FOR A FUTURE TO COME: DERRIDA'S DEMOCRACY AND THE RIGHT TO LITERATURE

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Abstract: Reflecting on the political nature of literature and its relation to modern democracy, the essay begins by problematizing any notion of commitment in literature. However, irresponsibility found in literature, far from undermining the political process, is what animates the political field seen as an endless contestability of our social practice. The way our notion of modern democracy informs our understanding of literary practice is explored through a selection of Derrida's writings where democracy emerges as the possibility of imagining alternatives to the world and "of thinking life otherwise," as Derrida (2004) says, which is to say that democracy cannot be thought without the possibility of literature. Democracy implies not political stability but a continuous call for unrest that prevents its atrophy, and literature, in its unconditional right to call everything to account, is its rearguard work as it were, keeping democracy forever open, for better or for worse.

No democracy without literature; no literature without democracy.
— Jacques Derrida, *Passions*

To write is to engage oneself; but to write is also to disengage oneself, to commit oneself irresponsibly.
— Maurice Blanchot, *The Work of Fire*

I

IN HIS RESPONSE to Sartre's famous call for commitment in literature, Theodore Adorno wrote that art was "not a matter of pointing up alternatives but rather of resisting, solely through artistic form, the course of the world, which continues to hold a pistol to the heads of human beings."[1] The political nature of a literary work, for Adorno, does not reside in any political program or partisanship it may assume, but precisely in its resistance to any program that would appropriate it for its own ends. This is what Maurice Blanchot calls the inherent "bad faith" of literature, the fact that it registers historical and political stresses but as soon as taken seriously literature can also proclaim its own fictionality. In other words, one never knows how to read a work of fiction, because it places its bet on both sides of the ironic coin. "Literature," as J. Hillis Miller suggests, "is an exploitation of the possibility that any utterance may be 'non-serious.'"[2] This ambiguity is what Blanchot, in his own response to Sartre's notion of *littérature engagée*, flashes out as the very watershed of literature and

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[1]Theodore Adorno, "Commitment," in *Notes to Literature*, vol. 2, trans. Shierry Webber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia UP, 1992), p. 80.
[2]J. Hillis Miller, "Derrida and Literature," in *Jacques Derrida and the Humanities: A Critical Reader*, ed. Tom Cohen (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001), p. 65.

the cause of its inherent deceitfulness. "Literature," he writes "is language turning into ambiguity," and it "asserts itself as continually differing possibility."[3] Literature, in other words, always signifies more than we are prepared to acknowledge and can always exceed our assignations. "It is easy to understand," says Blanchot (1995),

> why men who have committed themselves to a party, who have made a decision, distrust writers who share their views; because these writers have also committed themselves to literature, and in the final analysis literature, by its very activity, denies the substance of what it represents. This is its law and its truth. If it renounces this in order to attach itself permanently to a truth outside itself, it ceases to be literature and the writer who still claims he is a writer enters into another aspect of bad faith. (309-10)

Literary commitment, after all, does not seem to be easy to square with political activism and responsibility. This, however, may be due to the ontological instability of literary practice, which we will return to shortly, as well as its "bad faith" or the impossibility of literature to stay true to its own statement. Political assurances literature seems to give are thus always haunted by deeper complicities it shares with irony, laughter and the figurativity of language in general. The duplicity of literature that one cannot surmount in the end or conjure away without taking the magic with it rests on the fact that "the same text," as Jacques Derrida points out in his reading of Blanchot's short story "The Instant of My Death," can be read both as a testimony that is said to be serious and authentic, [but also] as an archive, or as a document, or as a symptom—or as a work of literary fiction, indeed the work of fiction that simulates all of the positions that we have just enumerated. For literature can say anything, accept anything, receive anything, suffer anything, and simulate everything…[4]

This ambiguity of literary writing, its recourse to fictionality and simulation, is what constitutes the specific resistance of literature by continually preserving the alterity of a literary text. If, on the contrary, a literary work is given a specific political fiat that would legislate for a determinate set of readings then literature itself with its inherent pervertibility of all positions is made to comply with the censor's close-up of political life. However, even the most committed of works will betray their allegiance to the very thing they attempt to excoriate. Even the "so-called artistic rendering of the naked physical pain," writes Adorno (1992), "of those who were beaten down with rifle butts [in the Warsaw Ghetto] contains, however distantly, the possibility that pleasure can be squeezed from it. The

[3] Maurice Blanchot, "Literature and the Right to Death," in *The Work of Fire*, trans. Charlotte Mandel (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995), pp. 341, 343. "In literature," writes Blanchot, "ambiguity is in some sense abandoned to its excesses by the opportunities it finds and exhausted by the extent of the abuses it can commit… It is not just that each moment of language can become ambiguous and say something different from what it is saying, but that the general meaning of language [in literature] is unclear…" (341).

[4] Jacques Derrida, "Demeure: Fiction and Testimony," in *The Instant of My Death/Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*, Maurice Blanchot/Jacques Derrida, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000), p. 29. The impossibility of knowing what one reads—a testimony, a harrowing autobiographical episode or a fictive narrative—is precisely one of the questions Blanchot's short story seems to solicit, but the fact that it is still literature bears out Derrida's point here.

morality that forbids art to forget [suffering] for a second [can] slide off into the abyss of its opposite" (88).[5] In other words, there is an excess in art and literature that no reading, not even the most rigorous one, can fully account for. Something in the very nature of art seems to adulterate and compromise with the truth that art nevertheless unequivocally tries to reach and represent.

In a sense, ambiguity of literature is implacable because literature is never at peace with the world. Literature is inextricably bound up with the world while at the same time reserving a place of detachment that enables it to imagine it otherwise. Literature always exceeds its apparent capacity to represent the truth of the world. Insofar as it offers alternatives to the world, it is also what makes the world contain more than it is. And it is this excess, as we shall see, that tethers literature to a promise contained in Derrida's notion of "democracy to come" whose specific relation to literature I intend to develop in the course of this essay.

For Derrida, right to literature seems to be synonymous with democracy and the freedom of expression, which not only warrants our right to say anything but also implies, more crucially, our right to disavow all responsibility for what is said. The fact that one cannot be held responsible for what one says, which the freedom of expression implies, is also what constitutes the ambiguity of literary writing that here becomes exemplary since it stubbornly preserves the trace of rhetoricity in even the most literal of statements. Furthermore, both literature and democracy, in Derrida, share the same affirmation of the other as that future that is unpredictable—and thus cannot be contained in and by the *existing* institutional and discursive practice—and in the name of which the institutions that represent literature and democracy are always open to question and to the exigency of critique. At the heart of Derrida's political thought that concerns itself with democracy, justice, ethics and the other, one also finds literature that opens the space necessary for the contestability of the social practice that democracy endlessly calls for. Indeed, the very idea of literature is somehow inimical to the slackening of the discursive field that animates political life.

But what, for Derrida, is democracy and what are its implications for literary discourse? Is there, indeed, such a thing as democracy and is there such a thing as literature? "[T]here is no—or hardly any, ever so little literature… in any event there is no essence of literature, no truth of literature, no literary-being or being-literary of literature," writes Derrida in *Dissemination*.[6] No ontology of literature, in other words, is possible due to its ability to transcend the world and imagine it otherwise, as we have noted earlier, and due to the fact that literature answers to a future beyond the institutional practice which represents and determines it. But is this the case with democracy as well? Are we to say that there is no democracy? In order to solicit and enable a closer look at the relation between literature and

[5]Although Adorno here has Schoenberg's composition A *Survivor from Warsaw* in mind and the fact that the victims are being violated by the very act of artistic rendering, by being "turned into works of art, tossed out to be gobbled up by the world that did them in" (88), the same also applies to the literary aesthetic that in the very act of fictionalisation could be seen to deprive the victims of their dignity or even to assign meaning to the unthinkable horror of genocide that cannot be explained insofar as it is what interrupts all reason and turns any explanation into a mockery of the victims and those left behind. However, as Adorno suggests, it is impossible to protect oneself against it.

[6] Jacques Derrida, "The Double Session," in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1981), p. 223.

modern democracy, a set of tentative questions regarding the significance of literature for Derrida as well as the way his notion of democracy informs our understanding of what we might mean by literary practice in general will form an inconspicuous but necessary backdrop of this essay. After all, the historical fibre of politics and literature would seem to set them up in an uneasy relationship to say the least, certainly not one that would perfunctorily assume the catchphrase that almost has the resonance of a maxim: "No democracy without literature; no literature without democracy."[7]

II

The possibility of politics in general must rest upon a commitment, in the community, to question and to improve the existing institutional practice.[8] Politics is essentially linked to the promise of a future that is better and worth more than the present state of affairs. In other words, it is linked to the possibility of imagining alternatives to the world, of relating things differently and "thinking life otherwise," as Derrida says in *Rogues*,[9] or, which amounts to the same thing, to the possibility of literature. This is why literature, all literature, is essentially political. Adorno (1992) writes: "The moment of intention [of a literary work] is mediated solely through the form of the work, which crystallises into a likeness of an Other that *ought to exist*. As pure artefacts, products, works of art, even literary ones, are *instructions for the praxis they refrain from: the production of life lived as it ought to be* (93, emphasis added). Insofar as politics is set in motion by a sense of disappointment to which we are not resigned but which demands and legitimates the necessity of critique where our current practice is related to the production of life other than it is, literature will retain its political significance. Both politics and literature, in fact, seem to be carried by a sworn allegiance to what is yet unwritten by the existing accounts of history. There is an essential pledge, both in politics and literature, to keep watch over absent meaning.

For Derrida, literature and democracy are essentially linked by their unconditional right in principle to say anything and by their responsibility to question all dogmatisms—in particular those that seem to have become prosaic or beyond dispute:

> Literature is a modern invention, inscribed in conventions and institutions which, to hold on to just this trait, secure in principle its *right to say everything*. Literature thus ties its destiny to a certain non-censure, to the space of democratic freedom, (freedom of the press, freedom of speech, etc.). No

[7]Jacques Derrida, "Passions: 'An Oblique Offering,'" in *On the Name*, ed. Thomas Dutoit, trans. David Wood et al. (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995), p. 28.

[8] "When one says politics," says Lyotard, "one always means that there is something to institute. There is no politics if there is not at the very center of society, at least at a center that is not a center but everywhere in the society, a questioning of existing institutions, a project to improve them, to make them more just. This means that all politics implies prescription of doing something else than what is." Jean-François Lyotard, and Jean-Loup Thébaud, *Just Gaming*, trans. Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1985), p. 23.

[9]Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault & Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2004), p. 33.

> democracy without literature; no literature without democracy. One can always want neither one nor the other, and there is no shortage of doing without them under all regimes; it is quite possible to consider neither of them to be unconditional goods and indispensable rights. But in no case can one dissociate one from the other. No analysis would be equal to it. And each time that a literary work is censured, democracy is in danger, as everyone agrees. The possibility of literature, the legitimation that a society gives it, the allaying of suspicion or terror with regard to it, all that goes together—politically—with the unlimited right to ask any question, to suspect all dogmatism, to analyze every presupposition, even those of the ethics or the politics of responsibility. (Derrida, 1995, 28)

As an institution, literature finds its place (*topos*) within the social conventions, laws and rights that legitimate its practice. However, having an authorisation to say everything, to overturn all our prerogatives and entitlements, to generate alternate histories and place in question the very laws that determine it, literature is also a counter-institution or, as Derrida says elsewhere, "an institution that tends to overflow the institution."[10] This means that literature cannot be contained by an institutional or canonical practice that, in fact, regulates and assigns its meaning. It cannot be kept in place (*atopos*), but rather exceeds any determination that may prescribe its function or its place. Literature never simply is then, never simply takes place within the limits of a defined topology. This is what Derrida (2000) suggests when he writes that there is no literary place strictly speaking, "no essence or substance of literature: literature is not. It does not exist. It does not remain at home, *abidingly* [à demeure] in the identity of a nature or even of a historical being identical with itself. It does not maintain itself abidingly [*à demeure*], at least if 'abode [*demeure*]' designates the essential stability of a place…" (28). This "strange" topology of literature, where it is both inside and outside the institution that legitimates it, is tied not only to the fact that, like democracy, literature seems to lack any ontological status but also, like democracy, it reserves the right to say everything and thus question its own institutional and juridical presuppositions.

However, its freedom to say everything, which "is a very powerful political weapon," as Derrida (1992) says, is also "one which might immediately let itself be neutralized as a fiction" (38). And it is necessary that it be so, if "the right to say everything" is to remain safeguarded from political intimidation or religious persecution. This is why, as Blanchot suggests, literature commits itself irresponsibly.[11] It retains the right to fictionalize its own account, to disclaim all responsibility when brought to the stand; without it, literature would become hostage to opportunism and vagaries of political power. "This duty of irresponsibility," writes Derrida (1992), that literature assumes as its own, "of refusing to reply for one's thought or writing to constituted powers, is perhaps the highest form of responsibility" (38). To speak for the autonomy of literature, that

[10]Jacques Derrida, "'This Strange Institution Called Literature:' An Interview with Jacques Derrida," in *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 36.

[11] "To write is to engage oneself; but to write is also to disengage oneself, to commit oneself irresponsibly. To write is to call into question one's existence, the world of values, and, to a certain extent, to condemn the good; but to write is always to try to write well, to seek out the good." Maurice Blanchot, "Kafka and Literature," in *The Work of Fire*, trans. Charlotte Mandel (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995), p. 26.

is to say its "irresponsibility"—with regard to the existing politico-juridical practice, for instance—is, in fact, to argue for the radically political nature of literary practice. This "duty of irresponsibility" is an excessive form of responsibility in the name of which literature can call into question any positive law and contest the conscience of an entire nation reflected in its body politic. Literature that does not, in one sense or another, cultivate the ethos of irresponsibility is literature surrounded and pressed for air by the claustrophobic embrace of political power and whenever this occurs, democracy itself is under siege. This irresponsible responsibility associated with literature is in Derrida (1992) directly related to "democracy to come:" to refuse

> to reply for one's thought or writing to constituted powers, is perhaps the highest form of responsibility. To whom, to what? That's the whole question of the future or the event promised by or to such an experience, what I was just calling the democracy to come. Not the democracy of tomorrow, not a future democracy which will be present tomorrow but one whose concept is linked to the to-come [*à-venir*, cf. *avenir*, future], to the experience of a promise engaged, that is always an endless promise. (38)

It is by asserting the exceptional status of literature, that one also assumes responsibility for the infinite promise that constitutes democracy. This democracy, to which literature, in the final instance, is accountable, is never present or realised, constituted in the present, as it were, but is rather always and yet to come precisely in virtue of the fact that democracy allows of self-contestability, which implies that it remains unfinished. The promise essential to democracy both defines the incomplete or *diastemic* relation it has to its own history—the fact that no historical determination can instantiate it, which is why it presents itself as a continuous promise—and the risk that ties it to the future which cannot be foreseen by instrumental reason but remains radically unpredictable. This radical openness of democracy that no teleology or reason can regulate is, in fact, what is democratic above all and what constitutes democracy's supreme possibility, even if openness always means "for better or for worse."

Literature's right to say anything is thus, on the one hand, related to the very pragmatic juridico-institutional context of censorship, of political persecution and religious intolerance where the right to speak out against the constituted powers must be maintained. Democracy, in all its polyvalence, is maintained for Derrida insofar as it preserves the right of literature to remain irresponsible. On the other hand, however, literature is also related to the messianic aspect of responsibility that transcends the empirical and historical determinations of democratic rights and keeps open the possibilities of their transformation. This responsibility, that Derrida (1995) calls "the highest form of responsibility" or "hyper-responsibility" which "goes together with democracy" (29), is what makes democracy obligate itself beyond its historical limit, what makes it contain *more than it is* or, which amounts to the same thing, what constitutes its incompleteness. This incompleteness, however, should not be seen as a lack or deficiency, but as an agent of unrelieved negotiation that constitutes the democratic process. The "to come" in Derrida's democracy points to the constant distress of all political practice whose present is held hostage by a radical demand of responsibility that calls for its interminable critique. The "to come" expresses a concern, in other

words, that no present can abate because one will never be responsible enough and there can be no political or other regime that can embody this responsibility.

However, literature, insofar as it offers alternatives to the world and to the positivistic epistemologies of fact, constitutes the rearguard work of this responsibility. This is why in literature's "authorization to say everything" that also implies its unconditional "right to absolute nonresponse," the right of not having to respond to the powers that be for everything it says, Derrida (1995) finds a "hyperbolic condition of democracy" which, as he continues, "seems to contradict a certain determined and historically limited concept of such a democracy, a concept which links it to the concept of a subject that is calculable, accountable, imputable and responsible, a subject having-to-respond…" (29).[12] As Jonathan Culler points out, this right of nonresponse, similar to Bartleby's "I would prefer not to" in Herman Melville's short story, is "an essential feature of democracy, for it is totalitarian to *require* that one respond, to call one to answer for everything."[13] Hyper-responsibility, as Culler further and crucially suggests, is associated more with a literary subject than with an imputable "calculable, responsible citizen-subject" (Ibid., 9) that we all are as part of a particular judicial and historically determined social structure. This means that the literary subject becomes exemplary rather than mimetic, the one to imitate rather than the one that imitates, which also means that it becomes performative. In other words, literature never reflects the world *as it is*, there is no "realism" in literature that, at the same time, does not suffer from the pathos of what it is not yet. Even the most realistic of literary works carries a virtuality which haunts and destabilises the present by offering visions of alternate futures, even if, and especially when, these remain unseen. In a sense, Bartleby's irresponsible "I would prefer not to" carries an ethico-political injunction that evokes an alternate future which calls into question the present that cannot accommodate it, in this case the dispassionate world of emerging materialism in 1850s America and the corporate reality of Wall Street.[14] Beyond the narrator's sentimentalising of Bartleby's fate, which denies his complicity in its tragic end, his concluding words, "Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!" ironically charge the story with all the pathos coming from a world in which the heuristic and instrumentalising drives of Western

[12]This right to "nonresponse" that Derrida identifies with literature is further developed here in his motif of secrecy that is far from an incidental aspect of literature and democracy. In literature it could be associated with the alterity of the text, the fact that the text ultimately keeps itself secret and in view of which there are different readings of the text that can never appropriate it fully however. In democracy, without the right to secrecy there would be a totalitarian insistence on absolute transparency instead. In *The Gift of Death*, for instance, Derrida writes that if the "essential possibility of secrecy and every link between responsibility and the keeping of a secret; everything that allows responsibility to be dedicated to secrecy" is institutionally unacknowledged or suppressed, then "[f]rom there it takes very little to envisage an inevitable passage from the *democratic* to the *totalitarian*…" Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago, Chicago UP: 1995), p. 34. The right to "absolute nonresponse," to keeping secret, is thus integral to any consideration of literature in its relation to democracy.

[13]Jonathan Culler, "The Most Interesting Thing in the World," in *Diacritics*, 38, Spring-Sum. 2008, p. 8.

[14]This ethical injunction of "I would prefer not to" that calls the present to account was at the heart of the protest organised by Occupy Wall Street movement in New York on November 10, 2011 when a marathon reading of "Bartleby, the Scrivener" took place.

rationality will have reduced human beings to a mere technical product used in the service of monopoly capitalism.[15] Literature commits itself thus to the endless promise of a better world to come. It obligates itself, but does so in its licence and its irresponsibility, in its very capacity to suspend literalism and referentiality.

Literature and democracy seem thus destined by the same promise to chart the course of a life imagined *otherwise* than the present. This, however, implies both licence and irresponsibility. Literary licence to say everything and anything without implications, the poetic licence to go against the grain and fibre of proven historical structures is what safeguards the historical adventure of democracy, Derrida would say, its openness that is for better or for worse. Licence, writes Derrida (2004), has always been associated with democracy or rather with "democratization:" "For democracy, the passage to democracy, *democratization*, will have always been associated with licence, with taking too many liberties [*trop-de-liberté*], with the dissoluteness of the libertine, with liberalism, indeed perversion and delinquency, with malfeasance, with failing to live according to the law, with the notion that 'everything is allowed,' that 'anything goes'" (20-21). The "to come" of democracy, constituted in real terms as the permanent contestability of the social, requires disobedience, which literature, "linked to an authorisation to say everything," indeed, to allow everything, where anything truly goes, seems to embody. Literature is thus not dependent on a "democracy in place," that would legitimate and guarantee its rights, but "seems inseparable," Derrida (1992) argues, "from what *calls forth* a democracy, in the most open (and doubtless itself to come) sense of democracy" (37, emphasis added). Literature is thus structurally linked to the very opening of the idea of democracy as a continuous promise.

III

Ontological instability that we said was at the heart of literature is also what troubles the concept of democracy in general. The fact that no ontology could essentialise literature, as Derrida claims in *Demeure*, is also valid for democracy. There is "a freedom of play," he writes, "an opening of indetermination and indecidability *in the very concept* of democracy, in the interpretation of the democratic" (Derrida, 2004, 25). Insofar as it is interminably contested and unfinished, the concept of democracy remains undetermined and cannot be represented by any of its historical manifestations. It is a "quasi regime," says Derrida, that is "open to its own historical transformation… and its interminable self-criticisability" (Ibid.). Because of its endless imperfection, that is, its right to criticize and correct itself, to ask any question about itself, democracy is never complete but remains to come. This is why it is not even a "regime" but a "quasi-regime" whose definition and practice remain in question.

Put in the service of global capital that today claims its transnational validity, liberal democracy has become an alibi used as a warrant for measures taken against the voices that put its authority in question. This may be part of the historical adventure of democracy to come but it is not democracy in Derrida's terms. Furthermore, to protect or immunize democracy against the voices of

[15]Herman Melville, "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street," in *Great Short Works of Herman Melville*, ed. Warner Berthoff (New York: Perennial, 2004), p. 74.

dissidence that may threaten it is to limit it and suspend its grace, its very capacity to tolerate and accommodate more than it can, its hospitality upon which it depends. For is not democracy, Derrida (2004) asks, that which, in a sense, should ascertain my right to act and speak against it? "Is the right to speak without taking sides *for* democracy, that is, without committing oneself to it, more or less democratic?" (41). Democracy, as Derrida suggests, allows of self-contestation. This is what constitutes both its weakness as a system of government but is also what constitutes the very excellence and merit of democracy, the fact that it is never finished, which means that it cannot be unilaterally monopolised by the West and enforced upon others.

This fundamental indeterminacy of democracy as a concept, is also what opens its history to endless transformations and to hospitality that also seems to threaten it insofar as its unconditional welcome is extended even to those who question and speak against it. But this threat goes together with "a certain hyperbolic essence, an essence more autoimmune than ever, of *democracy itself*, if 'itself' there ever is, if there ever is a democracy… worthy of this name" (Derrida, 2004, 41). What Derrida seems to suggest is that democracy in virtue of its openness, which constitutes it above all, imperils itself. The autoimmune response of democracy whenever it is in peril is to limit itself or the very freedoms upon which it depends.[16] As Derrida suggests, one can always suspend the democratic or electoral process in order to immunise democracy against its threats. This may indeed be necessary in the context of increasing political paranoia that surrounds us, but the "hyperbolic essence" of democracy requires an unconditional openness to "anyone," to "no matter who" (Ibid., 86), that is at the same time never present but constitutes the deferred and always differing structure of its "to come." This does not mean that it is not historical however; on the contrary, it is here that one may find the very exigency of all its historical transformations.

If this "to come" structure of democracy becomes immanent to a body politic, that is, when a historically determined polity believes itself to embody democracy fully, when it becomes its positive expression, so to speak, which has not only become part of the Western rhetoric, but even the articulation of its identity, it inevitably sanctions oppression of others in the very name of democracy and gives free rein to imperialism and global hegemony currently underway. But democracy arises, on the contrary, in the encounter with the other that puts its legitimacy and the authorities that uphold it in question, calling for their justification. This is a chance for democracy, what makes it possible in general:

> [Democracy is] the only system that welcomes in itself, in its very concept, this expression of autoimmunity that is called the right to self-critique and perfectibility… [It is] the only constitutional paradigm, in which, in principle, one has or assumes for oneself the right to criticize everything publicly, including the idea of democracy, its concept, its history, and its name.

[16]This overactive immune response, however, is not limited to democracy alone but to all concepts that in order to remain pure against corruption end up destroying themselves. One can speak of the autoimmune reaction of nationalism or separatism, for instance, of National Socialism, that ends up destroying its own cells in its ever increasing sanitising compulsion towards purity.

> Including the idea of the constitutional paradigm and the absolute authority of law. It is thus the only paradigm that is universalizable, whence its chance and its fragility. (Derrida, 2004, 87)

The fact that democracy, like literature, is "the *name without the thing*" (Derrida, 2000, 20), that it remains incomplete due to its autoimmunity, is also what makes possible its transformation and its future, and, above all, what keeps open the possibility of politics that we have associated with a commitment to move beyond the present and imagine it otherwise. This is also where literary practice—indeed fiction—finds the gravity of its being that is also to come and, in the end, why literature, standing "on the edge of everything, almost beyond everything, including itself" is "the most interesting thing in the world, maybe more interesting than the world" (Derrida, 1992, 47). Literature, in other words, suspends the world but becomes the possibility of other worlds, or, as Culler (2008), following this much quoted passage from Derrida, puts it in his essay: "Literature can be 'the most interesting thing in the world… more interesting than the world' because it exceeds the actual but includes its possibilities, opening their condition of possibility" (9). Literature could then be understood as part of a process of a certain disaffirmation of the world rather than its positive expression. It is part of a recasting of the sense of the world, of "thinking life otherwise." And democracy itself, says Derrida (2004), "if there is a to-come for it… is only on the condition of thinking life otherwise, life and the force of life" (33).

Both literature and democracy are inimical to the very question of essence, of identity and metaphysics that the question of "what is" seems to imply. In fact, they both resist and challenge our ability to stabilise them other than in contingent and provisional terms, that is to say, in terms of *doxa* as the *only* terms left to us. But this is not an occasion for disenchantment. That there *is* no literature or democracy does not mean that we have witnessed their demise but rather the opposite; this is their radical affirmation as transformative, as what commits them beyond the present. What is lost, however, but not to be lamented, are the normative foundations that have for too long tied both democracy and literature to a certain aggressive expansionism and political dominance of the Western axiological systems. But both democracy and literature, although eminently Western institutions, remain what they are only insofar as they put this very ownership in question. In the end, literature and democracy do not belong to anyone while everyone and everything belongs to literature and democracy.

Democracy then is both a formal, historical structure of political organization and distribution of forces and needs, but it is also related to "the force of life" that exceeds its formal expression and, in this excess, enables its transformation. Like literature, it is bound up with the same excessive or promissory responsibility that may not be readily justifiable by established critical heritage precisely insofar as this heritage itself may be in question. Both democracy and literature preserve the promise of alterity, of something other than what is and it is this promise that animates politics, preventing it from the atrophy of uncritical provincialism and from the reduction to ontopolitics.

The irresponsibility and ambiguity of fiction that, for Blanchot, as we mentioned in the beginning, is its "bad faith," and the right to non-accountability that saying everything and anything implies are part of the political ad-venture of democracy, just as democracy with its promise of alterity is part of literature and

its continuous recasting of the world. The "what if" that, in a sense, haunts even the most entrenched realisms in literature, the fact that literature is always in excess of the world, that it plays in the domain of virtualities and alternate futures that overflow and swell the world, which does not mean that there is no world in literature but rather that there is *too much* of it, are hyperbolic interventions into the order of things that infinite responsibility demands. If literature and democracy in Derrida are to say something, surely it must be that we are *better* than we are, where "better" carries all the weight of humanity and its history, dragging it behind, as it were, towards a future to come.

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