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## The Responsibility of Responsiveness: Criticism in an Age of Witness

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Ross Chambers

I'm not a very millenarian kind of person and I don't come to you out of the East today with apocalyptic messages. (My East, after all, is only the Midwest.) I'll try to rise to the challenge of this conference somewhat, by reflecting aloud on the century that is about to end and about the historical role of us, literary and cultural critics, vis-à-vis the texts of this and previous centuries. What is criticism all about? Why has it grown in tandem with the culture of modernity that sprang from the Enlightenment and its attendant revolutions, industrial, political, economic and social? What does it mean to do criticism professionally, as a way of earning a living? I won't be answering any of these large questions, but I'd like them to lie at the horizon of the more specific topic I want to address. This is the problem of critical responsiveness, in particular to a history of pain, and of the responsibility of us professional critics in relation to that history.

When I stumbled onto the critical scene forty-odd years ago, and more particularly during the 1960s, a period of great theoretical excitement, it was common for people to say that, whereas the nineteenth century had invented history, the key discovery of the twentieth century was structure. It seemed so at the time and there is still a grain of truth in these characterizations, but I think they miss the mark (even within the natural limitations of such *obiter dicta*) by mistaking symptoms for their causes. I would want to say now that alienation was the nineteenth century's defining experience, and that the turn to history was a way of coming to grips with alienation by trying to understand how it came about. Similarly, I would account for the twentieth century's interest in structure (which was at its height in the dismal period before and after World War II) as evidence of a flight from the pain of history, as if structure offered a field of pure relationality that could be abstracted from the social interactions and historical processes over which human subjects appear increasingly to have lost control.

Consider just a few major events of our century: the two destructive world wars (and the many ferocious smaller ones), the

turmoil of two major revolutions, in Russia and China, and the disappointment of their failure—not forgetting a failed revolution, also, around 1968, in the West; the economic misery of the great depression; the horror of the Holocaust and countless other genocides and would-be genocides; the era of nuclear fear, intensified by the cold war, ushered in by Hiroshima and Nagasaki; the continuation of political oppression, ethnic hatred and economic exploitation in a world supposedly decolonized, and the vast displacements of people that have resulted; the globalization of capitalism and its return to ruthless *laissez-faire* doctrines in the absence of convincing socialist alternatives; the needless famines and the epidemics that might have been at least mitigated were it not for social prejudice and governmental cynicism. It is not a happy record and even allowing for a degree of historical foreshortening—after all, war and famine, misery, oppression and epidemic seem always to have been humanity's lot—our century seems exceptional in the degree of pain it has created and suffered on a world scale.

I think it has been exceptional, too, in the amount of witnessing literature this history of pain has given rise to. The practice of witness at times of dire extremity is as old as the book of *Exodus* and the genre is replete with plague narratives, accounts of slavery and condemnations of war. But consider the flood of poetry and novels unleashed by the experience of trench warfare in 1914-18 and the much greater flood of biographical and historical accounts, the music, poetry and films that have been devoted to the Holocaust; think, more recently, of the *testimonios* produced by the oppressed indigenous people of Central American countries, and, again, of the many narratives and diaries, the poems, videos, films, music and dance that bear witness to the AIDS epidemic in this country and world-wide. One reason why autobiography has become a major twentieth-century genre is that the ability of autobiographical writing to subserve a witnessing as well as a memorializing function has become evident: the trials of war, prison (and other modes of sequestration and confinement), torture and disease; the pain of gender inequality, racial and ethnic division; social and economic misery are susceptible to autobiographical treatment where more objective modes might prove less compelling.

In understanding this flood of witnessing writing, we must take account, therefore, not only of the agonies of twentieth-

century history but also of the increased access that ordinary folks have to education and to the means of dissemination represented by the publishing industry and the mass media. But I think something more profound and more disturbing underlies it, which is the fact that our era is the first—or at least the first in a very long time—to have seriously doubted the probability of humanity's having a future. The pain of the present is matched for us only by the fear that, through ecological mismanagement or nuclear disaster, we will bring destruction on ourselves. Witnessing literature, of course, does not guarantee that there will be a future, but it presupposes it: it is the expression of a desire for there to be a future. That is because the writing of witness has not completed its task unless it finds a readership: if living to tell the tale is essentially the desire that fuels the urge to bear witness, it is necessary also for the tale itself to survive if the survival of the individual witnessing subject is not to prove futile. Witnessing, then, presupposes a certain faith in the future and that is a reason why, alongside the pain of the present, it has seemed so necessary a gesture in the twentieth century.

But what, in all this effort to recognize pain, has been criticism's contribution? Feminist, postcolonial, ethnic and queer studies are certainly witness in themselves to various forms of pain and injustice. In the last ten or fifteen years, criticism has begun to take note, also, of various forms of testimonial literature: slave narratives, Holocaust witness, *testimonio*, the writing of AIDS. Two key theoretical works have appeared: Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain* (about torture) and, concerning the problematics of witness itself, Shoshana Felman's and Dori Laub's *Testimonial*. But the evidence of criticism's participation in the twentieth century's need to bear witness tends to stop there. I'm going to suggest that we *might* have understood criticism, more generally, as standing in relation to the texts of the past, whether specifically witnessing texts or no, in the way that a responsive reading stands in relation to witnessing texts, as a continuation of their project; whereas the practice that mainly defines us, the production of commentary or, if you will, "doing readings," has become, instead, a semi-autonomous professional activity. I mean that we treat the texts of our culture as being available for us to demonstrate—mainly for the benefit of other professional critics—our skill at making them signify in ways that bring credit to us, the interpreters, in proportion as the

interpretations prove to be—within the limits and conventions of pertinence that define the rules of critical play—unforeseen, unexpected and indeed unpredictable, that is, “original.”

This game of commentary is a lot of fun to play once you’ve gotten the hang of it, but it does tend to develop into a mandarin pursuit; that, I think, is because it’s posited on a principle that tends to substitute the performance of the *critical* project for the resonance that might be given, through amplification, to what I will call (recognizing in advance the difficulties of this concept) the *textual* project. For one thing about witnessing literature is that, in it, the textual project is difficult to ignore: it’s something that commands respect, the author having paid for the right to pursue it by undergoing deprivation, suffering, pain and even death. It seems churlish, for example, to do a “resisting reading” of a text of witness or to distance oneself in other ways from what one recognizes to be its *visée*, or “aim.” That is perhaps a reason why, proportionately to the significance of witnessing literature in our century, not to mention earlier centuries, professional criticism has tended to ignore, or to under-acknowledge, and even to marginalize, the literature of witness. It is an embarrassment to the critical project because it proposes a moral objection to what, as professional critics, we tend to do best (if only because it determines professional rewards). It makes visible a certain tension, within critical practice, between a requirement of responsiveness (in the case of witness, responsiveness to a text of pain) and a dynamic that I’m calling professional, that encourages critical discourse to develop its own autonomy.

Of course, the tension is inherent in the genre of commentary itself. On the one hand, commentary is nothing if not a relation to a prior text: it is a form of uptake that leans, therefore, for its authority, on a previous “take” of some kind. But on the other hand, commentary isn’t worthwhile unless it develops some point or *raison d’être* of its own, attracting attention in its own right. A commentary that merely reproduced or paraphrased a prior text without developing a significance undeveloped or underdeveloped in the text itself would generally be regarded as a waste of everyone’s time. But if commentary is untrue to its generic character when it leans too heavily on prior texts, it can equally betray its generic function by developing interests and concerns that are too remote. Consider sports commentary on TV: the show, in one

sense, is on the field of play—the rink, ground or court—and that should theoretically suffice; yet it requires commentary as a necessary supplement, without which the show isn't really complete. The commentary needs to be lively, diverting our attention at the same time as it directs it; just so long as it doesn't become self-sufficient (this rule being particularly true, oddly enough, of commentary that actually substitutes for an absent primary text, like radio commentary of sports or critical commentary on a text one hasn't read). No one, as far as I know, regards sports commentary as a mandarin practice that only other sports commentators are interested in; it is rather that sports commentary is a supplement that is a part of the game (and so players will sometimes do it themselves, by word or gesture), and I suspect that viewers watching a televised game without any form of commentary would feel frustrated, as if half the excitement was missing. Literary criticism, though, as we practice it, doesn't share the status of TV sports commentary: it isn't really a part of the game, but another game altogether, in which most people have little interest (except once in a while when our debates are misrepresented in the media and made to seem even more freakish than they actually are). It has formed projects that are too detached from the textual projects that it has the cultural function of supplementing. It has thus become a culturally marginal activity.

I'm sure you're already mentally shooting holes in my argument from sports commentary, so let me quickly drop it and describe where I want to go in what follows. I'm proposing that criticism's relative unresponsiveness to the literature of witness is a sign of a larger unresponsiveness to the texts of culture that it is our task to supplement through commentary, that is, of a relative indifference to textual projects as opposed to those of professionalized critical commentary. At the far horizon of that argument is the thought that such unresponsiveness functions—a bit like the turn to structuralism at mid-century—as a denial of pain, in the specific sense that the cultural texts that survive and require our attention do so as evidence of projects that have survived their author's death, and ought by rights, therefore, to attract the particular form of pained attention, on the part of those who survive that death, that is called mourning. I'll give the argument an autobiographical twist by describing, as a kind of allegory, how my own thinking about reading has begun to change

recently, as a result of my work with the literature of AIDS witness, and specifically with AIDS diaries—literature that poignantly literalizes the theoretical concept we casually refer to as “the death of the author.” And I’ll lean my account on the authority of a film that allegorizes reading as responsiveness by exploring the themes of witnessing and mourning, and the relation between them. Then I’ll be ready to return, very briefly, to the conundrum of professionalism as an example of a question that’s frequently posed these days: that of the degree to which the conditions of our employment as University intellectuals—and hence the institutional authority we enjoy (in particular through teaching)—actually inhibit the accomplishment of our work as we might like to conceive it.

Reading AIDS diaries, which are accounts of their authors’ dying, inspires thoughts (and emotions) about survivorhood and notably about the sense in which one is charged, as a reader, with the responsibility for the survival of a project of witnessing that has been interrupted—but also, arguably, defined—by an author’s death. As a result of that experience, I’ve come to think of readers as survivors and to think about the reading of the whole corpus of our cultural texts as a form of mourning. Our work as critics could also be considered part of the way our society deals with a problematic of continuity and discontinuity that arises in culture because it must deal with the fact of death.

I have always tended to be a happy reader and one of my friends takes pleasure (he knows it bugs me to be convicted of something uncool) in referring to me as “the last happy critic.” It is true that I was one of those children who were never happier than when they were absorbed in a book and oblivious to the world. As a critic, I was much influenced in the 1960s by those impenitent enjoyers of texts, the so-called “Geneva School” critics, and by the French *nouvelle critique*, itself strongly influenced by the “*rêverie matérielle*” so persuasively written about by Gaston Bachelard. You could say that I’ve been trying to wake up from a dream of my own ever since, although not a specifically “material” one, and to emerge from an enchanted circle: a circle of privacy, indulgence, comfort and illusion formed by the pool of light that falls from a lamp onto the solitary figure of a reader ensconced in an armchair with a good book.

I turned to narrative, mainly in the 1970s, because there was also something of a linguist and grammarian in me—a structural-

ist, then—and there was something compelling about the progress made by the structural narratology that emerged, mainly in France, in the 1960s. Within a few years, we found ourselves in possession of any number of useful grammars of narrative, the teaching of which led me, however, to conceive the project of a narrative pragmatics, as so to speak the “next stage” of research. Without much prior thought, I took the readability of literary narratives as a model for the problem of understanding narrative as a vehicle and a site of social interaction and understood interaction in terms of those three famous French modals, *pouvoir-vouloir-savoir* (power, desire and knowledge), that flourished in those poststructuralist days. The key to reading itself, which I understood (and still do) as a general model of discursive reception, lay for me in its power to split statement and utterance or, in Benveniste’s terms, *énoncé* and *énonciation*, and to produce a relation of difference, and (following Derrida, now) of deferral, between a grammatical subject of statement (the text as structure) and a subject of utterance open to interpretation within the context of an act of communication. Out of that framework, significantly reconceptualized in terms of the discursive production of subjectivity (as opposed to Benveniste’s still positivist understanding of linguistic subjects as semi-autonomous entities), came three books, representing twelve or fifteen years of work.

Whatever else you may say about those books, they don’t amount to a hill of beans when it comes to a pragmatics of narrative. There are many reasons for this failure; but most fundamentally, I think, no general theory of reading as a social interaction could emerge because I clung unconsciously to a privatized model of the magic circle, the pool of light enclosing an individual reader absorbed in a specific text. Simultaneously, as a “happy” reader, I understood the deferral entailed by reading as exclusively a matter of supplementation and hence of gain (a reader “enriched” by the encounter with a text, a text “enriched” by the encounter with a reader) without giving thought to the sense in which deferral also entails loss.

In that last respect, I fell in with the general thrust of academic theories of reading, which—perhaps a bit self-interestedly on the part of academic critics describing their own practice?—tend overwhelmingly to be theories of gain and are uninterested in reading as a social practice. Barthes is one of those theoreticians:



"the birth of the reader," as he puts it in the famous final sentence of an early essay, "must be at the cost of the death of the Author," implying by that a victory of writerliness over restrictive social ideologies. As far as I can recall I've never referred to that essay in my work, until now. It may perhaps have been something about that phrase "at the cost of," which jibes a bit with the triumphalism of the sentence. For although Barthes is working here (the fact is often forgotten) within a certain theory of *écriture* that has a long history in France, his phrase "the death of the author," particularly when the word is shorn of its capital A, can itself readily be taken as a metaphor for the textual split that occurs when reading makes of a text, not an inert, parsable structure, but an interpretable utterance or *énonciation*. Thus, it begins to suggest that reading is, in the end, not a matter solely of gain, that is not without cost.

For reading in this sense to occur, a discursive subject, whom we can call the author, must lose control of the text's meaning and in that sense "die," so that a readable subject of enunciation can emerge. However, as Benveniste noticed, just as there can be no *énoncé* that is not also an enunciation (and so subject to readerly interpretation), there can't be an enunciation either without an *énoncé*. Reading does not produce an enunciation in isolation but measures a difference between what the text "says" (its *énoncé*) and what it enunciatively "means." This *énoncé*, of course, has no objective status: it's a differential product of reading and not a statement of, say, the author's intended meaning; but my contention would be that the inseparability of the *énoncé* from the enunciation nevertheless stands as a marker for the *idea* of an authorial meaning that has been inevitably displaced by the (also inescapable) intervention of reading. It functions, therefore, as a "trace" of the authorial project and a kind of monument to the author's "death"—the loss of control over meaning—on which the very possibility of reading depends.

In this understanding of reading—which I would describe as a discursive understanding in that it concerns interactions marked by effects of power, desire and knowledge, that is of relation (and let me repeat that it is not Barthes's understanding)—an issue of responsibility therefore arises, one that Barthes—whose complacency over the author's death has been widely followed in critical theory—has no room for. It is an issue of theoretical responsibility: what responsibility, toward the author, is entailed on the part of a

reader whose reading displaces—however inevitably—an authorial sense? And further, what is the responsibility of the reader toward that lost authorial sense itself? This theoretical responsibility becomes painfully literalized when one reads texts of AIDS witness, such as diaries, that are autobiographical accounts of their author's dying. It becomes clear to their reader that (a) the reader would not be reading the text unless the author were dead, and (b) the existence of the text implies a project of witnessing on the author's part—the bearing of witness to his own dying and death—which can't be completed by the author and relies, for its survival, on readerly responsiveness to that project.

Let's assume that the project of witness can be encapsulated in the message "I am dead." This is the message that's intended to enable the text to survive and to be effective as an active social agent following its author's death. Yet it is a message that cannot *exist*, either as a literal statement or as a sincere utterance, even though the conjunction of such a literal statement and such a sincere utterance would (by my hypothesis) define the ideal act of witnessing. The author, while living, cannot make it; his message—which survives as the readable *énoncé* of AIDS diaries—is "I am dying" (not "I am dead"). The reader, in turn, who survives the author's demise, produces the text that also survives him, but not as saying "I am dead": to the reader, the text as *énonciation* now signifies "I is dead" (where "I" refers to the subject of the *énoncé* "I am dying"). The one comes too early, the other too late, so that the survival of the author's project is "at the cost" of its resignification within the terms implied by the reader's survivorhood with respect to the author's death, that is, within a new discursive context. A message survives, but subject to an effect of deferral that prevents it from becoming "the" message that remains forever potential. Thus the reader can't avoid recognition of the fact that the author is dead (and that the very fact of reading sanctions the author's death), nor fail to understand that the readerly message differs, on the one hand from the textual *énoncé* ("I am dying"), but also, and on the other hand, from the impossible message ("I am dead") that the authorial act of witness, were it to be adequately completed by the reader, would require.

Reading thus becomes a site where both *loss* is registered (in the interpretation: "I is dead") and readerly *inadequacy* is measured with respect to the demand made by the text (i.e. in the

difference between the impossible "I am dead" and the readerly interpretation "'I' is dead"). The sense of loss describes reading as being in deferred relation to the supposed authorial sense, while the sense of inadequacy implies further deferral since the potential textual message that might have been released by the author's death has not been realized and cannot be realized. The responsibility for realizing it can only be passed on, in a kind of relay of inadequacy, to other readings. What I'm saying, then, about reading and deferral, is a version of what Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub have described as the impossibility of witness as an act of referentiality and the consequent constitution of witnessing as the passing on of the responsibility of witness, such that the failure of "direct" witness entails an obligation to "bear" witness, to be its carrier. Witnessing thus becomes a shared, social responsibility not an individual act. But I've also described the situation of reading as an inescapably anxious one, the opposite of the complacent or happy reading whose alibi is the theory of gain. It is here, in the impossibility for the reader either of repairing the effects of the author's death or of fully realizing its consequences, that reading begins to resemble the situation of mourning, if mourning can be described as the impossibility of forgetting the dead (under pain of betraying them) combined with the impossibility of not forgetting them, that is, the impossibility of not betraying them, since the survivors live on and must, as the phrase goes, get on with the tasks of living.

We might say, furthermore, that if pain is the name of the impossible referential object of witnessing—what witnessing discourse cannot say—pain returns and is transmitted from writer to reader in the anxiety provoked by discursive inadequacy. The writer worries about the posthumous survival of a message that will fatally be committed to the inadequacy of some reader's survivorhood; the reader—conscious of the loss and inadequacy that mark readerly reception—becomes a site of anxiety and of mourning over the indelible mark of death that makes reading both, (1) a deferred act (intervening too late to catch the message the author is too early to pronounce) and so, (2) an act of deferral (passing on the responsibility) in its turn. No reading, however responsive it may seek to be, can ever be responsive *enough*. Yet no reader can fail to respond to a message that carries an authority, in Benjamin's famous phrase, "borrowed from death." The *responsi-*

*bility of responsiveness* (etymologically cognate words), which has to be assumed individually, can only be *realized* by the sharing of inadequacies; and it is finally that sharing among survivors, then, which in a society comes to constitute death's authority.

A short film by Canadian filmmaker Laurie Lynd, significantly entitled "RSVP," concerns the relation of both witnessing and mourning to the dynamics of discursive deferral and becomes readable, therefore, as an allegory of reading as mourning. I'll have to tell it in some detail for its force to become apparent. "RSVP" is set in Toronto. A youngish man, Sid, enters an empty house, evidently just home from a trip. He reads a message taped to a mirror, releases the cat into the garden. The phone rings but he doesn't answer it; we hear a jointly recorded message which enables us, although we may not realize this on the first viewing, to hear the voice—surviving through deferral—of a dead man, Sid's lover, Andy, from whose funeral in Winnipeg Sid is returning. As the friend who is calling now records his message (the third deferred message in the first moments of the film, after the note and Andy's voice on the answering machine), the support he offers makes us realize Sid's state of bereftness and a glimpse of a hospital bed set up by the French windows—an icon these days for AIDS—confirms the cause of Andy's death.

As Sid looks at two sets of family photos—his own with Andy; then, on the refrigerator, those of Andy's parents separately and (mediating them) of a young woman who will prove to be Andy's sister Ellen—he prepares to make tea and switches the radio on, just in time to catch a CBC request program, entitled "RSVP," in which an announcer is *responding*—by broadcasting it—to the request of one Andrew Sellman, who having been unable to attend a recital by Jessye Norman, has asked to hear the soprano's recording of Berlioz's "Le spectre de la rose," from *Les Nuits d'Été*. As the orchestral introduction sounds, Sid stands motionless, his face troubled, then hastens to record the music, fumbling with the equipment as he does so. Deferral upon deferral: Andy, one realizes, has made the request before his death, setting it up as a message from beyond the grave (as proof of his intention, we see later that the lovers own the same recording in their collection). The complicated mechanism of radio technology, along with the inbuilt delay of request and response, are being employed in the service of a certain project of self-survival on Andy's part, which

Sid, after the announcer, is now furthering by recording the message.

Deferral as a price of survival is also implied in multiple ways by the song itself: a poem by Gautier, set by Berlioz, recorded by Norman, broadcast by CBC in a chain of relays, its own theme is that of survival. With its last faint perfume, a wilted rose speaks to the (presumably beautiful young) woman who wore it to the ball, and was thus responsible for the rose's death; but it speaks lovingly of its contentment to find itself lying, as if entombed in alabaster, on its wearer's breast. Gautier is specifically ("Ci-gît une rose" ["Here lies a rose"]) referring his poem to the conventions of epitaph, whereby the "soul" of a deceased person speaks a message addressed to the living:

Ce léger parfum est mon âme,  
Et j'arrive du paradis.

This faint perfume is my soul,  
And I come to you from paradise.

But deferred, now, by the chain of relays, from its context of writing (in which it had the value, perhaps, of a piece of semi-bantering, over-precious, poetic wit), the poem of survival itself survives, albeit with a signification that, in the new context, is radically altered, since the rose's message in the *énoncé* has become, as enunciation, a message from Andy, and it speaks of AIDS (Gautier's ball becoming a reference to the good times associated with the urban gay lifestyle and the circumstances of the rose's death hinting, perhaps, at the possibility of Andy's having been contaminated by his lover). The authorial message (about roses and such) has "died" (although it persists from relay to relay as the poem's *énoncé*) in order for the poem to become readable as a text of AIDS witness. The uncanny quality that derives from the "spectral" character of a message that survives, although so marked by death that its authority is profoundly altered (no longer bantering and precious, but eerie and momentous), is of course reinforced by the music. Berlioz's orchestration is lush, luxurious and often voluptuous, but at times also hollow and mysterious, as if he were particularly sensitive to the connotations of death as the guest at life's feast that are in the poem. And the unearthly quality of Jessye Norman's operatically trained soprano voice, with its

hints of the sublimity of the “inhuman” and its own otherworldly quality, concretizes very powerfully the idea of a voice speaking “from paradise” with an authority derived from death.

As the music plays, the camera moves out from Sid’s house to explore a community of friends (a lesbian and gay bookstore and counseling center with its bulletin board of obituaries to which Andy’s is added), but also another environment, the high school where Andy taught and where the announcement of his death has been less lovingly vandalized by homophobic graffiti. Received as epitaph, the message is responded to and simultaneously retransmitted in the mode of obituary (a genre in which the dead person’s already deferred voice is replaced by another, in the mode of “ ‘I’ is dead”). When the camera finally returns to its point of departure and we discover Sid pacing the hallway as the haunting last measures, with their hollow woodwind orchestration, resound in the empty house:

Ci-gît une rose,  
Que tous les rois vont jalouser,

Here lies a rose  
That every king will envy[.]

The context of the message from beyond has consequently widened: it is no longer just the house voided by AIDS but a larger social scene, one partly of warmth and companionship and partly of hostility and confrontation. Accordingly, the problem of family now enters the picture. Busying himself frantically with packing away Andy’s things, Sid comes upon a sweater, draped over a chair at Andy’s desk, as if he were still using it, and he falls into contemplation. Then he goes to the phone and calls Ellen, Andy’s sister in Winnipeg.

If the relays figure “Le spectre de la rose” as signifying the authority messages acquire through (death and) deferral, Ellen—as a (presumed) lesbian who is also “in touch” with the family—is the film’s principal figure of mediation, that is of relay, as a mode of continuity. Sid can’t communicate directly with Andy’s parents, but Ellen is able to transmit to them his message about Andy’s message of request and response, which, living in Winnipeg, they will be able to hear because the broadcast, in yet another instance of deferral, is time-delayed. Her mother is responsive (“Of course

I want to hear it. Thank you for telling me.”); but it is also for her to retransmit Ellen’s message about Sid’s message about Andy’s message, this time to its final destination, Andy’s father, the very figure, one supposes, of patriarchal authority in its homophobic incarnation. She does so by turning on the radio as she serves him his lunch. At first scowling and isolated behind his newspaper, then troubled and moved, the father, as ultimate addressee of Andy’s request for a response, remains—by contrast in particular with Ellen, who poignantly breaks down and gives way to grief as she stands listening to the music in her own kitchen—not undisturbed, but apparently unresponsive.

His response, when it comes, is delayed by a week. The film now, as it closes, echoes its opening scenes. As we see Sid approaching and entering his house again, we hear the answering machine once more speaking in the emptiness. Now only Sid’s voice invites the caller to leave a message; again, the caller is not a friend but Andy’s father. “I just wanted to thank you for letting Ellen know about that song,” he records. “I’m sorry we didn’t get a chance to talk more at the funeral. We know what a big help you were to Andy. We know how important you were to him. Well, thanks.” These, under the circumstances, are broken, poverty-stricken words; and they are not received directly by Sid (let alone by Andy, for whom they come too late); they are spoken, so to speak, “under deferral” and, if they constitute an obituary of sorts, it is weighed toward the affairs of the living: the reconciliation of Andy’s father and Sid. This deferred response to a much-deferred message is clearly inadequate and yet it’s also something un hoped for, given the history of alienated affections at which the film allows us to guess. For, it *is* a response and the implication is that this degree of (inadequate) responsiveness would not have been achieved had not Andy’s message itself, by virtue of the authority it borrows from death (and deferral), had a particular power to elicit it. Nor would the message of Andy’s witness have been efficacious had it not been retransmitted through a chain of witnessing relays embodied (leaving Gautier, Berlioz, Norman and the CBC out of it, as the vehicles of the message) by Sid, as its first addressee, then by Ellen and her mother, so that it acquires a social impact on top of its personal value to Sid. Although the film achieves an effect of closure with the father’s reception and response to the message, it is also itself using the two interlocked

chains of relayed messages as the vehicle of its own witnessing, replicating Andy's message and rebroadcasting it, so to speak, to an audience that includes me, retransmitting it, inadequately, here.

But let's not forget the sweater which, it will be remembered, provoked Sid's decision to retransmit to the family Andy's message, received and understood in the first instance as addressed to him. It is like a text in abeyance, awaiting reading. As the father records his message of apology, acknowledgment and perhaps reconciliation, Sid again, as at the beginning, enters the house, but this time removes his jacket, encountering as he does so the sweater which now hangs on the coatrack, the relic of Andy that signifies both his absence and the sense in which he survives and remains present to the mourning Sid. At this point, the memory stirs in Sid that gives the sweater its symbolic charge for him, one of those flashes of reminiscence, seemingly random, that mourners know well and the film plays back the incident for us. Sid and Andy (whom now we *see* for the first and only time) are leaving the house together to attend a social engagement. To Sid's slight irritation, Andy stops and returns to the house; he has forgotten his sweater. Sid: "It's not cold." Andy: "It's always cold in their house." Sid: "We'll be late." Andy: "We're always late." Andy quickly grabs the sweater off the hook, gives Sid an affectionate and reconciliatory peck and they leave together.

We're invited to interpret the sense of this memory in the context of Sid's bereavement. As a figure of Andy's absent presence, what it means for the survivor, Sid, is a consciousness that, in the after-life of his survivorhood, it is nevertheless "always cold" and "always (too) late." Andy's sweater might keep Sid warm if he were able to break down the distance of his belatedness (the distance of death) and put it on. But we don't see him put it on: in the last shot of the film he stands, staring and contemplative, by the coatrack, able neither to assume the sweater—a relic of Andy's life—as his own, nor yet to ignore its presence in his own life. It is like the texts of our culture in which the spectral presence of an authorial project eerily survives: we, as their readers, can neither assume that project, which the author's death has indelibly interrupted, nor yet be completely unresponsive to its authority and the demand it makes of us to accord it a mode of survival through our reading. Our inadequate responses thus take the form of deferral,



as the passing on of the message, relay-fashion, and each time in a modified form. Each retransmitted message will be in some sense continuous with the message to which it responds but also, and inescapably, discontinuous with it. The film seems to assure us that this is what is meant by broadcasting, and that it is by virtue of such broadcasting through which messages are socially (not just privately) received and of the responsibility of responsiveness jointly shouldered, that texts whose authors are dead—ultimately, all texts—acquire an authority “borrowed from death” and are able to exert their effects.

Let me finish now with just two short comments. One is about responsiveness, the other about professionalism; and both entail a catch-22.

Frederic Jameson defines history concisely and memorably as “what hurts.” I have been proposing that a responsive criticism would participate, in the mode of mourning, in the ongoing process of witnessing that is a product of history so understood, a history of pain. I have also said that discursive response to discursive manifestations of pain is always and inevitably inadequately responsive, because it is subject to all the effects of deferral. It follows, and this is the catch-22—that the more responsive an act of critical reception tries to be, the more it is likely to be conscious of its own inadequacy, its failure to measure up to the required standards of responsiveness: the responsive critic, in other words, will demonstrate responsiveness by feeling guilty of unresponsiveness. Responsiveness, to put it another way, is like saintliness: each of these two requirements is so stringent that the saintly or the responsive person, in the end, is not the one who measures up to the requirement, but the one who is most conscious of falling short of the desired ideal. Conversely, it is those who most confidently and unselfconsciously believe themselves to be saintly or responsive who are open to indictment for complacency: their saintliness (responsiveness) is a sham, a matter of deceit or self-deceit. So I need now to restate my argument slightly and recommend not responsiveness as such—an impossible ideal—but reading that is anxious about the quality of its responsiveness to the extent that it is conscious that reading participates in a history of pain and has a responsibility of witness.

For University critics, one of the themes on which anxiety about responsiveness might focus—this is my second comment and I am returning to a point already foreshadowed at the beginning of this talk—is professionalism. In the United States, we have relatively few public intellectuals and fewer still who define their task as cultural (including literary) criticism; of these, most are on the right of the political spectrum and are unlikely to entertain an understanding of history as “what hurts” or to promote the literature of witness. That responsibility thus devolves on University critics, who are, however (to use the verb that’s in common use), “trained” in graduate schools to be critics and to consider their work, therefore, as a form of research, that is, a mode of disciplinary production of knowledge that is more “about” its object than it considers itself to participate in what it studies. That is, roughly speaking, what Foucault meant when he pointed out that the characteristic practice of disciplines is examination (not reading). So there is some tension between our research mission, as we conceive it, and our vocational responsibility as readers—one that might well be quite salutary, I think, as a tension. It’s when the weight of attention moves too far in the direction of research that I begin to worry. We who do research in the humanities can easily overestimate the degree to which it is taken seriously outside of our own relatively small group. You do not even have to set foot outside of the Universities to become aware of this, it is enough to sit with social scientists and natural scientists on University-wide committees. Our research is fun and it is interesting and important to us; I don’t believe it seriously justifies our existence in the eyes of the world, although we would have no institutional status at all, within Universities, if we did not do it, and take it seriously.

Yet, a society that is willing to expend money on maintaining a body of several thousand people whose task it is to frequent the texts of culture and confer on these some form of continued cultural agency *is* clearly entrusting some sort of responsibility to us. I’m suggesting that it is a responsibility other than the research we do. I would argue also that it is not exhausted by disabused analyses like Bourdieu’s (with which I concur), of education as the provision of symbolic capital to the children of a specific class. If there were no professional critics working in Universities, the maintenance of culture, in the sense of mediating the relation of continuity and discontinuity that constitutes the culture’s history

as a permanent encounter with the fact of death, would scarcely be done, at least to the extent that such work entails the reading of texts. Yet, because it *has* become a specialized pursuit subject to the demands of professionalism, there is some danger of our losing sight of the cultural work we are doing and forgetting why it needs to be done. That's the catch-22 of professionalism. Without it, the cultural work of mourning and witnessing might largely go undone in a society such as ours; under the conditions of professionalism, though, our attention gets rather easily diverted from doing that work.

So I've told a story, in part autobiographical, about our professional forgetting of some of the cost that's mentioned in Barthes's famous phrase about "the death of the A/author." It's an allegorical story and I've tried to suggest some of the ways the allegory might be read (I'm sure there are others) by indicating the lines of thought that have begun to impinge on my consciousness as a result of my encounter with AIDS diaries and other forms of AIDS witness, and have made me a more anxious reader than once I was (not anxious enough, of course—for anxiety too, like responsiveness, is a catch-22). I've told the story because I was curious to know what degree of responsiveness it might encounter—whether the allegory would be read and how it would be read—not only among my professional colleagues, but also and especially among those of you who are undergoing professionalization as critics right now and are perhaps likely to be particularly sensitive to the problems of which I've spoken.

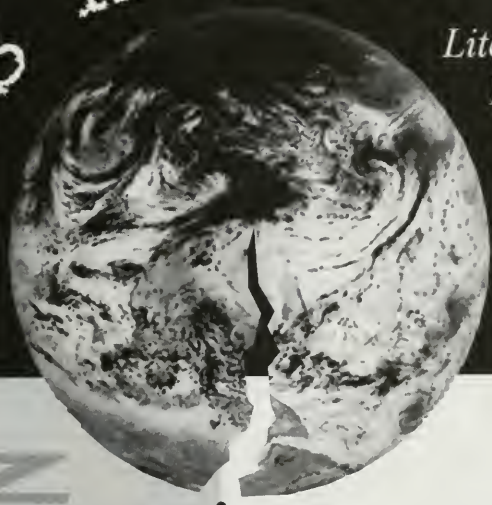
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