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La Svolta Testaule by Maurizio Ferraris

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approach the subject free of any pre-conceived notions, willing to break the customary boundaries in an attempt to envisage productive ideas.

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 [trans. by Rosa Lauro]

***La Svolta Testuale,
 Il Decostruzionismo in Derrida,
 Lyotard, Gli "Yale Critics"***
 By Maurizio Ferraris
 Pavia: Cooperativa Libreria
 Universitaria, 1984

As Ferraris notes at the end of the book, some of the material of *La Svolta Testuale* (*The Textual Turn*) has appeared before in journals. It is now put together to provide the Italian reader (but not only) with an overview of deconstruction, of its practitioners (Derrida, Lyotard) and of the literary schools that were inspired by it. For the general reader in particular, the book is useful for its informative value and detailed exposition of theoretical texts, as well as for the valuable bibliographical references in the notes that direct the reader to material available in Italian translation. Here lies the strength of Ferraris's book.

If there are weaknesses they lie in the breadth of the material covered that allows only for brief, summary remarks on aspects of the issue of deconstruction that deserve better documentation. While the best chapter of the book is without a doubt the one on Lyotard, an author Ferraris knows well, the weakest is the one on American textualism; Ferraris in fact devotes

little space to it and does not really explore the literary implications of deconstruction for literature and can only mention them in passing. One gets the feeling that Ferraris is not really at home here or else that he is not very much interested in the issues other than to summarize them for his readers.

This imbalance in the treatment of deconstruction gives the false impression that the question of the literary is marginal to the philosophical. This question overlooks the fact, which Ferraris is the first to point out, that the success of deconstruction and of Derrida in America was mainly due to the enthusiastic response of Literature Departments who were the first to appropriate the "new" philosophy. This was never the case with Lyotard, for example, and this is partly the reason why Lyotard is still, as Ferraris notes, a marginal figure.

In *La Svolta Testuale*, instead, Lyotard gets an exhaustive text-by-text analysis, most of which is marginal to the issue of deconstruction, while the question of the literary is barely covered. The issue is further confused by discussing together "schools" of different tendencies, like deconstructionism and paracriticism, which have little to do with deconstruction.

A second and most important issue is the methodology Ferraris adopts. He accepts Richard Rorty's distinction of deconstruction and textualism as well as the further differentiation in "strong textualism" and "weak textualism" which is yet another way of distinguishing arbitrarily between texts that are and are not literary. Ferraris does not accept Rorty's generalizations uncritically. His critique, however, aims at bringing Rorty's typology closer to Derrida's notion of deconstruction and to widen the definition of textualism to encompass more "schools" of criticism. Ror-

ty's typology is too tempting to dismiss. It allows Ferraris to lump together under one label the most diverse critics and to erase not only the differences that separate them but also to downplay the relation between Derrida's deconstruction and literary deconstruction.

A case in point is Ferraris's account of de Man's reading which is to illustrate the similarities and the differences in their views of deconstruction. Ferraris gives a fair but partial account of de Man's reading but reaches the surprising conclusion that "this version of deconstruction [de Man's] is not, ultimately, too distant, at least in its conclusions, from Derridian deconstruction" (p.115). For those who have read the essay in question, "The Rhetoric of Blindness: Jacques Derrida's Reading of Rousseau," in *Blindness and Insight*, and know the work of Paul de Man, this conclusion could not be further from the truth. Ferraris does not tell his readers that de Man's essay is not simply a reading of Derrida's reading of Rousseau but *also* a critique of Derrida's enterprise. Paul de Man's conclusion is not just that Derrida's reading does not read Rousseau and that at best it is only a critique of the commonplaces of Rousseau criticism, but also that Derrida's method is only apparently deconstructive. Derrida's deconstruction, says de Man, is really a "construction":

Whereas Rousseau tells the story of an inexorable regression, Derrida rectifies a recurrent error of judgment. His text, as he puts it so well, is the unmasking of a construct. However negative it may sound, *deconstruction implies the possibility of rebuilding.* (italics mine, BI 140)

Derrida's deconstructive reading is not only open to question but turns out to be another reading, a new construction.

The issue, however, is neither between Derrida and de Man nor

between two types of deconstruction. It is between two modes of reading, one that excludes the other that accounts for the literary. Derrida's critique of philosophical discourse denounces an exclusion, that of writing by speech, but in so doing it excludes the literary. It reads the text of Rousseau, for example, as the literal statement of the dichotomy speech/writing forgetting the literary, or rhetorical, nature of the text that puts into question such a reading. Paul de Man's reading, instead, emphasizes the literary and reads the deconstruction that the text itself performs.

The distinction between deconstruction and textualism, introduced by Ferraris, is another way in which the distinction and the separation of the philosophical and the literary, the literal and the figurative, is reintroduced. Whether he is aware of it or not, in using Rorty's distinction (or Lentricchia's critique of de Man's conception of literature), Ferraris forever displaces the possibility of coming to terms with Derrida's deconstruction or with the issue of deconstruction, *tout court*.

Literature, the literary, rhetoric, textualism, or however one may choose to name it, can never be avoided or quite displaced by any strategy. In Ferraris's *La Svolta Testuale* it forces itself in a discussion of deconstruction that would exclude it and for whose presence the author has to apologize:

For the time being we must point out that textualism does not equal deconstructionism: between the former and the latter there's a relationship of genus to species (textualism includes deconstructionism). However, if we decided to include a discussion on American Textualism within a study on deconstruction, this does not depend solely upon this *relatively* vague relation of genus to species . . . but it was nevertheless precisely Derrida's notion of deconstruction to set off a different concep-

tion of the text, which in turn resolved itself in trends and tendencies which at times contradict one another. (p. 28)

This "relativamente vago rapporto di genere a specie" between (Derrida's) deconstruction and (de Man's) "textualism" is anything but vague. The synecdochal relation that would characterize it is in actuality the locus of a disruption, the deconstruction of the synecdoche, the trope of philosophy, by the trope of literature. It is, however, destined to remain "relativamente vago" for the sake of a philosophical discourse or for the type of analysis exemplified by *La Svolta Testuale*.

It is inevitable, in fact, that books like Ferraris's, whether conscious of it or not, perpetuate the same aberrant distinctions just as it is inevitable that they be disrupted by a reading that takes into account the literary, the only genuine *svolta testuale*.

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***The Favorite Malice:
Ontology and Reference in
Contemporary Italian Poetry***
Ed. and trans. by
Thomas J. Harrison
New York-Norristown-Milan:
Out of London Press, 1983

What does it mean to write and to read poetry in a post-Nietzschean and post-Heideggerian era? An era, that is, whose notion of language is devoid of historical or ontological foundations? *The Favorite Malice*, a bilingual anthol-

ogy of poetry, poetics, theory and criticism—including texts by some of the most interesting contemporary Italian poets (Zanzotto, Porta, Cagnone, and others), as well as philosophers (Gianni Vattimo and Jacques Garelli) and literary critics (Fredí Chiappelli, Stefano Agosti, Angus Fletcher, etc.)—attempts to address some of the issues related to these questions. "The Favorite Malice" (a quote taken from the "On the Mount of Olives" section of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: "It is my favorite malice and art, that my silence has learned not to betray itself by silence") was originally the title of a symposium held at New York University in 1979. The anthology contains an account of the symposium and some of the texts read there, but most of the material is more recent and was written at the request of the principal organizer, Luigi Ballerini, as an "update" and a response to the questions and debates that emerged during the symposium.

The purification of lyrical language, the attempt to reach a "zero degree" of writing, the creation of an improbable or impossible syntax, the proliferation of signifiers without regard for the referent, and the use of margins and typographical space to establish a frame of visual "silence": all these strategies, as found in the anthologized poems, testify to a post-Nietzschean and post-Heideggerian use and abuse of language as an experience of the limits of the word as well as the limits of Being. Poetry, writes Heidegger, "brings the unsayable as such into a world." According to Vattimo (the most prominent interpreter of Nietzsche and Heidegger in Italy today), this is a language whose horizon is the anticipation of death, and whose expressive power is defined paradoxically by silence. However, it is extremely difficult to ascertain whether this kind of threshold language which speaks the silence of lived temporality