enabling us to speak but only by never quite saying what we mean. Derrida has made himself the ungainly prophet or herald of misnaming. He knows that the most perfect form of catachresis (and also, on this analysis, the most plainly discursive form of discourse) occurs when, arbitrarily, you call someone a dirty name. It won't do to allegorize Derrida's insult, but to complete the thought that the insult deserves we should remember that calling people dirty names is something we are taught not to do—after, of course, we have learned how to do it as part of our learning how to speak. To learn a language is to master its defects, which are (Derrida believes) essential to its operation. Learning how to speak requires, among other things, learning how not to say what you mean, and also how not to mean what you say. The insult lodges among these lines of customary deceit and serves to tangle them. Outrage and tangling are the chief ways Derrida teaches his lesson.

Derrida is a hard man to deal with, which is why Hartman claims him in behalf of the art of writing. It is not easy for us to think of the insult as a form of art, but this, Hartman says, is only because our view of what counts as art is too enlightened, still too much in the power of doctrines that apply only to museum pieces: purity, autonomy, objectivity, aesthetic distance. Hartman wishes to disenlighten us by reintroducing the concept of force into our talk about art—and the uncertain hermeneutical task of commenting on Derrida's *Glas* provides him with just this chance, because *Glas*, though it lack the form a little, has the force of art. *Saving the Text* moves away from *Glas* toward a final series of musings and puzzlings that Hartman intends as a "counterstatement" to Derrida ("Words and Wounds," pp. 118-57). Without actually matching Hartman's views point for point, I would like to elucidate his opinions with a short excursus on the ontological force of the word. I use the word "ontological" where Hartman would use the word "psychic," but we are both speaking of the power of the word (and, by extension, the power of art) over the whole being of man, not simply over his feelings or his views, his perceptions or outlook. The power of words is a worldly rather than mental power or power over mental events.

Go back again to Derrida's insult. The insult exists along the axis of discourse between the curse and the blessing, wounding and healing words. These are good forms to think about because they force us to speak of language in terms of what it *does* to people rather than in terms of what it says to them. Not much in our education prepares us to grasp this idea, but the ancients (Plato, for example, and every student of rhetoric before and after him—until, surely, the death of Alexander Pope) knew that the power of art is not simply the power of representation but a power of altering people for better or for worse, or as the occasion requires. Art is thaumaturgical, not epistemological.<sup>12</sup> It is not remarkable for what it contains (images of the world, expressions of this or that idea or state of mind) but for the way that it works upon those who come in contact with it. Indeed, the contents of the word, its truths or falsehoods, become valuable for the very reason of its work. Every utterance possesses a magical component that gives it enormous power over those who hear it—power to cure or to poison, to transfigure or to derange, to quicken or to kill. No one has ever adequately described the nature of this power, but from the beginning its efficacy has been figured in terms of the voice, which is a pervasive and possessive rather

than an objective and determinable phenomenon. For example, in contrast to the letter, which always possesses the status of an object in a spatial and visual field, and which the eye is able to behold or take hold of from a safe distance as something external to itself, the voice is that which invades us, takes us over and occupies that most intimate and vulnerable portion of ourselves, so that we become hardly distinguishable from that which we hear.<sup>13</sup> The letter is intrinsically rational, whereas the voice is demonic; the letter is intelligible, whereas the voice is maddening, since it is always a matter of possession by another. The letter can be grasped as an object, subjected to and by a knowing power, whereas the voice is always the master of whoever has ears to hear. This is no doubt why no one from the common rabble is ever allowed to speak in the presence of the king. It is no wonder that philosophy (king of the sciences) requires silence as the primary condition of its possibility; the silencing of alien voices allows thought to go on, and so becomes the first definition of reason and the criterion of sanity. Hence the enormous philosophical energy that has (for twenty-five hundred years) gone into the war against thaumaturgy for the soul of language. Whereas rhetoric and poetry seek to exploit the power of words to torment and beatify, philosophy always argues that the purpose of language is simply (and only) the designation of objects—the rest, we have learned to say, is style. For the task of designation voices are not required, and, indeed, designation is a task that voices would only confound by getting caught up in one another's hearing.

It has taken those who think this way about voice and language a long time to be persuaded that Derrida really wants to be the advocate of writing and textuality that he says he is. His desire to do injury—or, in Hartman's terms, his desire to wound and to cure—is nothing less than thaumaturgical. Yet it is true that he proposes writing and textuality, not as forms of expression and the coherence of discourse, but, on the contrary, as the displacement of these forms, whose purpose, he says, has been to hold in place the categories of voice and presence that define logocentrism, or the tradition of Western metaphysics, with its inexpungeable belief in a transcendental ground of being, reason, reference, knowledge, culture, and human destiny. Writing and textuality, Derrida says, take on philosophical interest in this tradition only as agents of subversion or demystification, since they repose in silence, ineloquence, materiality, and absence. Derrida makes his appearance to propose “the death of speech,” and to inaugurate writing in turn, not as the written

form of anything—not as anything transitive or constructive—but just as that which is incompatible on every count with a metaphysics of presence.<sup>14</sup>

But who could not make the argument that Derrida's conception of speech is already entirely philosophical, that is, already shaped by the standpoint of writing and its corresponding theories of language as a system of designation? Speech for Derrida is logocentric, but only because it is already taken to be the speech of predication, the speech of an "I" who speaks "of"—speech as propositional discourse, or the making sense of things according to principles of identity and difference. A thaumaturgical conception of speech, by contrast, would emphasize the stubborn resistance of the voice to the logical forms of meaning (hence the natural incoherence of transcripts: speech as it actually occurs is unwritable). From a thaumaturgical point of view, writing as a cure of speech would appear to be nothing less than the casting out of gods or demons—not a disruption of designation but the securing of it by the breaking of a magic spell. Writing silences the voice and so robs the word of its power to heal or hurt. It is very hard to curse someone by means of writing; the written curse is a preservation of form without impact: it shows us what a curse is like so that we may examine it without peril. Writing, the thaumaturge would say, rationalizes language, stabilizes it, puts it in order, makes it safe to use, and leaves nothing behind except the clean mechanisms of reference that logicians require for the analysis of statements like "The cat is on the mat."

It would not be hard to show that Derrida understands this truth of the voice very well. Thus one can see why it is necessary to judge his valorization of writing against the voice as a palpable error. It is plainly not a blunder or mistake but what we would now call a deliberate miscreation: the only move Derrida could make so that we would not confuse him with Heidegger, who had already moved to cure philosophical writing of its Enlightenment passion for epistemology, objectivity, and systematic construction—but who had done so expressly by valorizing the voice over and against any philosophy of language that would reduce speech to the systematic manipulation of signs. "Implicitly or explicitly," Derrida says, "the valorization of spoken language is constant and massive in Heidegger,"<sup>15</sup> and this is true, but also, to speak strictly, it is not quite the case, because the later Heidegger goes beyond the language that you and I imagine ourselves to be using. The later Heidegger's reflections are concerned with what he calls *Sage*, Saying,

which has, however, nothing to do with predications or statements because it is not any sort of human activity; indeed, it is a notion that cannot be assimilated into any normal theory of language—cannot be grasped or explained in terms of any conception of language from Leibniz to Saussure—nor can it be arrived at by any normal way of thinking. The way to language is blocked by the way we are taught to think (that is, in terms of objects and relations). Language as Heidegger wants to think of it is not what we think of as language: it is not something that one can pick up and speak or write, although, of course, we do such things only because of language. We would do better to think of language as something that takes *us* over—takes possession of us and speaks itself through us—and, doing so, speaks what Heidegger calls “the language of being.” This language is not a language of man; it is the language of disclosure and cannot be contained within any theory of reference or designation. In virtue of language as Saying or disclosure, what is hidden (namely, all that is) is brought out into the open, not in the sense that it is exposed to view and accessible as so many objects, but just in the sense that without Saying we would be worldless beings in the manner of stones: we would exist, but not in anything like a place to do so.

“Saying,” Heidegger says, “will not let itself be captured in any statement.”<sup>16</sup> We cannot say what Saying is, because it will not let itself be mastered by speaking or by anyone who speaks; on the contrary, the direction of power and mastery is altogether different from what we imagine it to be. Saying will not let itself be captured in speaking, because the one who speaks has already been appropriated by language, nor can he say anything at all except as he first *listens* to the Saying of language. The indispensable organ of discourse for Heidegger is not the eye, hand, or tongue; it is the *ear*:

Speaking is known as the articulated vocalization of thought by means of the organs of speech. But speaking is at the same time also listening. It is the custom to put speaking and listening in opposition: one man speaks, the other listens. But listening accompanies and surrounds not only speaking such as takes place in conversation. The simultaneousness of speaking and listening has a larger meaning. Speaking is of itself a listening. Speaking is a listening to the language which we speak. Thus, it is a listening not *while* but *before* we are

speaking. This listening to language also comes before all other kinds of listening that we know, in a most inconspicuous manner. We do not merely speak *the* language—we speak *by way* of it. We can do so solely because we always have already listened to the language. What do we hear there? We hear language speaking.<sup>17</sup>

We hear language speaking, and language speaks the language of being, or the language of disclosure. What is important to understand here, however, is the way Heidegger characterizes our relation to language: it is like a relation to a voice rather than to an object or a system. The one who speaks does not encounter language from the outside; rather, he is already in it, already surrounded and penetrated by it—it pervades him like a voice that disregards all boundaries between inside and outside, self and other, presence and absence. Our relation to language is like our relation to time, and also, in this same way, to being. Language is that to which we are helplessly exposed—and from which writing helps us to protect ourselves.

Protect ourselves—but not from any sort of being. From what, then? To understand how Heidegger would answer this question, one would have to return to his account of the origin of language in *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (1953), where “man’s departure into being” is described as a violent and terrible beginning.<sup>18</sup> Geoffrey Hartman’s answer, given in “Words and Wounds,” concerns the fear of the word that once made the curse and the blessing such dramatic components of human life, and which endowed the name (or, more accurately, name-giving and name-changing, and also name-abusing) with ontological force. From our enlightened point of view, of course, we can regard these things formally and simply as so many speech-acts or performatives, and we can dismiss their ontology as the old superstition of the word, but Hartman’s position is that our enlightenment has been achieved as much by repression as by progress—repression of the archaic fear of the power that words have over us, but also repression of a “lust of the ears” that only the aurality of language can satisfy (p. 123). Tacitly (but there is no mistaking the point) Hartman denies Derrida’s assertion that our culture privileges voice over script, the spoken word over the written. On the contrary, the stronger argument is that since the Renaissance writing and print have produced a culture of the eye that has effectively banished the aurality of language from psychic life.<sup>19</sup> There is no longer anything

to fear in language, nor anything to desire in it, because the word is only something that we read and write: it is always out there in front of us where we can keep an eye on it. We cannot imagine what there is to listen to, notwithstanding the effort (both fascinating and appalling) of a writer like Joyce, whose texts grow abnormal and unreadable in proportion as they are overtaken by the voice:

Stand forth, Nayman of Noland (for no longer will I follow you obliquelike through the inspired form of the third person singular and the moods and hesitations of the deponent but address myself to you, with the imperative of my vendictive, provocative and out direct), stand forth, come boldly, jolly me, move me, zwillling though I am, to laughter in your true colours, ere you be back for ever till I have you your talkingto!<sup>20</sup>

“Supposing,” Hartman muses, “[that] the psyche demands to be cursed or blessed—that it cannot be satisfied, that it cannot even exist as a namable and conscious entity—as ego or self—except when defined by direct speech of that kind” (p. 131).

In *Criticism in the Wilderness* Hartman spoke in behalf of indeterminacy as the hermeneutical attitude of being open to what is written—open, strictly speaking, to the historicity of what is written and to the historical life of our own understanding. In *Saving the Text* Hartman gives this theme of openness an additional turn. He proposes a rehabilitation of the ear as an organ of discourse—an organ not only of speech and hearing but of writing and reading characterized by an openness to the force as well as to the meaning of the word. It is easy to trivialize this issue, but to avoid doing so one need only substitute the word “truth” for the word “force.” There is always something more to what is written than simply what is expressed, but the laws of literacy and analysis tend to repress this “something more,” whence expression is rarely taken as a form of direct address but is analyzed chiefly as an operation of the mind. The art of writing, as Hartman understands it, is that which seeks to restore to writing the power that we experience in situations of direct address, that is, when what is said or written speaks to us in such a way as to make a claim upon us. This means that the writing of criticism, if it is to be an art, can never be a self-effacing or voice-effacing act of composition, nor can it allow the one who reads

to stand outside of it as a bystander or eavesdropper. Like writing, Hartman says, reading requires a “conscious ear,” that is, an openness to the affectional power of words (p. 143). “Reading is, or can be,” he says, “an active kind of hearing. We really do ‘look with ears’ when we read a book of some complexity. A book has the capacity to put us on the defensive, or make us envious, or inflict some other narcissistic injury” (p. 128). Or, “To put it differently: critical reading is not only the reception (*Rezeption*) of a text, but also its conception (*Empfängnis*) through the ear” (pp. 141-42)—a sort of reinscription of what is written within the aurality of language. Doing this transports us out of the preserve of enlightenment, because it means the abandonment of disinterestedness and the analytic attitude, whence our relationship to what is written is like the relation to a voice rather than to an object, code, or system. This means that what is written is to be taken in as that which speaks to us, not as if across an aesthetic or analytic distance, but intimately as a possessive voice sounding us out and staking a claim in every nook and cranny of our being. Now we become implicated in what we understand.

## NOTES

1 Hartman is the author of one of the masterworks of modern criticism, *Wordsworth's Poetry: 1787-1814* (1964), but his genius is in essay writing. Two outstanding collections are *Beyond Formalism* (1970) and *The Fate of Reading* (1975). References below are to *Criticism in the Wilderness* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980) and *Saving the Text: Literature/Derrida/Philosophy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1981).

2 *Glas* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1974). See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Glas-piece,” in *Diacritics* (Fall 1977), 22-43.

3 The essay is included in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row), 17-81.

4 The essay is in *Soul and Form*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1974), p. 10.

5 See *Kora in Hell: Improvisations*, in *Imaginations*, ed. Webster Schott (New York: New Directions Publishing Corp., 1970), p. 70.

6 *Imaginations*, p. 10.

7 *Soul and Form*, p. 2.

8 See Richard Rorty, “Philosophy as a Kind of Writing: An Essay on Derrida,” in *New Literary History*, 10 (Autumn 1978), 141-60.

9 See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), pp. 305-41, esp. 319-25; and Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), among other recent works.

10 *Limited, Inc.: a b c . . .* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).

11 "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy," trans. F. C. T. Moore, in *New Literary History*, 6 (Autumn 1974), 5-74.

12 The notion of thaumaturgy first turns up in Hartman's *Fate of Reading and Other Essays* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975); Hartman avoids the word in "Words and Wounds," evidently not wanting to abandon the domain of Enlightenment altogether. He writes: "To avoid the misunderstanding that mine is a 'postcritical' theory like Paul Ricoeur's in *The Symbolism of Evil*, I exclude religious and magical views, though they are always implied. I am also cautionary rather than assertive about the clinical aspects of word-therapy. My aim is limited to the issue of words and wounds as imaginative literature evokes it: the poets themselves depict most clearly the power of words, their balm and venom. With the exception, however, of the vital if obscure notion of 'catharsis' or 'purification,' and Freud's exploration of the mechanism of jokes, we do not have anything useful with which to understand the tremendous impact words may have on psychic life." (p. 122)

13 For a good discussion of this phenomenon, see Eric Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1967), pp. 145-64.

14 *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), pp. 6-10.

15 "The Ends of Man," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 30 (September 1969), 53n.

16 "The Way to Language," in *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 134.

17 *On the Way to Language*, pp. 123-24.

18 Trans. Ralph Mannheim (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1961), pp. 143-44.

19 See Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, p. 53: "In a certain broad sense the Greeks looked on language from a visual point of view, that is, starting from written language. It is in writing that the spoken language comes to stand. Language is, i.e. it stands in the written image of the word, in the written signs, the letters, *grammata*. Consequently grammar represents language in being. But through the flow of speech language seeps away into the impermanent. Thus, down to our time, language has been interpreted grammatically. But the Greeks also knew of the phonetic character of language, the *phone*. They established rhetoric and poetics. (But all this did not in itself lead to an appropriate definition of the essence of language)."

20 *Finnegans Wake* (New York: Viking Press, 1939), p. 187.