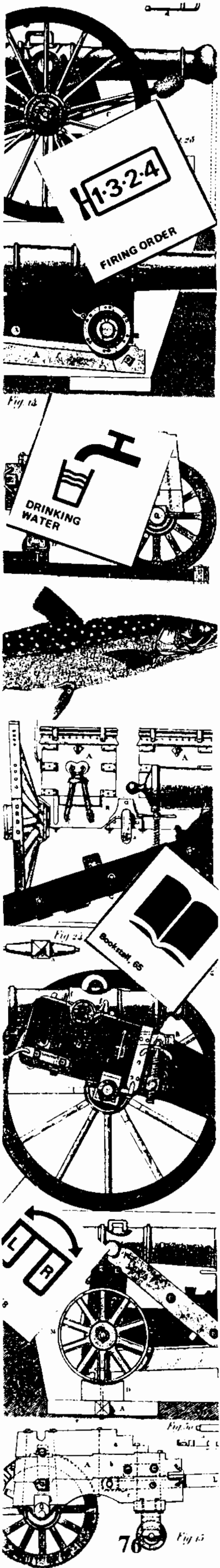

SALVAGING LITERATURE, SAVAGING THEORY

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Robert Alter. THE PLEASURES OF READING IN AN IDEOLOGICAL AGE. *New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989.*

By Robert Alter's account, we live in an "ideological age" in which "the pleasures of reading" are increasingly compromised by political considerations extraneous to literature. Who is responsible for this state of affairs and what should be done about it are the questions this book attempts to answer.

"Ideological" is not a neutral epithet. Most often it is used to refer with hostility to someone else's beliefs or claims. Like the related word "propaganda," which in contemporary usage has narrowed to mean "ideology our side disagrees with," the term "ideology" has become—as in this book about "literature in an ideological age"—shorthand for "the mistaken beliefs our side rejects." Thus the essential job of the propagandist (a.k.a. "apologist," "defender") is not to define and defend what is true, just, and good, but to make sure his or her audience feels that they do belong, and want to remain, on "our side." Is Robert Alter an ideologue because he has written a book in which he assumes the role of an apologist for literature and defender of tradition?

Confronting what he calls "the division of the academic study of literature, especially in the United States, into competing sectarian groups, each with its own dogmas and its own arcane language" [14], he takes a firm stand on the side of traditionalism. It is a conservative stance that recognizes that its opponents view literary traditionalism as being hopelessly gripped, as Paul de Man put it in a now-famous phrase, by "the resistance to theory." De Man characterized such readers as "unable to transcend the same old polemical opposition, the systematic non-understanding and misrepresentation, the unsubstantial but eternally recurrent objections" to theory [de Man 12]. Alter sums up his own—avowedly polemical—resistance to theory in the six-sentence synopsis he provides of the book:

> *During the past two decades, structuralism, semiotics, feminism, Marxism, and other schools of thought have elevated abstract theories over original works of art, elite academic critics over ordinary readers, and various modes of interpretation or deconstruction over the primary experience of reading. The tendency has been to deny the distinctiveness of literature, to resist its representational power or to replace representation with self-referentiality, and to set aside reading in favor of metaphysical or metapsychological speculation or ideological exhortation.*
>
> *In* The Pleasures of Reading in an Ideological Age, *Robert Alter offers general readers and students of literature a constructive*

diacritics 21.1: 76–90

alternative to this trend. Through abundant discussions of illustrative texts—from the Bible, Shakespeare, Joyce, Dickens, Fielding, Nabokov, Stendhal, and others—he shows how literature is not a self-referential universe but is connected in meaningful and revelatory ways with the world outside the text. Exploring literature as a source of complex pleasures and insight, he gives a critical account of some of the distinctive aspects of literary expression—style, character, allusion, structure, perspective. Finally, in place of the interpretive anarchy that now prevails, The Pleasures of Reading *makes the case for a critical pluralism that can illuminate our understanding of literature and the larger world it seeks to represent.* [Dustjacket]

The Rhetoric of Neutrality

Claims to ideological neutrality are never expressed in neutral terms but with a righteous vehemence proportional to the perceived threat posed by the adversary. It would be useful at the outset to identify in the preceding argument the main rhetorical features of its vehemence.

Alter's argument is tightly structured around a simple opposition that pits literary theory (characterized as reductive and destructive) against literature itself (characterized as a constructive source of pleasure and insight). Everything in his exordium works to reinforce this polarity. Theory is "abstract," while the concrete and "primary experience of reading" affords pleasure and insight. The self-evident value of "pleasure and insight" contrasts ominously with the "metaphysical or metapsychological speculation or ideological exhortation" in which theorists indulge. The syntactic diffuseness of this last phrase (unpunctuated collocation of two "meta-" adjectives with two contextually negative nouns—speculation, exhortation—loosely correlated by two "or"s) mocks theory by mimicking the obscure and confusing jargon with which it is here equated. The same effect is obtained by the syntactic equation of the two members of the phrase "various modes of interpretation *or* deconstruction" yoked in quasi-synonymy by an "or" which, this time, inconspicuously indicts *all* these "various modes of interpretation" by association with the implicitly contemptible d-word, as though Alter sees "deconstruction" as merely a pretentious synonym for "destruction," inflated by an extra syllable.

This oratorical approach to the exordium (known in classical rhetoric as *insinuatio*) is used throughout the book in a rhetoric of "guilt by association." As we shall see, weak or extravagant versions (easy targets) of tough theoretical issues and positions (hard targets) are cited or paraphrased in this book as evidence of the excesses or vacuity of the whole contemporary theoretical enterprise. Thus (to return to the exordium), if the experience of reading literature is "primary," how could theory be anything but secondary at best? By what perversion, then, could theory be "elevated" ("abstract theories elevated over original works of art") above the primary experience of literature itself? Obviously, only by dint of metaspeculation and "ideological exhortation." Hence the verbs used to characterize the actions attributed to theorists all denote, without exception, destructive or reactionary acts ("deny," "resist," "replace," "set aside"), whereas what Alter and Literature do is constructive ("offer," "show," "explore," "give," "make the case," "illuminate").

Ideology vs. pleasure: the opposition is simple almost to the point of parody. Theorists are reductionist ideologues (Marxists, feminists, deconstructionists). Worse, the privilege and self-indulgence on which their ideologies rest are inherently undemocratic: "elite academic critics" band together in doctrinaire "schools of thought" against "ordinary readers" or "general readers and students." "Schools" thus find themselves in paradoxical opposition to "students" as private "self-referentiality" shuts out the "larger

world," and egotistical, solipsistic "speculation" eschews experience that "connects in meaningful and revelatory ways to the world outside the text."

As a remedy to this private speculation and narrow ideology, Alter promises a book that "makes the case for a critical pluralism," and winds up his summary with another barely noticeable *insinuatio*. He associates the good pluralists ("our side") against the bad ideologues by means of an inconspicuous pronoun shift from the anonymous third person singular to a collaborative first person plural: we the readers and "*our* understanding of literature and the larger world" are assimilated to the good cause by this possessive pronoun of solidarity.

But does the "ordinary reader" seeking the pleasures of fiction really wish to be aligned with Balch, Bennett, Bloom, Cheney, Hirsch, the author of *Profscam*, and all the other "New Fundamentalists"? Whether Alter intended it to or not, his case against theory empties briskly into the general current of suspicion and hostility lately unleashed against Elite Academia with its perverse hermeticism, privileged radicals, and overpaid charlatans. Intentionally or not, by lamenting "The Disappearance of Reading" (the title of Alter's introductory chapter [9–22]), he fans the flames of the conflagration he purports to deplore, and adds grist to the mill of the antiacademics by lending a patina of legitimacy, from an authoritative vantage point within academia itself, to their attacks on theory. Alter's own attacks are executed with considerably more finesse; but how well do they stand up under scrutiny?

The Invasion of the Primary by the Secondary:
Three Pages of Theory for Each Page of Literature

"I strongly suspect," he writes in the opening pages, "that many young people now earning undergraduate degrees in English or French at our most prestigious institutions have read two or three pages of Lacan, Derrida, Foucault, and Kristeva for every page of George Eliot or Stendhal" [11]. No such imbalance mars the pages of this book. Not a line of a single work by any of these four theorists is ever cited, nor does Alter engage their ideas head-on even in paraphrase. The closest he comes is an astonishingly disfigured echo (via Denis Donoghue) of Derrida's "metaphysics of presence," which he seems to believe has something to do with "the delusional habit of reading fictional characters as though they were real people":

> *One objection that can be dismissed at the outset is that ordinary habits of reading betray a "metaphysics of presence," ignoring the ineluctable absence of all purported objects of representation in those columns of conventional signs of linguistic elements that constitute the printed page.* [50]

Are we to conclude that a critic as gifted as Alter can write off Derrida (along with Lacan, Foucault, and Kristeva) simply because he has found weak applications or imitations of him baffling?

As for his statistical estimate—two or three pages of theory for every page of "the real thing"—this is an argument we will be hearing with increasing frequency. As of this writing, his estimate is probably still correct. But only a negligible fringe of enthusiasts believe that reading theorists—or critics for that matter—will do a student any good if the student has not already read and deeply enjoyed reading (as did Lacan, Derrida, Foucault, and Kristeva) the writers they talk about. In any case, it's too late to expunge Derrida and co. from the reading list. So what Alter calls "critical pluralism," if taken seriously, requires that the critical mind be open to more than just reflections of its own self-sameness. This is what distinguishes an authentically *critical* pluralism from redundant

pluralizing—that is, from "tradition" practiced as clonism and colonialism in the name of a literary culture confined to the same mold in which it was moldering prior to the disruptive advent of the "theorists" in the 1960s. Is it not well known that nostalgia for a golden age of literary pleasure untainted by "metadiscourse" is an illusion? Or that there have always been "too many secondary sources" on the reading list? In the '50s and early '60s, the same argument was made—less often, admittedly, and less stridently—deploring the fact that students earning undergraduate degrees in English or French at our most prestigious institutions probably read two or three pages of Auerbach, Spitzer, Frye, and Wellek for every page of Eliot (George) or Stendhal. Indeed this primary/secondary argument has been around longer than the *institution* of literature itself. We find it already in Montaigne in the sixteenth century:

> *It is more of a job to interpret the interpretations than to interpret the things, and there are more books about books than about any other subject: we do nothing but write glosses about each other. The world is swarming with commentaries; of authors, there is a great scarcity. Is it not the chief and most reputed learning of our times to learn to understand the learned? Is that not the common and ultimate end of all studies?* [818][1]

Montaigne was (to use Alter's jargon) keenly alive to the complex pleasures and insight that come from reading. But because the books he read were not yet called "literature," he made no claims about the "distinctiveness" of that pleasure as being uniquely literary. (This is the burden of Alter's first chapter, discussed below.) Montaigne's chapter on the subject is called simply "On Books." He divides "books" into two categories: pleasure ("les livres simplement plaisans"), and instruction ("reading which mingles a little more profit with the pleasure, and by means of which I learn to keep my humors and my ways in line") [300].[2] And since reading connected him in meaningful and revelatory ways with the world outside the text, he too deplored the babble of modern writers drowning out the voices of the "good old poets" ("les bons et anciens Poëtes"). He too, like Alter, derided the crudity and barbarous stupidity ("bestise et stupidité barbaresque") of contemporary commentators who, in his day, saw fit to compare the lightweight Ariosto with the venerable Virgil. So closely does this moment (but for Montaigne it is only a moment) of high-cultural nostalgia parallel Alter's elegiac pages on the "Disappearance of Reading" that we even find, 400 years earlier, precisely the same ratio (three to one) in Montaigne's comparison of the "beauties and perfections" of the old authors with the "affectation and complication" (*affectation et complexitez*) of the contemporary ones. Describing students (to borrow Alter's formula) "earning degrees in [his society's] most prestigious institutions"—these were the elite cadres just beginning, in the new Humanist colleges of the sixteenth century, to write "comedies" and "tragedies" by way of "imitation" of antiquity, such as they knew it—Montaigne finds that it takes "three or four plots from Terence or Plautus to make one of their own" [299].[3] The integument of the topos is different but its core is exactly the same: the superiority of the

1. *"Il y a plus affaire à interpreter les interpretations qu'à interpreter les choses, et plus de livres sur les livres que sur autre subject; nous ne faisons que nous entregloser. Tout fourmille de commentaires; d'auteurs, il en est grand cherté. Le principal et plus fameux sçavoir de nos siecles, est-ce pas sçavoir entendre les sçavans? Est-ce pas la fin commune et derniere de tous estudes?" [2:520–21].*

2. *". . . qui mesle un peu plus de fruict au plaisir, par où j'apprens à renger mes humeurs et mes conditions" [1:453].*

3. *". . . trois ou quatre argumens de celles de Terence ou de Plaute pour en faire une des leurs" [1:452].*

classics compares strikingly to the ineptitude and affectation of modernity—at a ratio of 3 to 1.

While agreeing on the problem, Montaigne and Alter diverge radically on the solution. What solution is there? Suppress inept interpretations? Montaigne toys with this idea (a fantasy cherished by many partisans of traditionalism today)[4] for the space of a sentence, framed as an evident absurdity:

> *Who would not say that glosses increase doubts and ignorance, since there is no book to be found . . . whose difficulties are cleared up by interpretation? The hundredth commentator hands it on to his successor thornier and rougher than the first one had found it. When do we agree and say, "There has been enough about this book; henceforth there is nothing more to say about it?"* [817][5]

But in the next paragraph he immediately retracts. With keener insight than much of his spiritual progeny in literary conservatism today, Montaigne realizes that it is futile to put braces, crooked braces, on the human mind; the "chasse de cognoissance" *requires* intellectual superfluity, or what a later period would call Blakean excess:

> *It is only personal weakness that makes us content with what others, or we ourselves, have found out in this hunt for knowledge. An abler person will not rest content with it. There is always room for a successor, yes and for ourselves, and a road in another direction. There is no end to our researches; our end is in the other world. It is a sign of contraction of the mind when it is content, or of weariness.*[6]

Now today, since Montaigne himself belongs to Literature, those who derive complex pleasure and insight from reading "Montaigne himself" deplore the fact that students earning degrees in our most prestigious institutions (and even the less prestigious ones) probably read, for every page of "Montaigne himself," three or four pages of Montaigne criticism, the bibliography of which [Bonnet] crushingly outweighs Montaigne's oeuvre. This of course is the case for a growing number of canonized classics from the Bible to Beckett. (Regarding the latter, John Calder observed more than 20 years ago, "More books have been written on Christ, Napoleon, and Wagner, in that order, than on anyone else; I predict that by 2000 AD. Beckett may well rank fourth if the present flood of Beckett literature keeps up" [2].) But what all these numbers add up to is the fact that the eternal primary/secondary argument has little to do with the "pleasures of reading in an ideological age" and very much to do with the nature and demands of the particular ideology (or mixture of ideologies) that prevails in a given time and place. As we have seen from even a cursory analysis of Alter's exordium, the only recourse available to him is to fight ideology with ideology, though he would have the reader believe that he is

4. *Recall that it was Walter Jackson Bate's suggestion that administrators deny tenure to professors who concentrate on theory that prompted de Man's "Resistance to Theory" article in response to Bate, his former English department colleague at Harvard.*

5. *"Qui ne diroit que les gloses augmentent les doubtes et l'ignorance, puis qu'il ne se voit aucun livre . . . duquel l'interpretation face tarir la difficulté? Le centiesme commentaire le renvoye à son suivant, plus espineux et plus scabreux que le premier ne l'avoit trouvé. Quand est-il convenu entre nous: ce livre en a assez, il n'y a meshuy plus que dire?" [2:519]*

6. *"Ce n'est rien que foiblesse particuliere qui nous faict contenter de ce que d'autres ou que nous-mesmes avons trouvé en cette chasse de cognoissance; un plus habile ne s'en contentera pas. Il y a tousjours place pour un suyvant, ouy et pour nous mesmes, et route par ailleurs. Il n'y a point de fin en nos inquisitions; nostre fin est en l'autre monde. C'est signe de racourciment d'esprit quand il se contente, ou de lasseté" [2:520].*

fighting ideology with a nonideological reformism and that his task is to *restore* the faith: "not merely," as he says, "to question a few of the fundamentally misleading dogmas of the new critical sectarians, but to propose a set of concepts that will point toward a *return* to reading" [19; my emphasis]. To that end, the first obstacle to be removed—and it is a considerable one—is Terry Eagleton's characterization of the fluid nature of the construct "literature."

Against Eagleton: On "Stable Cores" and "Fuzzy Boundaries"

Against Eagleton's position [1–16], which in Alter's paraphrase becomes "that there is no coherent phenomenon that can be called literature" [14–15], he argues (as did the Russian formalists, as did the New Critics) that literary language has features and operations that are "intrinsic" to it and to it alone: "There is a great deal in the intrinsic operations of literature vitally calling for our attention" [14]. A few pages later this formula recurs in an allusion to "the inflections and syntax of literature's intrinsic language" [21]. "Intrinsic" alternates with "distinctive": "Literature speaks through its own complex and distinctive language" [14]. This assertion is echoed in the summary he provides of the chapter: "The language of literature is distinct from the use of language elsewhere in its resources and in its possibilities of expression" [19]. In support of these familiar and threadbare claims he offers two arguments. The first is historical, the second is definitional, an attempt to specify the distinctiveness of literary language. We will examine each briefly in turn.

> *The reduction of literature purely to considerations of ideology [itself a reductive paraphrase of Eagleton] overlooks a good deal of the historical evidence. For all the changes through the ages in values, and the changes in political arrangements behind them, the literary tradition exhibits a surprising degree of stability. It might be imagined as a large and variegated corpus with a relatively stable center and intermittently shifting borders. We have gone through a dizzying variety of societies over the past two millennia, but none has seriously questioned the status as literature of Homer, Sophocles, Sappho, Virgil, Horace.* [26]

This assertion is flat wrong; and Alter is asking too much of the "historical evidence" to support such a claim. Homer, Sophocles, and Sappho were entirely unknown in the Latin West until the Renaissance—or almost: the name "Homer" came to be vaguely known in the West in connection with adaptations and crude condensations of a "Troy Story" (the standard medieval abridgment or "Latin Homer" [*Ilias latina*] is generally considered "a wretched piece of work" [Curtius 51]), whose principal interest was unashamedly ideological, as a means for advancing dynastic claims on behalf of presumptive French and English successors to the legendary Trojan founders of both royal lineages.

But if Alter's claim about Homer, Sophocles, Sappho, Virgil, and Horace is partly true, in a trivial way, it is flagrantly untrue in a major way. For not to question seriously the "status *as* literature" of these figures is beside the point for the millennium-and-a-half during which, in the premodern West, the status *of* such literature bears little resemblance to its status in Western society today. In other words, it may be granted that the tiny, scattered handful of clerics in the post-Alexandrian Greek East and Latin West who could have recognized one or more of these names would not have "seriously questioned" their status *as* literature; but pagan literature before the Renaissance had no status to question. Otherwise there would have been no Renaissance (renaissance of what?). Thus the "historical evidence" speaks resoundingly *against* Alter's claim. For *most* of "the past

two millennia"—the two-thirds to three-quarters of them that include the entire European Middle Ages—Homer, Sophocles, and Sappho were virtually unknown.[7] In the same period, Virgil and Horace, like other Roman authors, were considered important *auctores* (authorities) to the extent that they could be assimilated to Christian ideology as standards of grammatical correctness (for writing good Latin), as repositories of rhetorical technique (for constructing persuasive arguments), or for their moral teaching (for Bible study).[8]

But the implied comparison of modern literary studies with a Great Tradition any older than the mid-twentieth century is spurious. For antiquity, the place of "literary studies" in Greek *paideia* and Roman *humanitas* bears little resemblance to their place in the liberal arts curriculum today; or rather, it bears precisely the same resemblance as contemporary Western societies bear to the societies of classical antiquity. The crux of the matter is this: for today's students, which similarities of antiquity to modernity outweigh which differences? Likewise, for a medieval Christian, according to St. Augustine, the only nontechnical (grammatical and rhetorical) use to which pagan writers could legitimately be put was as a means to better understand the Bible. And up through the eighteenth century, poetry remained primarily a collective, social activity, "a weapon to be hurled against an opponent," as Jane Tompkins puts it, or "a partisan activity whose purpose is to advance individual and factional interests" [211]. All of this is hardly comparable to providing "complex pleasure and insight" today to the classrooms of (barely) postadolescent undergraduate individuals Alter has in mind or "connecting them in meaningful and revelatory ways with the world outside the text."

Alter's second "distinctiveness of literature" argument is far more nuanced. But the nuances add up to concessions that dilute the argument to a position that is ultimately very close to Eagleton's. To say that as a result of these concessions the argument "undoes itself" is not to allude to any fancy deconstructive "move" but simply to the fact that after asserting P, Alter comes back repeatedly to concede not-P under certain circumstances. In the quotation that follows, I have emphasized these concessions or "hedges":

> It would be foolish not to recognize that *literary works are* often *esteemed* at least partly *because they express values deemed important by the culture at large. . . . But the force of this whole argument will be considerably weakened if we can identify intrinsically literary values, and I believe that to be the case.*

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7. The first appointment of a university lecturer to teach Greek literature was made in Florence in the fourteenth century. Sophocles in the Middle Ages was confused with Seneca (and this by no less a figure than Vincent of Beauvais, the most learned Dominican scholar of the thirteenth century). As for Sappho, her genius and artistry are not in question; but since when has she been part of the "stable core" of the Western literary canon? As far as generations of students earning undergraduate degrees in at least one of our most prestigious institutions are concerned, that question can be answered very precisely: Fall 1986, when she appeared for the first time on the reading list of Columbia's famous Humanities A sequence (a.k.a. Literature Humanities, part of Columbia's core-curriculum requirements), in deference to the ideological redress mandated by liberal academia's literary response to Affirmative Action. James Mirollo, director of "Lit. Hum.," was perfectly candid on this point: "The presence of Sappho, a woman poet, for the very first time this year has to do with the issue of women authors" [35]. But prior to 1986, Columbia undergraduates acquiring the stable core of Western literature read Herodotus, not Sappho. Her example thus seems to prove exactly the opposite *of the case Alter wants to make regarding the stability of the canon core vs. the vicissitudes of ideology.*

8. Such was the case for Horace: when he was read at all (he was virtually unknown in Italy, somewhat better known in France and Germany), he was read for his moral precepts, not for his lyric poetry. If there is *any "stable core" in the two millennia of Western writing, it is to be sought not in poetry but—if this is any comfort—in grammar.*

> *If any purposeful ordering of language implies some intention of communication, literature is remarkable for its densely layered communication, its capacity to open up multifarious connections and multiple interpretations to the recipient of the communication, and for the pleasure it produces in making the instrument of communication a satisfying aesthetic object—or more precisely, the pleasure it gives us as we experience the nice interplay between the verbal aesthetic form and the complex meanings conveyed. It is on these grounds that it is valued as literature. . . .*
>
> It may not be altogether fair *to compare the literary act of communication to that of graffiti, or laundry lists, or telephone directories,* since there are, after all, works of philosophy, history, psychological theory, and social analysis that exhibit the most formidable complexities. I do not mean to claim that literature is more precise or more profound than these other kinds of discourse, only that it is different *in the way it plays with multiple meanings and in the centrality of aesthetic pleasure to the act of communication.* (And there are, of course, intriguing borderline cases in which the ostensibly nonliterary text achieves literary force or uses literary techniques, as in Gibbon's history, Plato's philosophy, Freud's psychological theory; *but fuzzy borders do not imply that a phenomenon lacks distinctive character.)* [28–29].[9]

If the borders of the set "literature" allow for the inclusion of Gibbon, Plato, and Freud, whom do they exclude? Michelet, Aristotle, and Jung? Where do we draw the line, and why does the line keep moving? If Alter admits that "it would be foolish not to recognize that literary works are often esteemed at least partly because they express values deemed important by the culture at large," and that quite often an "ostensibly nonliterary text achieves literary force or uses literary techniques," then what has become of the "distinctiveness" of literature? What we come down to at the core of the argument is literature's complexity ("densely layered communication . . . complex meanings"). But if this is all that remains of the argument, then it has very little purchase against what anthropology and linguistics tell us about the related arts of oral narrative and ritual performance.[10] If literature is admitted to be neither more precise nor more profound, only "*different* in the way it plays with multiple meanings and in the centrality of aesthetic pleasure to the act of communication," then the rich and unbroken tradition of Western "orature" (where Homer, by the way, properly belongs) provides sufficient reason to reject Alter's second argument for the distinctiveness of literature.

As long as we remain inside the bubble of Western literary criticism it will always be difficult to see beyond the aesthetic *a prioris* that bend and tint our notions of "densely layered" and "richly textured." But nothing requires us to remain in splendid isolation within the bubble of Western (post-eighteenth-century) literary criticism. When weighed on a scale that has fewer thumbs on it, "poetic" or "literary" language turns out

9. *Actually, "fuzzy set theory" speaks more against than in favor of Alter's argument about literature, which for cognitive science would be called a graded category (tall people) as opposed to a well-defined category (US senator). In graded categories, what Alter calls "distinctive character" is a matter of* degree of membership *in a set where intermediate values between 0 and 1 are possible. But the fact that such categories admit of partial membership (culturally defined) means that the same object or physical phenomenon (e.g., various shades of color in different languages) may or may not belong to the set—likewise books. See Lakoff, "Hedges" [183–228] and* Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things *[21–22, 26–30].*

10. *The relevant literature is immense. From anthropology I will single out Victor Turner's* The Anthropology of Performance. *From linguistics, notably but not solely in the wake of Labov, a steady flow of studies (indeed a whole new field called orature) have sought to document in orally performed stories the same features Alter ascribes to literature alone.*

to be more ordinary than is generally admitted, while so-called ordinary language turns out to be more "poetic" than academic critics have been able to admit. This explains the indifference with which literary academia has for the most part treated work by such writers as Turner or Labov.[11] The latter's *Language in the Inner City* is threatening not because it offers a dispassionate technical analysis of the features and functions characterizing a distinctively "other" verbal artistic tradition; it is threatening because the narrative art of inner-city dropouts is assessed by Labov with the same weights and measures that academic critics use to establish the narrative art of Virgil or Voltaire, thus disclosing more than a few thumbs on the scales of literary criticism.

Thus it is not just the "borderlines" of literature that are fuzzy; the criteria for assigning works to the "stable core" must themselves also be fuzzy if these criteria (which Alter treats as all more or less synonymous: artistic ambiguity, pleasurably "densely layered" semantic multifariousness, complex interplay of form and meanings) are imagined to be uniquely distinctive of literature. This is because what formulations like this are trying to grasp turns out, under close technical inspection, to be a massive number of operations which all tend, at the level of cognitive computations, toward the same goal of *complicating representation.* (At this level of analysis there is no reason *a priori* to exclude music and visual art—along with larger symbolic practices of myth and ritual—unless we have insufficient time or are inadequately equipped to read their languages or to relate their languages to the more familiar codes of literary usage.) But in all these cases, the intricacy of ramification and entangled semic dendrons that result from the *intentional blurrings* of (possible, virtual) distinctions in a representational system (denotative/connotative, metaphor/metonymy, etc.) come to be labeled "literary," in arguments such as Alter's, only as the result of an evaluative process secondary to the object and not *intrinsic* to it. Simply put: art, with or without the label of authority (whether or not it has been accorded the right to call itself "art" in a particular time and place), is always subtle, complex, technically refined, intensely pleasurable. The only "*Difference* of Literature" is that its sectarian apologists (its union, its syndicate) have been more vocal, more verbal (naturally), and, until recently, unified enough to overpower the advocates of all those "other kinds of discourse" akin to literature but which Alter feels should not detain the literature specialist.[12]

The remainder of Alter's argument in this chapter against Eagleton consists of an attempt to show that "the literary canon, for all its supposed attachment to ideological values, often incorporates texts that run counter to the dominant ideology of the culture" [31; cf. 54–55]. In other words, Alter wants to claim that "the literary imagination develops a momentum of its own in indifference or in actual contravention to reigning ideology" [32]. But the examples he cites in support of this claim do not prove that to be the case at all; rather, what they prove is that reigning ideologies sometimes tolerate dissent, up to a point. Crushing evidence from the history of censorship could be marshaled in support of the opposite claim (one thinks of the example of the "trial" of *Madame Bovary*—a famous but by no means isolated example).

How does "The Difference of Literature" relate to "The Disappearance of Reading"? It is clear (though perhaps indelicate to say so) that what is at stake in giving up the myth of the "distinctiveness of literature" is not the "disappearance of reading" but the

11. A recent exception is Ward Parks's book, Verbal Dueling in Heroic Narrative, *which draws on Labov in analyzing the dynamics of ritual insult in Homeric and Old English literature.*

12. On value—and thumbs on the scale—see Smith for a crisply lucid critique of the logical incoherence characterizing the standard account of literary value. (In particular, "concepts such as 'intrinsic,' 'objective,' 'absolute,' " and so forth [12], betray "the humanist's fantasy of transcendence, endurance, and universality" and render such a person "unable to acknowledge the most fundamental character of literary value, which is its mutability and diversity" [10].)

disappearing influence of arbiters who for their arbitrary Great Tradition carve out of reading a raggedy synecdoche of Literature and find it increasingly difficult to defend the selection criteria they have used to narrow "literature" in the ways discussed above.[13]

Against Pseudolinguistics in Literary Theory

The thesis of chapter 2, "Character and the Connection with Reality," is "that literature is not just a self-referential closed circuit but is connected in meaningful and revelatory ways with the world of experience outside the text" [19]. Here is the core of the argument:

> *[The] inadequacy of Structuralist thinking about narrative is compounded by a fondness for seeing literary works in reductively linguistic terms. Because literary narrative is made up of words, it is imagined to be a language, or at the very least, a language-like system in which the purely internal differences among components . . . generate meanings. The elements of narrative, then, are conceived as analogous to or isomorphic with the elements of language, a notion that has led to some of the most embarrassing moments of the new narratology in which attempts have been made to identify in configurations of plot and character narrative adverbs, narrative adjectives, and so forth.* [51–52]

Unlike the previous chapter in which Eagleton is specifically named as the proponent of a debatable proposition, here the contested argument is attributed to no one in particular, but to anonymous collectivities like "structuralist thinking about narrative," "the new narratology," and "the cluster of related intellectual trends called post-Structuralism." Since most readers would be hard-pressed to imagine anyone actually arguing in favor of "seeing literature in reductively linguistic terms," Alter's position risks arousing the suspicion that the deck may be stacked against the nameless, mute opponents. Since I am sympathetic to Alter's position on this particular point—the pervasive reductionism in much "language-modeled" literary theory even today—fairness compels me to fill the gap with a specific example of the type of "reductively linguistic" argument Alter attacks here in general. Examples are easy enough to come by. I find one conveniently at hand in the foreword to Paul de Man's "Resistance to Theory." It is not de Man who takes such a position, but the commentator who introduces the volume. This distinction is important. As mentioned above, Alter typically indicts by association, equating what theorist X actually says with what commentator Y thinks theorist X said.

In the foreword to *The Resistance to Theory*, Wlad Godzich argues that the semantic-pragmatic category linguists call deixis is crucial to a proper understanding of de Man's theoretical writings in that volume. "Deixis," he explains, "is the linguistic mechanism that permits the articulation of all of these distinctions between the here and the there, the now and the then, the we and the you. It establishes the existence of an 'out there' that is not an 'over here,' and thus it is fundamental to the theoretical enterprise. It gives it its authority" [xv]. These last two statements make weighty claims. Each contains a problematic key word—"existence" and "authority"—that pushes onto hazardous sands the case that linguists typically make for deixis. Propositions like "deixis establishes existence" or "gives theory its authority" nudge the argument off its empirical tracks. ("Authority" to do what? "Existence" other than conceptual—as mental representations of verbal signs—is not required.) Having introduced deixis in this way, Godzich goes on

13. *"The Difference of Literature" [23–48] was reprinted in* Poetics Today *9.3 (1988): 573–91.*

to attribute to Emile Benveniste the conclusion he himself wants to make, namely that deictics "have no objective referents outside of the discourse; they *actually make reference to what has no referent* since their meaning is determinable only by means of the instance of discourse that they occur in" [xvi, my emphasis]. This, I take it, is the type of abusive linguisticizing that Alter objects to. Benveniste himself makes no such claim. What he says is that deictics have no fixed referents (they are defined anew by each new speech situation), as opposed to nominal terms which always and only refer to concepts (with a consensual consistency that is not discourse-specific). Godzich in the sentence above deflects the idea of a class of signs with discourse-defined referents to the notion of phantom signs which "actually make reference to what has no referent" by sliding down the scale from *no stable referents* to "no objective referents" to "no referent," period. Provocative, provoking, or provocational as this approach may be, there is no such drama in Benveniste. Linguists in general tend to avoid confusing reference with reality and confine themselves to specifying the representational mechanisms whereby descriptions of what referents refer to can be said to be true (as opposed to "real"). For Godzich to say categorically that "deictics do not refer to anything tangible, to anything that has any resistance, as is clear from the very instability of the terms themselves (I becomes you when you address me, and here turns into there, etc.)" [xvi], is merely to register the tautology that deixis is mobile; it does not by any stretch of the imagination prove that "you" and "I" as tangible entities do not exist (or exist only in discourse). This is one example among many that Alter might have cited. But however embarrassing or annoying he may find some of the linguisticizing or pseudolinguisticizing approaches to literature, it is not legitimate to dismiss "the new narratology" and all linguistically informed literary theory wholesale on the basis of isolated cases of overly creative extensions of linguistics—no more legitimate than it would be to dismiss literary criticism out of hand on the basis of isolated cases of poor reading and bad writing.

Traditional Reading in the Grand Style

Alter's book certainly suffers from neither of these. What it does suffer from is an *a priori* aesthetic ideology which, a generation ago, was so transparent to itself as to be authentically invisible to its hosts. This blind spot is what I believe accounts for the apparent illogicality in the articulation of the two parts of the book: if the premise of the first part is valid (and it is valid: that the aesthetics of traditional or old-fashioned reading is disappearing, at least in "professional" literary study in the universities), then who is Alter writing for in the second part of the book, where he so ably argues on behalf of the pleasures of reading in the old style? The only way out of that logical impasse would be to revise the premise of the "Disappearance of Reading" such that pre-'70s reading could truly appear salvageable. But for that to happen, the ideological counterrevolution that would have to take place would require more than Alter's present effort, valiant as it is when he abandons polemics and confines himself to criticism. Who will write more such books?[14] More important, who will read them?

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14. *Alvin Kernan's recent book* The Death of Literature *addresses what Alter might agree is the same problem ("Literature has passed through a crisis of confidence in recent decades, a radical questioning of its traditional values and its importance to humanity" [dustjacket]), but it reaches totally different conclusions. What is chilling about Kernan's book is not its premises or conclusions (which are set forth and documented with straightforward clarity and graceful wit, devoid of polemics) but rather that such a book—a muted eulogy for "the old literature" accompanied by a detailed autopsy performed with professional restraint, though the corpse is clearly that of a loved one—with a title intended to be more constative than provocational, was written not by some disaffected young Turk or elegant French ludocrat, but by an emeritus professor*

Those who read this one will find, beyond the polemics, some deftly probing, keenly sensitive analyses of rich and beautiful writing, masterful examples of old criticism in the grand style. These do not prove Alter's case against theory. What they prove is that finely honed intellect and delicate sensitivity, coupled with a refined and disciplined talent for writing, can result in the highest quality of what Samuel Johnson took to be the goal of literary criticism: "good talk about good books." As such, Alter's book deserves to elbow out many of the other new books competing for a place on the current reading list for literary criticism. Under that rubric I would make a place for it on my own list of "secondary sources" I recommend to students—not because of its ideology or anti-ideology of nostalgia, but because it is a brilliant book in places. And because in failing to mount a convincing case against theory, it strikingly enacts the blindness/insight hypothesis put forth by a critic and theorist in whose company Alter would surely feel uncomfortable (for more than a few reasons), while de Man, for his part, would doubtless have admired portions of Alter's book while rejecting its premise. In any event, those who really do wish, as Alter puts it, to "make the case for a critical pluralism" will do well to reckon seriously with both the Alters and the de Mans—with, that is, the opposed ideologies of nostalgia and renovation, while acknowledging, at a deeper level, that (to paraphrase the ancients) there is no accounting for affect.

De affectis non disputandum

But accounting for affect in its relation to ideology is precisely what is necessary if one wishes to understand the ideological standoff in literary academia. Today's graduate students and young faculty ask, with a skeptical defensiveness rare in Alter's generation, "Who speaks here?," like sentinels in occupied territory, the land of Literature. Who speaks here: age, class, ethnicity, gender, job status (to name just a few, in no order of precedence other than alphabetical). In the last twenty years these considerations have come to the fore in the study of literature as primary issues, no longer the accidental, incidental, anecdotal inconsequentials that the universal human truths of great literature were formerly supposed to transcend.

How does affect relate to ideology? In the foregoing critique, I have portrayed Robert Alter as a defender of the humanist *belles lettres* tradition against contamination by an "ideology" he associates with contemporary theory. If the value system supporting Alter's defense of literature (his position is clearly a defensive one) were not steadily losing credibility and not perceived to be in danger, a book like his would have no reason for being. In assessing the case he makes, it has been relatively easy to identify the ploys Alter uses to focus attention on a particular current in the ideology of literary academia (abbreviated as "poststructuralist theory"), while pretending, or assuming, that his own position, grounded in a demonstrably nonuniversal aesthetics, politics, and faith, is somehow nonideological or anti-ideological. But to show that the pretension to ideological neutrality is itself ideological does not fully capture what is wrong with this book. What remains problematic and challenging about the stance Alter assumes is that despite the transparency of his rhetoric, he does insistently touch a sensitive nerve in all of us: the nerve pinched by doubt in the very possibility of humanistic faith—the possibility of sustaining belief in the value of the humanities—at a time when the traditional humanities are, by universal agreement of the political left, right, and center, "in crisis."

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of humanities at Princeton, the very image of the Ivy League—fatherly—English prof. If anyone is to get through the barriers of denial sectoring off literary studies new and old, it will be with books like Kernan's.

Certainly Robert Alter is an exemplary Man of Letters. But "Man"—does this even still need to be said?—is no longer the uncontested exemplar of humanity, no more than "letters," *belles lettres*, are today the universally acknowledged exemplars of literacy, the varieties of which tend now to be subsumed under the tag "cultural competence." To be sure, participation in elite culture did, until recently, require a level of lettered proficiency ("literacy" in the Hirschian sense: familiarity with an august and hypostasized repertoire of names, arguments, and allusions) which today's postindustrial elite simply finds superfluous. Notwithstanding the cries from beleaguered academics in defense of an obsolescent humanism, baseball literacy and pop-cultural fluency (what Siskel and Ebert said about the latest piece of celluloid throwaway art) have generally replaced book-talk for lubricating social intercourse among the educated classes. Even among academics themselves (shell-shocked, battle-weary), leisure talk focuses less and less on books, as our classrooms and conference halls become the galleries and museums for the exhibition if not preservation of the culture, or cult, of the book—both traditional *and* postmodern.

How, then, do we account for the hold high culture still apparently continues to exert on the postmodern psyche? Inertia? Oedipality (a parent-figure to bait?—but what if we really *did* kill the father)? [See note 14.] A superficially cogent (and not unfamiliar) *prima facie* case (the standard account taught in the schools) might begin with the observation that our Western tradition's founding fathers, a Socrates or a Homer, would, if they could travel through time (and if Homer could see), feel right at home amidst the stately grace and confident harmony of the buildings in the Capitol area of Washington, DC. "These truly are our descendants, our spiritual heirs," they would be quoted as saying, as they marveled at the piety with which their own cultural artifacts are preserved in the Library of Congress and the National Gallery. "Twenty-five centuries of intellectual and aesthetic continuity!" How proud they would feel. And how eager they would be to meet and converse with the prince or king who presided over this astonishing miracle attesting to the permanence of Civilization . . . (etc.). But what if we push the standard account further? What if, in the manner of Dante, we were to imagine that behind the *prima facie* outside graced by Corinthian columns our visitors could in fact be conducted (by a Robert Alter with a tourguide pass) into the presence of Mayor Barry? Leaving aside crack and rap, or Fritos and bluegrass chez Bush, what would they make of (*mutatis mutandis*) Lyric, Epic, and Tragedy in glass boxes of colored, animated light? Aesthetic continuity? Spiritual heirs? We know how Alter would respond. But how far would their fears be allayed by a Greek translation of *The Pleasures of Reading in an Ideological Age*? The passage on Homer and Sappho would surely be intriguing, but would it suffice?

My point is not to argue against the case for the Great Western Tradition. Rather, it is to observe that the appeal of Robert Alter's version of the continuity-of-civilization story will be directly proportionate to the individual reader's personal stake in the pre-postmodernist Man of Letters persona and its ideology. Some readers still see themselves as the high priests or humble clerics of Culture, steadfastly sacrificing on the altars of civilization in the midst (and in defiance) of barbarian ideology that "seeks to elevate abstract theories over original works of art." But the book will appeal less to other readers who believe other stories about the state and status of the humanities—literary studies, in particular—in contemporary America, for example, stories told in the institutional-history mode of Gerald Graff and his successors (most recently Kernan).

If the "end of ideology" is an illusion, it is because there can be no end of ideological debate and struggle, only different names for their content. And if the term "ideology," as suggested at the outset, has come to mean nothing more than the mistaken beliefs of those we disagree with, then the principal and most valuable contribution of this book to the debate and struggle lately centered on literary theory and cultural criticism will consist in its resounding demonstration of the impossibility of ideological neutrality, of objectivity, of mere factuality, of "intrinsic" worth in the domains of aesthetics and value. As

mentioned above, to uncover the untenability of these propositions is not particularly difficult or original; but there is a much more important corollary: that the persistence of myth—in this case the existence, not to mention the charm, of a book like Alter's—remind us how hard it is to integrate demystification in any permanent way into the psychic circuitry of creatures that cling to and glorify their irrational qualities (the capacity for awe, enchantment, love, ecstasy—all that "charms" pleasure) as our sole hope of salvation, or escape, or at least the pleasures of being in a technological age. All of which is to say that the value system underlying Alter's rhetorical anti-ideology is not yet totally undone.

Where does that leave us? It leaves us, I think, in the space of a presently irreducible gap between two poles or modes of being in the world: a contemporary episteme (or ideology) that is resolutely secular and scientistic, at odds with but unable totally to wean itself from the archaic humanism Alter defends. Archaic but inextirpable, inextinguishable? This is perhaps the only compelling question left in the discussion: whether our archaic humanism proves to be more tenacious than untenable seems likely to continue to sum up the dilemma, the drama, of a consciousness never totally demystifiable and periodically reminded of its precariously aporistic stance astride that epistemic gap, or shuttling between its polarized ideologies.

I will close with an analogy (one that Alter contests) likening literature to "language" in general. The argument I wish to draw from the analogy is modest but powerful. Culture and value (no less than the Lacanian unconscious) are structured like language. The modest but powerful lesson of historical linguistics in this regard is that natural languages are always in flux. I am more prepared than Alter is to acknowledge that the way I speak and the way I write include features that conform to a grammar and usage that are already outmoded, already in small but significant ways out of step with the discursive norms that define the grammar and usage of today's students (Alter's "young people now earning undergraduate degrees . . . at our most prestigious universities"). We weren't brought up the same way. But if I cannot (or do not) bring myself to adopt their style, neither do I tax it as degenerate. The (ideological) difference between a linguist and a grammarian recapitulates the dilemma of an Alter crying in the wilderness; the difference is that a literary critic can still get away with prescriptivism where a linguist today cannot. Should discourse on narrative, lyric, or drama be immune from the forces of change that transform the lexicon, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics of the larger cultural system of which "literature" is a subset? Alter's argument against the winds of change boils down to saying that today's students and teachers of literature are different from those of his generation. Of course they are. It is not so much "wrong" to deplore this as it is futile; change in "natural" languages is no more pernicious than change in the "artificial" language (distinguished by more self-conscious art and artifice) of and about literature.

I could also argue that a linguist is like an ichthyologist. I could point out that it is in the nature of some fish (like some literary critics) to swim upstream, against the current, and then conclude that the ichthyologist, unlike the theologist (or the crypto-theological literary critic), makes no value judgments about the behavior of salmon or trout, or of the currents that carry them forward. But I recognize that this line of argument will not close the gap between an ideology of modernity and a traditionalist ideology that holds fast to the value of earlier value, and refuses to surrender the pleasure of its reading practices to the mistaken beliefs of the ascendant currents with which it reserves the right to disagree.

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