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Apter, Emily

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Responsibility as Risk (Some Thoughts on Ross Chambers's "The Responsibility of Responsiveness: Criticism in an Age of Witness")

Emily Apter

Ross Chambers's "The Responsibility of Responsiveness: Criticism in an Age of Witness," is one of those rare pieces of meta-reflection on the nature and purpose of critical work that prompts a hard look at what we are doing as so-called literary critics and why. Imbued with the guilt and sadness of a survivor in the age of AIDS, Ross's present sense of distance from his own career—a career structured around and motivated by diverse forms of textual pleasure-seeking—invites us to interrogate, in the deepest and most personal ways, the relationship between our *ontology* and our *calling*, between our modes of being in the world as teachers, activists, critics and readers of culture, and our status as professionals of a fairly elite order invested, quite literally, in a vocation. For the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, these "clivages du moi" or splits between intellectual passion and self-deceptive professional protocols, subtend and define the uniquely rifted academic universe.

Ross Chambers's paper reprises the kind of *nise en cause* of *homo academicus* that Bourdieu initiated in his book of that title in 1984.¹ Bourdieu's anthropology of academia's values and institutions relied on a demystificatory examination of academic power structures based on guild-loyalty, self-identification as a teaching corps whose body must resist and defend its stakes; certification rituals, structures of legitimation, strategies of self-authorization; and the emergence of symbolic (intellectual) capital which, in its volatility and quiescence, both mimics and holds shares in the global economic marketplace.

Ever suspicious of careerism for its own sake, of the smoke and mirrors posturing of superstars, or what Bourdieu has dubbed "consecrated heretics" (cultural sacred cows), Chambers reviews his own biography as *homo academicus* through an ethical and actuarial lens. His sense of the fragility of life, of generations vulnerable to lives and careers abridged by precocious mortality,

leads him to substitute the hubristic post-Structuralist Super-reader (a semiotic celebrity who came of age in the wake of the death of the Author), with the survivor and witness-bearer whose urgent task is to relay spectral messages and get on with the work of cultural transmission as a work of mourning.

Ross's evocation of responsibility and, particularly, the empathic link between responsibility and responsiveness, harks back to a Lévinasian notion of responsibility (developed in *Totalité et Infini*), that emphasizes the subject's innate ontological indebtedness and obligation to the Other. In the pedagogical context, Lévinas describes this responsibility as a "conversation" in which reason and receptivity are conflated:

Aborder Autrui dans le discours, c'est accueillir son expression où il déborde à tout instant l'idée qu'en emporterait une pensée. C'est donc *recevoir* d'Autrui au-delà de la capacité du Moi; ce qui signifie exactement: avoir l'idée de l'infini. Mais cela signifie aussi être enseigné. Le rapport avec Autrui ou le Discours, est un rapport non-allergique, un rapport éthique, mais ce discours accueilli est un enseignement. Mais l'enseignement ne revient pas à la maïeutique. Il vient de l'extérieur et m'apporte plus que je ne contiens. (43)

To approach the Other in conversation is to welcome his expression, in which at each instant he overflows the idea a thought would carry away from it. It is therefore to receive from the Other beyond the capacity of the I, which means exactly: to have the idea of infinity. But this also means: to be taught. The relation with the Other, or Conversation, is a non-allergic relation, an ethical relation; but inasmuch as it is welcomed this conversation is a teaching. Teaching is not reducible to maieutics; [Socratic method, from the word midwifery] it comes from the exterior and brings me more than I contain.

In bringing survivor's guilt to bear on the "Conversation" between Self and Other, or between critic and reading public, Ross Chambers thus identifies a whole range of issues informing the project of a critical pedagogy. His example as teacher and writer encourages us to be wary of the extent to which historical symptoms, once bracketed by self-congratulatory methodologies, epistemic codifications, and genuflections toward interpretive rigor, risk losing their documentary intensity, force of revelation and personal value.

Ross's paper may be read as a *mea culpa* for reveling just a bit too much in that private pool of lamplight that sheltered good reading but which also provided a "fantastic" wedge against the life-threatening world that would not go away. The self-doubt that Ross gives voice to in assessing his own past engagement in structuralist narratology parallels many of the doubts my own generation experienced when deconstruction came to crisis.

Morally singed by the "de Man Affair," cut loose from the prise of a European theory that seemed to have lost its younger progenitors, galvanized by the political urgency of minority discourses, and nostalgic for the bygone status of the "public intellectual," a whole generation of deconstruction-trained critics looked to cathect elsewhere. The destabilizing reading practices that were part of a literary formation in the 1970s and 1980s were now applied to the "texts" of popular culture, historical narrative, gender identity, virtual reality, American and postcolonial politics and so on.

In the "early days" of cultural studies, deconstruction was seen as the bridge to a promising politics of identity; its ability to dislodge the dead fixity of eternal verities was treasured as a mode of semantic activism. The "difficulty" of deconstruction's rhetorical conceits pressured the mind to project itself to a "different" place. Through diacritical invention, language was defamiliarized. Neologisms and syntactic intercessions broke up patterns of impacted, predictable meaning. The separation of prefixes and suffixes from verbal *racines* released lost or forgotten significations into the imagination. And then there was the visual mobilization of the page through narrative spacing and whimsical deformations of orthography and diction. Perhaps the most "historic" case in which deconstruction's graphological "deviance" was "identified" as potentially worthwhile for a nascent identity politics, was Henry Louis Gates's famous move toward an "écriture black." Read today, Gates's essay on the Signifyin(g) Monkey (as trope for the historic black vernacular parodics of the master's discourse) appears surprisingly indebted to Derridian "*différance*," I say surprisingly, because today he would undoubtedly feel in no way compelled to address race matters via a deconstructive turn. "Perhaps," he wrote back in the mid-80s, "replacing with a visual sign the g erased in the black vernacular shall, like Derrida's neologism, serve both to avoid confusion and the reduction of

these two distinct sets of homonyms to a false identity and to stand as the sign of a (black) Signifyin(g) difference itself. The absent *g* is a figure of the Signifyin(g) black difference" (46).

In the decade that has elapsed since Gates's appropriation of *différance* or Gayatri Spivak's insistence on "deconstructing" historiography within subaltern studies, a well-acknowledged divide has opened up between minority discourses and continental philosophy. The breach became glaringly visible in 1986 in the controversy that erupted between Derrida (*Racism's Last Word* and *But, Beyond...*) and Anne McClintock and Rob Nixon (*No Names Apart: The Separation of Word and History in Derrida's 'Le dernier mot du racisme'*) over the questionable political value of interrogating the word "apartheid" as a metonym for world racism, abstracted from the specific history of South Africa.² This early initiative to "identify deconstruction" (in the sense of consciously allying it with a global human rights movement) came from Derrida himself, but, one could say, in retrospect, that it backfired politically, and has continued to do so as the McClintock/Nixon position has fanned out into a larger critique of deconstruction's obsession with Eurocentric philosophical problems: being, subjectivity, representation and the real.

Where are we today? I would say that today we seem unintelligibly torn between literariness and cultural studies. On the one hand, there is a tendency, particularly strong in France, to promote an aesthetics of culture that goes back to the codes of the royal retinue; a culture of galanterie, geste, raffinement, and privileged intellection for its own sake. I am thinking, for example, of Marc Fumaroli's work, especially his long essay, "Le génie de la langue française."³ On the other hand, there has evolved a politics of culture committed to questioning the stakes of literary theories and institutions, to challenging intellectual pursuits that restrict their circuits of communication to the control room of the Ivory Tower.⁴

What I like about Ross Chambers's paper is that it refuses to offer a blueprint for choosing among fashions or "next wave" agendas. If his lecture prescribes anything specific, it is something inchoate and intuitive — it urges a moment of moral reflection on what we really are doing, it secretes a modest but urgent request to cock the ear to the "grain of the voice" (interior *and* exterior) as a prophylactic against becoming deaf to the speech of the parrot.

Ross's paper is also about living with risk and daring to take risks intellectually. His work provides a caveat against molding oneself as a professional before one has had the time or inclination to find out what one really wants to say or who one provisionally is in relation to the embattled realities of late modernity. Ross's paper is about the need to risk pursuing idiosyncratic interests and convictions; it argues, in short, for responsibility *as* risk.

Notes

¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo academicus* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1984).

² See Jacques Derrida, "Racism's Last Word" and "But, beyond... (Open Letter to Anne McClintock and Rob Nixon)," trans. Peggy Kamuf, *Race, Writing and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1985), 329-338 and 354-369 respectively. See also, Anne McClintock and Rob Nixon, "No Names Apart: The Separation of Word and History in Derrida's 'Le dernier mot du racisme,'" *Race, Writing and Difference*, op. cit. 339-353.

³ Fumaroli, Marc. "Le génie de la langue française," *Les Lieux de mémoire* III, ed. Pierre Nora. (Paris: Gallimard, 1992) 911-973.

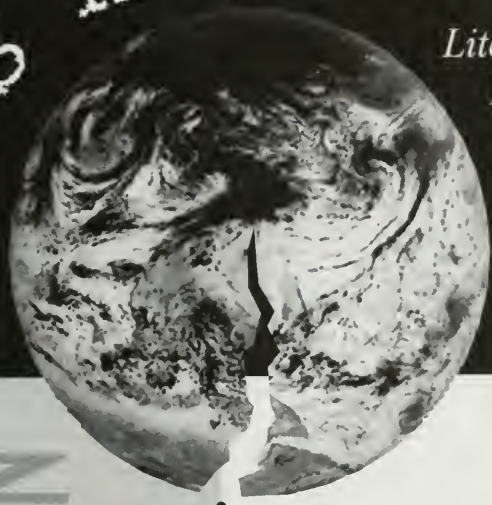
⁴ Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995) exemplifies the tendency in contemporary French studies to examine the hidden institutional stakes of schools of French thought. The most controversial interpretive thrust of the book concerns her reading of structuralism as a kind of excuse to forget history. The "messy" side of class struggle, urban apartheid, and the torture of Algerians, was, Ross implies, rendered semi-invisible by France's obsession with Americanization. This obsession manifested itself in the fetishization of gadgets, hygienic appliances, mass media, fast cars, and, in general, the designer visuality of modernity. For Ross, structuralism and Annales school history (*longue durée*) are guilty by association since, as positivist methodologies, they contributed to the ahistorical, technophilic postwar ethos.

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*Literary Criticism at the
End of the Millenium*



R I S K & R E S O L U T I O N

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Paroles Gelées 14.2 1996

*Selected Proceedings from UCLA's
French Department Graduate Students'
Interdisciplinary Conference*

PAROLES GELEES

UCLA French Studies

Ce serait le moment de philosopher et de
rechercher si, par hasard, se trouverait ici
l'endroit où de telles paroles dégèlent.

Rabelais, *Le Quart Livre*

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UCLA Department of French
2326 Murphy Hall
Box 951550
Los Angeles, California 90095-1550
(310) 825-1145
gelees@humnet.ucla.edu

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