

The Outside of the Text: On the Limits of Apolitical Reading



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SYNOPSIS

This article presents an argument against attempts to exclude the political perspective from the reading and reception of literature. Departing from the failed affirmation of radical autonomy of the Symbolic undertaken by poststructuralist philosophy (mainly Jean Baudrillard and Jacques Derrida) it argues for inclusion of the Real in the process of reading since it is always operational in the process of writing. Without going back to the metaphysics of presence, it puts forward an understanding of the Real that departs from the concept of disclosure (*ἀλήθεια*), but aims at a more negative and dialectical understanding of the Real as the force that disrupts and invades discourse in unwanted yet unavoidable ways. Edward Said's reading of literary classics, which traces the link between culture and imperialism, is provided as an example of such a political reading of literature.

KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA / KEYWORDS

Poststrukturalismus; postmodernismus; dekonstrukce; reálno; strukturální psychoanalýza; politický závazek; postkolonialismus; imperialismus / poststructuralism; postmodernism; deconstruction; the Real; structural psychoanalysis; political commitment; postcolonialism; imperialism.

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*how to speak of it
this thing that doesn't rhyme
or pulse in iambs or move in predictable ways
like lines
or sentences*

*how to find the syntax
of this thing
that rides the tides
and moves with the tides and under the tides
and through the tides
and has an underbelly so deep and wide*



*even our most powerful lights
cannot illuminate its full body*

*this is our soul shadow,
that darkness we cannot own
the form we cannot name*

Sheryl St. Germain, *Midnight Oil*

If any place on Earth could epitomize the spectacular madness of contemporary capitalism, it would surely be New York's Times Square: the endless stream of people pouring through day and night, the thin line of stock quotes cutting steadily across ubiquitous flashing screens, the abattis of provisional scaffoldings permanently fastened to the hectic array of buildings, the torrents of images that not so much represent as create their own reality, the corporate logotypes blaring from every side, the homeless mingling with yuppies, tourists, policemen, preachers and street artists — and all that submerged in a never-ending rumble of car traffic. It was right there, on Times Square sometime in the mid 1990s, that the French sociologist and philosopher Jean Baudrillard experienced a kind of epiphany that gave birth to a short text *Dette mondiale et univers parallèle*, published in the French daily *Libération* in early 1996:

An electronic billboard in Times Square displays the American public debt, an astronomical figure of some thousands of billions of dollars which increases at a rate of \$20,000 a second. Another electronic billboard at the Beaubourg Center in Paris displays the thousands of seconds until the year 2000. The latter figure is that of time, which gradually diminishes. The former figure is that of money, which increases at a sky-rocketing speed. The latter is a countdown to second zero. The former, on the contrary, extends to infinity. Yet, at least in the imaginary, both of them evoke a catastrophe: the vanishing of time at Beaubourg; the passing of the debt into an exponential mode and the possibility of a financial crash in Times Square (Baudrillard 1996).

In an ironic twist characteristic of Baudrillard's writings, the sense of dread and peril quickly gives way to a depressed yet cosy feeling of relief, and to an overwhelming confidence in the perennial nature of financial capitalism:

In fact, the debt will never be paid. No debt will ever be paid. The final counts will never take place. If time is counted, the missing money is beyond counting. The United States is already virtually unable to pay, but this will have no consequence whatsoever. There will be no judgment day for this virtual bankruptcy. It is simple enough to enter an exponential or virtual mode to become free of any responsibility, since there is no reference anymore, no referential world to serve as a measuring norm (ibid.).

Baudrillard, a gifted writer and great prose stylist, was not a very original philosopher. His investigations into consumer society and his concept of 'precession of simulacra' that catapulted him into intellectual stardom were merely a reformulation of

the much more astute writings of Guy Debord. Baudrillard may have authored only one truly original book, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. He had, however, a rare talent for articulating in an attractive and relatively simple manner the intellectual *Zeitgeist* of his time. Along these lines the paragraph quoted above offers a neat summary of the central tenet of poststructuralism, an intellectual formation that expressed what may be labelled as the philosophical logic of postmodernism with its founding belief in the radical autonomy of the symbolic, and in the possibility of endless deferral. We can find the very same proposition in much more elaborate and nuanced form in one of the essays fundamental to poststructuralism: Jacques Derrida's *Freud and the Scene of Writing*, originally published in the volume *L'Écriture et la différence* in 1967 (cf. Derrida 2001). Derrida, going back to Freud's conceptualization of how the human nervous system works and to his theory of trauma as a deferred encounter with what is too disturbing to be experienced in any immediate and direct form, sketches a model of our psychic functioning. Our nervous apparatus, trying to protect us from the most painful stimuli, creates detours, through which the experience is routed — a phenomenon that Derrida refers to with the French term *frayer* ('to forge a path'), but which has been translated as 'breaching' in English editions of his works. We may be fooling ourselves that the stream of our conscious experience offers a kind of representation of 'the real world out there', while instead it rather serves as a screen in the double meaning of the word: a surface where a constructed image is projected (as in 'a movie screen') as well as a shield protecting the subject from what may be too disturbing for it (as in 'a sunscreen'). Hence the deferral that is central to Derrida's notion of *différance*, a philosophical concept deeply distorted in the US reception of deconstruction, where — along the lines of identity politics — it has become more or less equivalent to the word 'difference' as underlying concept of diversity. Derrida takes Freud one step further, claiming that since there is no way to directly encounter reality in any immediate and 'true' form — the central dream of what Derrida labels 'the metaphysics of presence' — there is nothing but deferral: no path may be forged to the 'outside of the text (*dehors du texte*)' (Derrida 1974, p. 158). That is the conceptual root of what Baudrillard describes as 'indefinitely deferred debt' (emphasis added — J. S.).

There is one thing in Derrida's essay that will strike any reader acquainted with Freudism: he seems to be describing only what may be called the normal or successful functioning of our psychic apparatus, when defence mechanisms efficiently protect us from what is too upsetting to be experienced. As Derrida puts it, 'pain, the threatening origin of the psyche, must be deferred, like death, for it can "ruin" psychical "organization"' (Derrida 2001, p. 254). However true that may be, it does not paint the full picture. There are moments of traumatic breakdown, when the force of the outside is too imposing for any detouring path to be effectively breached around the painful content, moments we experience as nightmares, psychosis or parapraxis: slips of the tongue, mislaying of objects, unintended actions surprising even for the subject itself. These are the moments when the allegedly non-existent — or, at least, never present — outside invades the inside of our psychic writing with an unstoppable force. We may not be able to integrate that experience in any meaningful cognitive pattern, but nor may we ignore the disruption it provokes. There seems to be no way to fit that basic fact of both our individual and collective life into the framework of Derrida's *différance*.





What looks like a complicated and abstract philosophical argument can be very well related to our everyday praxis in the world of capitalist realism (see Fisher 2009). After the financial crash of 2008 it is impossible to repeat in good faith Baudrillard's central thesis that 'no debt will ever be paid'. Rather the exact opposite seems to be true: sooner or later *all debts will have to be repaid*. There is no endless deferral, no way to avoid the outside, no trick to forge a path that could allow us to circumvent it. As the British PM Boris Johnson has recently learnt falling ill with COVID-19 after ignoring all scientific advice on how to behave during the epidemic, 'every lie we tell incurs a debt to the truth' — to quote the dramatized testimony of Valery Legasov,¹ Soviet nuclear physicist before the committee investigating the Chernobyl disaster of 1986. The analogy can be taken further: what the financial crash of 2008 did to contemporary capitalism is what Chernobyl did to the Soviet state. It exposed the founding lie of the system, revealing the basic flaw in the way we try to collectively cope with inconvenient facts: 'when the truth offends, we lie and lie and lie until we can no longer remember it is even there, but it is still there,' as Legasov also stated in the dramatization of his original testimony. Of course, the concrete consequences of these traumatic encounters with the real (understood as truth breaking through lies) have not been exactly the same in both cases. Financial markets have not completely disintegrated as the Soviet Union did within years after the original disaster. What is similar, however, is the fundamental difference that the traumatic occurrences introduced. No matter how much effort we put into a defence of *status quo ante*, the system has entered the phase of erratic transformation that in the contemporary situation is manifested by the invasion of the public life by various forces and positions that had been repressed before: populism and fascism on the one hand, but also progressive, emancipatory radicalism on the other. Neoliberal globalization based on free trade is damaged beyond repair (just think of Trump withdrawing the US, as it has been demonstrated beyond any doubts that the system does not work in the interests of all social groups as the old ideological hegemony imputed).

Contemporary philosophy has got a handy term to express the same problem in a more elaborate way: the structural-psychoanalytic concept of 'the Real'. It is at the same time utterly complicated and extremely easy to grasp, depending on how deeply we want to investigate its inner workings.² The Real is not a substance, but a position: something is Real for a given Symbolic-Imaginary construction, meaning it contains what is crucial and fundamental for that structure, though at the same time impossible to articulate within the Symbolic-Imaginary realm. So, the Real is at the same time impossible in the framework of the given 'system' and necessary for its very construction. It is the founding 'truth' of any system based on 'lies' (or 'illusions' to put it in a less evaluating way).

The Real is not the same thing as reality. The latter is a combination of the Imaginary and the Symbolic that is constructed primarily with the purpose of obfuscating

1 As presented in the Craig Mazin's mini-series *Chernobyl* aired by HBO in 2019.

2 For the most detailed yet also complicated account see *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XXII: R.S.I. 1974-75*, unpublished manuscript <<http://www.lacanireland.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/RSI-Complete-With-Diagrams.pdf>> [16.06.2020]. For a simpler yet more accessible version see Žižek 1989.



the Real — it is a story and a set of images that the subject constructs to shield itself from some of the most problematic yet at the same time constituent elements of its own functioning and of the situation it is in. In Derrida's terms from his essay *Freud and the Scene of Writing*, reality is the result and the very process of breaching — an internal landscape forged by the effort to avoid the Real. So, in this sense, the point of the argument I'm raising here is not to disprove Derrida's claims about what is happening. Of course, breaching and deferral do take place. It's just that not everything is — or can ever be — deferred; there always remains something that resists breaching, something we cannot totally subsume to the narration we call 'reality' and thus successfully defer, something that is never represented, yet remains always present. That unbreachable remainder is the Real.

The basic error committed by Derrida stems from the fact that he equates a possible outside of the text with a register of meaning and/or sense. It is stated *expressis verbis* in the paragraph that introduces the famous thesis on the non-existence of the outside:

Yet if reading must not be content with doubling the text, it cannot legitimately transgress the text toward something other than it, toward a referent (a reality that is metaphysical, historical, psycho-biographical, etc.) or toward a signified outside the text whose content could take place, could have taken place outside of language, that is to say, in the sense that we give here to that word, outside of writing in general. That is why the methodological considerations [...] are closely dependent on general propositions that we have elaborated above; as regards the absence of the referent or the transcendental signified [emphasis added — J. S.] (Derrida 1974, p. 158).

The Real it neither a referent nor a transcendental signified but what is *left excluded after the symbolization is over* (when the text is written). That is why it is not positively contained within the registers of the Symbolic-Imaginary (as the *signifié* of any *signifiant*, nor as the referent of a sign or the actual object featured in an image), but rather *negatively disrupts both of them*.³ In this way we can differentiate the unconscious, as Derrida understands it, from the Real. While 'the unconscious text is already a weave of pure traces, differences in which meaning and force are united' (Derrida 2001, p. 265), the Real is rather the register beyond/before/outside/devoid of meaning. However paradoxical it may seem, given major cleavages between psycho-analysis and schizo-analysis, the best way of grasping the Real — if at all — is through what Félix Guattari called 'non-signifying semiotics' (Guattari 1984, pp. 76–77), a practice that goes beyond the relation of *signifié* to any *signifiant*, as well as the sign to its designate, focusing on disruption rather than representation.

It should be pointed out that when the term 'truth' is evoked in this conceptual structure, it is not truth in the classical, Aristotelian sense of a correspondence

3 The relationship between the Symbolic and Imaginary is another issue that needs more consideration than can fit into such a short article. One may argue that the problematic *cul de sac* of Derrida's deconstruction in explaining the origin of the symbolic order stems from the fact that Derrida stays too much in bipolar dichotomy of the symbolic and the real while ignoring the role of the third register: the imaginary; see Lewis 2008.



between statements and facts. It is rather a different, more 'ontological' — or even ontic — concept of truth. In this sense it approaches Martin Heidegger's investigations into ἀλήθεια (*alētheia*), the term translated into English as 'un-concealedness' or 'disclosure' (cf. Kompridis 2006). Both formulations are pertinent as they convey the moment of negating an attempt to put something out of the picture (concealing, closing), so they expose the act of 'lying' that serves the purpose of hiding what is really there. However, there should be no going back to what Derrida describes as the 'metaphysics of presence' (see Derrida 1982). The Real is not any kind of 'hidden cache' that would contain some kind of surplus — an unknown and unrealized semiotic wealth, the ultimate Eldorado of signification. It is a much more dialectical situation: the veil of phantasy conceals an emptiness and impossibility (a lack), yet that emptiness is the very condition of possibility for any semiotic relation to exist (the signifier is always made of stuff that is un-signifying itself hence its submergence in the Real).

We also need to distinguish the approach presented here from any kind of moral critique. Concealedness and closure is not the outcome of a deliberate dishonesty. An individual may truly and deeply believe in what she is saying and thinking, just as Baudrillard did. As such the Real is neither moral nor ethical, but a structural category.⁴ The Real is like a light (although an impossibly dark light), that shines through the thick and abstruse curtain, at once enlightening and blinding us. We may not be able to see what it is exactly, because it is too much for our eyes (that is why we need to close them), however it is impossible to deny that this 'Thing' — the Real — is there; we cannot forge a path in the woods that would circumvent it.

The notion of the Real is the one we can use as a kind of guiding principle for the project of a political reading of literature. What it demonstrates is more negative than positive: every attempt at a completely apolitical reading of literary texts would ultimately fail — *the political is the Real of literature*. It does not mean that there is nothing but politics when it comes to literature, but rather that the political functions as the ever-present outside for all literary practice. Of course, 'the political' does not mean government and/or administration, but rather the practice of regulating our being-in-common as human and non-human subjects. As such it includes the social and the economic as its possible instances or aspects (respectively, the ones regulating interactions between subjects and material conditions of their lives). Understood in this way, any effort to eradicate the political from literature should be interpreted as an act of closure or concealment, and as such is ideological in its attempt to build a screen that would shield the literary text from its social, political and economic reality. The political is by no means the one and only ultimate Real of literature. There should be no reductionism here: literature is also much more than politics, and my aim here is not to reduce it to any political content. My aim is precisely the opposite: to prevent a general purging of the political from the literary, and thus to demonstrate that while the political reading of literature is not the only possible one, the apolitical reading will inevitably miss the fundamental dimensions of literature and writing.

Every act of constructing a literary fiction by means of writing incurs a debt to the Real that would eventually come back to haunt that fiction. In order to make these di-

4 Even if it has got its place in ethics, see Zupančič 2000.



vagations more concrete I'd refer at the end to one outstanding example of the political reading of literature: Edward Said's book *Culture and Imperialism*. It is a quite well known work, so I shall just sketch an outline that will help to grasp the method I have in mind here. Said takes masterpieces of European art, in most part literary texts (but also works from other artistic fields, like Verdi's *Aida*, for instance) and demonstrates their entanglement in the political context of their time. The most illustrative example is that of Jane Austen (Said 1994, pp. 80–97). Her novels offer an expansive and realistic depiction of life in the early 19th century English upper classes. A lot of attention is given to the social circumstances that shape their existence, especially when it comes to the complicated position of women in the society of that period. What remains outside the picture, in such novels as *Pride and Prejudice* or *Mansfield Park*, are the social, political and economic conditions of possibility of the world depicted, namely the British colonial empire. Yet it is not entirely absent, and *Mansfield Park* can even serve as proof of Austen's enthusiastic position towards the British overseas expansion. Reading her novels, however, one would never suspect that slaves cultivating tobacco and sugar on the other side of the planet provided the condition of possibility for the female members of 19th century English aristocracy to ponder their oppression and emancipation. It is by no means an attempt to discredit Austen as a writer or a person, much less to negate the importance of women's emancipation. Neither does this kind of reading aim to reduce Austen's work to a simple expression of the colonial and imperial mindset. Rather, it is an effort to open and enrich our understanding of her texts by showing that there is yet another dimension that one can explore in her work: that of the global political and economic interdependencies of its time.

Such a political reading of literature offers yet another very important advantage. In his grammatological exploration of writing, Jacques Derrida goes beyond the domain of the literary text as such:

And thus we say 'writing' for all that gives rise to an inscription in general, whether it is literal or not and even if what it distributes in space is alien to the order of the voice: cinematography, choreography, of course, but also pictorial, musical, sculptural 'writing'. One might also speak of athletic writing, and with even greater certainty of military or political writing in view of the techniques that govern those domains today (Derrida 1974, p. 9).

Even if we do not accept his view on the alleged lack of the outside of the text, we may very well embrace such a conceptualization of what writing is, one that approaches the theories of discourse and practice in 20th century humanities and social theory. From this perspective, the political reading of literature is part of a larger enterprise of critique of ideology — an endeavour of urgent necessity in the world of decaying capitalist realism.



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