

UCLA

Paroles gelées

Title

"Romantic Effects": The Difficulties and Usefulness of Literary Criticism

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8954b6rh>

Journal

Paroles gelées, 14(2)

ISSN

1094-7264

Author

Silver, Naomi E.

Publication Date

1996

DOI

10.5070/PG7142003043

Peer reviewed

“Romantic Effects”: The Difficulties and Usefulness of Literary Criticism

Naomi E. Silver

Congress and the taxpayers deserve a little less romancing and a lot more reality about where the arts and humanities are today.

Lynne Cheney, “Mocking America at U.S. Expense”

What is literary criticism, and what is it up to today? “Risk and Resolution: Literary Criticism at the *Fin-de-Millénaire*,” the title of this conference, would seem to invite us to reflect on these questions and take stock of the stakes, status, risks and purposes of literary criticism at the close of our 20th century. The urgency of this kind of reflection and stock-taking in these days of budgetary turmoil hardly needs underscoring. Indeed, as the stock of the humanities—and academia in general—in the eyes of both elected officials and the public at large continues to fall, the need for aggressive stock-taking and self-study becomes more and more urgent. All of which seems to make good practical sense. If we cannot figure out who we are and what we are doing, how can we possibly market our services in an increasingly difficult marketplace of ideas? Understanding what we are doing would seem to be the essential condition of our continued existence.

Yet, there would seem to be difficulties associated with ascertaining “where the arts and humanities are today”—difficulties neither negligible, merely local, nor accidental to this kind of reflection. Starkly put, there would seem to be something inherent to the work of literary criticism that makes it particularly difficult to take stock of what has been done and what literary critics are currently engaged in doing. Which is not at all to say that such stock-taking is inconsequential or that literary criticism should be exempted from it. Paradoxically enough, literary criticism may in fact achieve its greatest rigor and its highest value—both intellectual and socio-cultural—in a mode of questioning and self-questioning that so far has yielded plenty of insights but no definitive answers and little straightforward factual knowledge.

The reasons for this difficulty—a difficulty at the same time debilitating and enabling—are perhaps worth spelling out in some detail. They become legible whenever and wherever there is the possibility, in language, of distinguishing between different ways of using words, literally or figuratively for instance, or between different modes or operations of language, the constative and performative modes for example. Wherever and whenever it becomes possible to make such distinctions, the rigor and value of literary criticism are both demonstrated and at the same time immediately called into question. For the possibility of telling the difference between a literal referent and a figure of speech, or between a sheerly descriptive utterance and one that enacts what it says, it turns out, coincides with the impossibility of systematizing these distinctions into discrete units of communicable knowledge.

When, in her opinion piece “Mocking America at U.S. Expense,” Lynne Cheney asks for an accounting of “where the arts and humanities are today,” or makes a morally charged demand regarding what “Congress and the taxpayers deserve [to know],” she engages in a version of the kind of stock-taking discussed above. Such stock-taking on her part, in and of itself, is perhaps not particularly remarkable. After all, Cheney, as former chairperson of the National Endowment for the Humanities, can be presumed to have opinions about the current state of affairs in the humanities. What is of greater interest is that Cheney frames her evaluation as a narrative interpretation of the present situation and, in calling for more truthful accounts of what is really happening in the humanities today, she bases her argument on a distinction and opposition between “romancing” and “reality.” In so doing, she nicely illustrates both the pitfalls and the importance of doing literary criticism.

Cheney would seem here, on the one hand, to be requesting some hard, factual, *literal* information about the present situation: not romance but reality is what we need in order to know accurately where the arts and humanities stand. At the same time, on the other hand, it is clear that Cheney is not asking for a map with push-pins telling her where all artists and humanities professors reside, but rather for some kind of more-than-literal narrative *interpretation* describing the “position” or “value” of the arts and humanities communities at the present time. While she asks for

"reality," her demand situates us not on any solid ground of facts and reference, but leaves us suspended, so to speak, in a space of storytelling.

We would be wrong, therefore, to interpret the opposition in Cheney's sentence between "reality" and "romancing" as referring to any neat distinction between something like "solid facts" and "mere fancy." Rather, her opposition works to differentiate between two kinds of *representation*: those that are supposedly literal and referential, and therefore accurate and truthful, and those that are figurative and fictional, and hence apparently imprecise, self-interested, or perhaps even deceitful. And indeed, it is the differences between these two kinds of representation that are normally designated by the terms "romance" and "realism."

So far so good. But the difficulty Cheney runs into in her act of stock-taking is in establishing that her own story about the present state of the humanities is a "realistic"—that is, a straightforwardly literal and merely descriptive—one.

A more detailed reading of Cheney's essay would probe the rhetorical status in her argument of such crucial conceptual metaphors as the notion of scholarly "evenhandedness" or that of "scholarly standards fall[ing] by the wayside," not to mention such rhetorical strategies as the demonization of something called "the academic elite" or Cheney's own narrative of innocently awakening to this "elite's" subversion of "our" cultural heritage. For our present purposes, however, it is perhaps enough to point out the coercive, even performative dimension of Cheney's statements. These statements present themselves as being merely descriptive; yet as a speech-act theorist like J.L. Austin would be quick to point out, they also *do* more. Such a statement as, "In my view, there is no longer sufficient rationale for Federal support for the [arts and humanities] endowments," for instance, is as prescriptive as it is descriptive. It contains information, to be sure, but it also pronounces a judgment and casts a vote. And these actions, carried out in words, are finally responsible for *producing*—and not merely referencing—a reality. Nor would Cheney necessarily dispute this analysis of her essay and her argument; clearly she is interested at this closing moment in her text in passing judgment and in having her judgments take effect. The crux of the analysis we are beginning here would lie in ascertaining whether, in the end, *any* part of Cheney's argument is strictly descriptive and

constative. Is it possible to isolate a rhetorically neutral first part of her essay that simply states the facts, or are even the most basic facts in this case *already* the sedimented outcome of prior figures of speech, prescriptions, and other performative utterances?

If it turns out that even Cheney's most "factual" statements are really nothing more—and nothing less—than congealed figures of speech and performative utterances posing as solid facts, then Cheney's call for "less romancing" and "more reality" on the part of the arts and humanities runs into difficulty. For, while it remains possible to identify and analyze particular speech acts and figures of speech, if one's language has a "history" that inflects it in ways that may not be intended, nor even immediately recognizable, then it becomes less and less possible to know the mode and status of one's own present act of writing. Although Cheney privileges the ostensibly literal referentiality and purely descriptive character of "realism," the story she is telling here about the present state of the arts and humanities—a story containing villains and heroes certainly, but also, and perhaps more tellingly, containing such "classic" performative speech-acts as proclamations, declarations, demands, and warnings—perhaps cannot avoid continually shading into the ungrounded and figurative space of "romance." It is for this reason, to return to an earlier assertion of ours, that the possibility of telling the difference between a literal referent and a figure of speech, or between a sheerly descriptive utterance and one that enacts what it says, coincides with the impossibility of systematizing these distinctions into discrete units of communicable knowledge.

If, with Cheney, we have begun to see what some of the *political* stakes of this difficulty of systematizing and circumscribing linguistic differences may be—on the one hand the ideological stakes of a coercively performative utterance passing itself off as a merely constative statement, and on the other hand the personal stakes of finding oneself occupying the same rhetorical territory (here that of "romance") as those one would denounce as one's opponents—I wish to turn now to another consideration of the opposition "romance" / "reality" to help us explore the *epistemological* stakes of this difficulty more fully. Henry James takes up this question in his 1907 preface to *The American* which documents his experience of writing this novel, and of rereading it for the purpose of revising it for the New York Edition of his collected works. In general, this

preface is read by James's critics as constituting his most significant statement on the generic differences between "romantic" and "realistic" fiction, and consequently it has been repeatedly culled for insights that could become the basis for a system of rules or a taxonomy of traits for distinguishing between these two linguistic modes. In this way, James's preface addresses precisely the question Cheney's essay raises: the possibility of grounding one's discourse in stable, literally referential distinctions.

However, James's particular approach to this discussion inflects it somewhat differently. It appears that he introduces these questions of genre not in order to establish some kind of system of classification, but rather as part of a process of self-questioning, of self-reflexive stock-taking, made necessary by his activity of re-reading *The American*. In a manner that interestingly echoes our analysis of Cheney, upon his rereading of *The American*, James discovers a discrepancy between the mode of writing he had believed himself to be employing during 1875 and 1876 as he serially composed the novel—that is, a referential or "realistic" mode—and the mode in which his novel now appears to him. As he puts it: "I had been plotting arch-romance without knowing it, just as I began to write it that December day without recognizing it and just as I serenely and blissfully pursued the process from month to month and from place to place, all without intention, presumption, hesitation, contrition" (25). In a genuinely critical move, and with his characteristic rigor, James makes use of this belated recognition—a recognition he finds both amusing and disturbing—to achieve a greater lucidity regarding the manner of his mystification. "If in 'The American,'" he says, "I invoked the romantic association without malice prepense, yet with a production of the romantic effect that is for myself unmistakable, the occasion is of the best perhaps for penetrating a little the obscurity of that principle" (30).

At stake for James in this work of "penetration" and clarification is his sense both of authorial control over his subject-matter and of *self*-control in his act of rendering it. This control depends upon the reliable operations of conscious intention and oversight, and to discover the possibility of their failure is highly unsettling, even if ultimately instructive. We see James's ambivalence regarding this state of affairs in the following remarks. He says, in the first place,

I somehow feel that it was lucky to have sacrificed on this particular altar [i.e., that of romance] while one still could; though it is perhaps droll—in a yet higher degree—to have done so not simply because one was guileless, but even quite under the conviction that, since no 'rendering' of any object and no painting of any picture can take effect without some form of reference and control, so these guarantees could but reside in a high probity of observation. I must decidedly have supposed, all the while, that I was acutely observing—and with a blest absence of wonder at its being so easy. (26)

James here adopts a tone of self-irony at his own youthful haplessness. But the temporal disjunction between youth and age turns out to have broader implications for his conception of "romance." James is led here to generalize the structure of this disjunction such that it indicates not simply the psychological transformations that accompany aging, but more to the point, a *linguistic* transformation that appears to take effect between the time of writing and the time of reading. He advances this possibility, stating that romance

is a question, no doubt, on the painter's part, very much more of perceived effect, effect *after* the fact, than of conscious design—though indeed I have ever failed to see how a coherent picture of anything is producible save by a complex of fine measurements. The cause of the deflexion must lie deep, however; so that for the most part we recognize the character of our interest only after the particular magic, as I say, has thoroughly operated—and then in truth but if we be a bit critically minded. (30)

To recapitulate James's process of self-reflection and stock-taking brought about by his rereading of *The American*, we have seen that James's theories of writing and authorship (most famously stated, perhaps, in his 1884 essay "The Art of Fiction" in which he declares, for instance, that "the only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent life" [46]) depend upon the possibility of accurately rendering a true picture of life, a picture that is only possible via "reference and control" ("Preface" 26) and the scientific employment of "a complex of fine measurements" (30). And we have seen, too, that James had every reason to believe at the time of writing *The American* that this "control" and these "measurements" were in full effect. Nevertheless, upon rereading *The American*, James discovers that, despite

his precautions, despite his "high probity of observation" (26), what he has produced is not a picture of "reality," but an effect of "romance." "Romance" has operated without him, he now recognizes, and by means of a "particular magic" (30) it has in effect severed his writing from him, removing it from the oversight of his "intention" (25) and his "conscious design" (30).

"Romance," then, or the "romantic effect" (30), seems here to stand in for what in language necessarily intervenes at precisely those moments when the illusion of referentiality and control is at its strongest (this intervention may be something like the unintended intervention, in our analysis of Cheney, of the sedimented history of prior judgments, figures of speech, etc., into her claim for the "realism" of her story). James had believed his writing to be intelligible by virtue of his authorial intention, but what he recognizes only "after the fact" (30) is that, at the moment of his writing, he fundamentally misrecognized what he was doing.

Nor is this misrecognition on James's part a simple mistake or oversight, a local or accidental difficulty. Rather, James suggests that what his process of rereading has uncovered is an instance of a more general and necessary misrecognition—a misrecognition stemming from the impossibility of a certain kind of cognition relating to language, the impossibility of systematizing and stabilizing linguistic differences and operations. "Romance," it turns out, names something like a constitutive discontinuity operating within *all* writing, a discontinuity between the time of writing and the time of reading, between the production of an effect and the awareness that an effect has operated—a constitutive discontinuity between the intentions and efforts of an author and the writing he or she produces.

The concepts we seem to end up with in James are those of "misrecognition" and "rereading." And indeed, it may be possible to see these concepts as constituting something like the two poles of the work of literary criticism, the poles of its impossibility and its promise, of its difficulty and its usefulness. We can perhaps take James's critical act of self-reflection and the lucidity it affords him—however ambivalently he may regard it—both about his own act of writing and about the more general operations of language, as exemplary of the work of the literary critic. As I read it, one of James's central insights in this preface is that literary criticism necessarily involves the rereading and reevaluation of an

earlier act of misrecognition. To paraphrase him: the "particular magic" of language operates during the act of writing to deflect the effects of our words from our conscious intentions and recognition, but we can perceive these effects only "after the fact," and only then "if we be a bit critically minded" ("Preface" 30).

James points here to what we might call the *belatedness* of literary criticism, and also to its difficulty: we must come to a text *already* with a "critical mind" if we hope to distinguish its effects and operations, and as critics, we are always playing catch-up, trying to understand something that has already happened, trying to isolate an effect that has already operated. In this sense, literary criticism is always at best a diagnostic activity, rather than a prophylactic or preventative one. Its work involves the analysis of words, concepts, speech acts, and figures of speech, and the excavation of their historical residues and sedimentations. One element, then, of the value of this work is—by virtue of its examination of this linguistic past—its ability to give us insights into the particular force behind the deployment of specific words and concepts in the present day. On the other hand, however, the work of literary criticism does not (and cannot) involve the systematization of this analysis, or the creation of a set of rules that, by their regular application, would be able to define for us in advance and once and for all the particular force and effect—ideological or otherwise—of a word, concept, or speech situation, thereby relieving us of the need for continued application and rigor, or indeed, the need for a continued "high probity of observation" (26).

But as James's preface has shown us emphatically (as, to a lesser degree, has Lynne Cheney's opinion piece as well), even the most vigilant eye is no guarantee of reliable vision. Literary criticism, therefore, is necessarily an ongoing activity sustaining itself by its own misrecognitions, and most importantly, by the fact that the occurrence of misrecognitions in practice cannot be excluded once and for all by any advance in our knowledge or theoretical understanding. Moreover, the kinds of diagnoses literary criticism can give us are themselves speech acts, utterances conforming to certain conventions and bringing about certain effects. Consequently, the reading and writing of the literary critic, too, is in no way exempt from the misrecognitions attendant upon an authorial utterance, and is therefore itself in need of continual rereading and diagnosis.

We started this essay by asking about the stakes, status, risks, and purposes of literary criticism at the close of our 20th century. It now seems that the best response we can give to this call for an accounting and a stock-taking would have to take the following form: literary criticism is—and as James's 1907 text indicates, perhaps always has been—an ongoing activity of questioning and self-questioning whose rigor and value lies not in the systematization and organization of the answers or insights it temporarily defines, but rather in its ability to put its own uncertainty to use in the production of further acts of rereading and questioning, that may lead to further diagnoses and further insights. Such an account may not be sufficiently "rational," "realistic," or even "humanistic" for a critic like Lynne Cheney, who wants her literary meanings and values, her analytical distinctions, secured once and for all. However, it is, I think, the most tenable and ethical, and ultimately the most *productive*, diagnosis this particular act of reading and writing can define—however "romantic" such a diagnosis may be.

Works Cited

- Auerbach, Jonathan. *The Romance of Failure: First-Person Fictions of Poe, Hawthorne, and James*. New York: Oxford UP, 1989.
- Austin, J.L. *How To Do Things With Words*. Eds. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1975.
- Cheney, Lynne. "Mocking America at U.S. Expense." Editorial. *New York Times* 10 March 1995, nat'l ed.: A15.
- Goetz, William R. *Henry James and the Darkest Abyss of Romance*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1986.
- Greenwald, Elissa. *Realism and the Romance: Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry James, and American Fiction*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research, 1989.
- James, Henry. "The Art of Fiction." *Literary Criticism*. Ed. Leon Edel. . New York: Library of America, 1984. 44-65.
- . "Preface to *The American*." *The Art of the Novel*. Ed. R. P. Blackmur. New York/London: Scribner's, 1934. 20-39.
- Jones, Vivien. *James the Critic*. London: Macmillan, 1985.
- Miller, J. Hillis. "History, Narrative and Responsibility: Speech Acts in Henry James's 'The Aspern Papers.'" *Textual Practice* 9.2 (1995): 243-267.
- Nettels, Elsa. *James and Conrad*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1977.

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



*Literary Criticism at the
End of the Millenium*

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

Special Issue
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*

Special Issue
Volume 14.2 ♪ 1996

Sponsors: French Consulate of Los Angeles
Borchard Foundation
UCLA French Department
European Studies Program
UCLA Graduate Students' Association

Co-Editors: Anne-Lancaster Badders
Marianne Golding

Assistant Editor: Diane Duffrin

Conference Organizers: Marianne Golding, Committee Chair
Anne-Lancaster Badders Laura Leavitt
Kimberly Carter-Cram Markus Müller
Helen Chu Michael Stafford
Diane Duffrin Lena Udall
Erik Eisel

Design and Layout: Joyce Ouchida

Paroles Gelées was established in 1983 by its founding editor, Kathryn Bailey. The journal is managed and edited by the French Graduate Students' Association and published annually under the auspices of the Department of French at UCLA. Information regarding the submission of articles and subscriptions is available from the journal office:

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

Subscription price (per issue): \$10 for individuals
\$12 for institutions
\$14 for international subscribers

Back issues available for \$7. For a listing, see our home page at:
<http://www.humnet.ucla.edu/humnet/parolesgelees/>

Copyright © 1996 by the Regents of the University of California.

CONTENTS

Introduction	5
<i>Editors</i>	
Program	7
The Responsibility of Responsiveness: Criticism in an Age of Witness	9
<i>Ross Chambers, Keynote Speaker</i>	
Responsibility as Risk (Some Thoughts on Ross Chambers's "The Responsibility of Responsiveness: Criticism in an Age of Witness")	29
<i>Emily Apter</i>	
On Responsibility, Cunning, and High Spirits: A Response to Ross Chambers	35
<i>Vincent P. Pecora</i>	
Reader's History Meets Textual Geography: Towards a Syncretistic Theory of Reading	41
<i>Arundhati Banerjee</i>	
"Romantic Effects": The Difficulties and Usefulness of Literary Criticism	57
<i>Naomi E. Silver</i>	
Islam, History, and the Modern Nation: Hegemony and Resistance in Contemporary Moroccan Francophone Literature	67
<i>Scott Homler</i>	

World Literature and Economic Hegemony: Free-Trade Imperialism and 'Whole Populations Conjured Out of the Ground' in <i>The Communist Manifesto</i>	75
<i>Chris Andre</i>	
Genre-Crossing: Kingston's <i>The Woman Warrior</i> and Its Discursive Community	87
<i>Hsiu-chuan Lee</i>	
Translation as Metaphor in Hildesheimer's <i>Marbot Eine Biographie</i>	103
<i>Julia Abramson</i>	
Literary Criticism After the Revolution or How to Read a Polemical Literary Text	115
<i>Janet Sarbanes</i>	
Cross-Cultural 'Othering' Through Metamorphosis	131
<i>Kristi Wilson</i>	
Jamming the Machine: Yves Klein's <i>Blue Monochrome</i> and the End of the Avant-Garde	143
<i>J. Stephen Murphy</i>	
"What About the Audience?/What About Them?": Spectatorship and Cinematic Pleasure	153
<i>Tamara Harvey</i>	
Ordering Information	163
Calls for Papers	164