

## Derrida and the potentiality of literature: Notes on Derrida's "The Law of Genre"

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### Derrida and the potentiality of literature: Notes on Derrida's "The Law of Genre"

Jacques Derrida. Maurice Blanchot. Literature. Deconstruction. Method. Possibility.

In this article I trace Derrida's modus of reading literary works focusing on "The Law of Genre". First, I offer a reconstruction of Derrida's text and analyze the strategy of reading in which one uses elements of what one reads as tools of interpretation. I then argue that this strategy allows the text to indicate its singularity. However, the singularity of literary works is associated with their potentiality, or what Derrida calls in *Glas* "POTENCE du texte". In the third and final part of the article, the singular potentiality of literature is outlined.

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Literature was a constant preoccupation for Jacques Derrida. From his first published text, the long introduction to Edmund Husserl's *The Origin of Geometry* (1962, 77–78, 88–89, 104–105), to the last of his seminars on *La bête et le souverain* (2008a, 2010; Eng. trans. *The Beast and the Sovereign*, 2009, 2011), literature always accompanied his thinking and not just as a theme. It is well known that the topic for a dissertation he had initially chosen already in 1957 was “The Ideality of the Literary Object” (1990a, 442–443). The following article will address a particular aspect of the way Derrida has approached literary texts.<sup>1</sup> This aspect is connected to the reason why deconstruction, at least the deconstruction as strategically practiced by Derrida, is not and should not be a method. I will focus on Derrida's strategy of reading in “The Law of Genre” (1980), demonstrate how his strategy there indicates the singular potentiality of Maurice Blanchot's *La folie du jour* ([1973] 2002; Eng. trans. *The Madness of the Day*, 1999), and then show what in Derrida's work outlines a certain theorization of literature that is not reducible to any form of strict literary theory. As Derrida states in *Glas* ([1974] 1986):

The rare force of the text is that you cannot catch it (and therefore limit it to) saying: *this is that*, or, what comes down to the same thing, this has a relation of apophantic or apocalyptic unveiling, a determinable semiotic or rhetorical relation with that, this is the subject, this is not the subject, this is the same, this is the other, this text here, this corpus here. There is always some question of yet something else. Rare force. At the limit, null. One would have to say the text's power, its potency [*puissance*]. As one would speak of the musculature of a tongue. But also of a mathematical expansion. But also of the enveloping of that which remains potential [*en puissance*]. At the limit, null. Nonexistent from remaining infinitely potential. From being condemned to power [*puissance*] and remaining there.

What I want to write is the text's GALLOWS [*POTENCE*]. (1986, 198–199)

However, the history of deconstruction in literary studies turned deconstruction into deconstructionism and ascribed a method to it (see Cusset 2004, 48; Cusset 2008, 113). The moment “deconstruction” is turned into “deconstructionism”, it becomes easily usable as a weapon against deconstruction.<sup>2</sup>

Jonathan Culler noted as early as 1982 that students of literature were mostly interested in deconstruction's “power as a *method* of reading and interpretation” (85, emphasis added), but also that it is the repetitions by Derrida's admirers with all the “parodies, ‘etiolations’, or distortions” that “bring a *method* into being and articulate, within Derrida's work itself, a practice of deconstruction” (120, emphasis added; see also 228–229). Also in 1982, Christopher Norris opened his book *Deconstruction* with the warning that presenting deconstruction as a method is misleading: “To present ‘deconstruction’ as if it were a method, a system or a settled body of ideas would be to falsify its nature and lay oneself open to charges of reductive misunderstanding” ([1982] 2000, 1). The turning of deconstruction into a method is neither limited to the field of literary studies nor is something of the past. Essays like Lasse Thomassen's “Deconstruction as Method in Political Theory” demonstrate that the “methodologization” of deconstruction can be found currently in various different fields (see 2010, 41).<sup>3</sup> However, Derrida insists in “Letter to a Japanese Friend” ([1985] 2008b)

that it cannot be reduced to an instrumental methodology: “Deconstruction is not a method and cannot be transformed into one” (4),<sup>4</sup> and elsewhere makes a similar claim: “Deconstruction is neither a theory nor a philosophy. It is neither a school nor a method” (1990b, 85).<sup>5</sup> As early as in *Dissemination* ([1972] 2000a) he makes a similar statement with regard to dissemination and Stéphane Mallarmé: “Pas de méthode” (303).<sup>6</sup>

The question why deconstruction is not a method, even when limited to the field of literary studies, deserves a complex and multifaceted answer. It should at least take into account Derrida’s conception of the event, as deconstruction is not a method primarily because it is something that happens as an event: “It is what happens” (1990b, 85)<sup>7</sup>, or as he elaborates elsewhere “[d]econstruction takes place, it is an event that does not await the deliberation” ([1985] 2008b, 4).<sup>8</sup> With regard to literary works, however, the conception that deconstruction is not and should not be turned into a method has to do with the way Derrida approaches literature. For him, there is no essence of literature (Derrida and Attridge [1992] 2009, 41, 47), and it cannot be explained without remainder on the basis of a supposed truth about literature. In this sense, literature is not something about which one can simply ask, “What is it?” (Derrida 2000a, 177), as the philosophical question “What is...?” is a question about essence and truth. Ginette Michaud describes this understanding very clearly: “Literature as Derrida ‘defines’ it – or rather as he ‘infinies’ it – is subtracted from all determination or typological, generical, formal, etc., specificity” (2006, 34).<sup>9</sup>

If one combines the statement that deconstruction is not a method with the insistence that there is no essence of literature, it may seem reasonable (but according to what law of reason and reasoning?) to assume that when dealing with literature deconstruction is just an irresponsible play with texts qualified as literary. Yet, deconstruction is not a chaotic treatment of literary texts, on the contrary – deconstruction is quite strict, stricter than most literary theories, and for an important reason. If literature has no essence, then literature is defined on the basis of conventions and contexts. However, the conventions and the contexts defining literature define it in such a manner that they make apparent how literary texts cannot be reduced to the conventions and the contexts that define them. If there is no essence of literature, the critic should take into account simultaneously the historical processes producing the objective rules for treating certain texts as literary and the way in which the individual work or set of works exceeds these rules and its context (Derrida and Attridge 2009, 264–267). The critic is therefore left without a secure ground and has nothing certain to rely on except the singularity of the works, but this singularity, precisely, is not something given, nor something present.<sup>10</sup> It does not appear *as such*, it is what puts the “as such” in question. What is more, such a singularity does not turn the work into an object closed upon itself but inscribes an immanent difference of the work with itself and opens the work to the other – and first of all the other that is the reader. The readers, however, as far as they are critics, should not reduce the work to their own reading. To substitute one’s reading of a literary work for the work itself would be nothing less than to ignore the singularity of the work that made possible the reading in the first place. All this means that

the critic should not borrow the tools for the analysis of the work from elsewhere (doing so implies that there is an essence of literature) but from the work itself, and should use them in a formal manner in order to indicate the elusive singularity which opens up the work to different readings while making it irreducible to any particular reading. Therefore, the singularity of the work should be conceived as *a singular potentiality*, a potentiality without a pre-given essence opened to the other (to the reader, to the critic, to the one who would take advantage of it, be it in the sphere of teaching, or politics, or that of marketing, or elsewhere). In other words, a deconstructive reading that accepts that there is no essence of literature, should let itself be guided by the work under analysis in such a way as to indicate the singular potentiality of the work. In this case there could be no pre-existing method. Yet no reading can be absolutely pure, since readers always have their pre-conceptions, their previous experience with literary texts, their precomprehension. What should the critic do then?

In this essay, I will trace the steps of Derrida's strategy in "The Law of Genre" to argue that Derrida's strategy of reading offers an answer to this conundrum that is of interest not only for those interested in deconstruction, but also for anyone who deals with literary texts.

#### INCLUSION WITHOUT BELONGING

Derrida's "La loi du genre" ("The Law of Genre") was presented in 1979 during an international conference on "Genre" in Strasbourg. In 1980, it was published in *Glyph* in a bilingual (French/English) edition translated by Avital Ronell; the translation was also published separately in *Critical Inquiry*. During his seminars in the second half of the 1970s, Derrida offered a series of readings of Blanchot's fictions, and each year he focused on one or more of his works. The text discussed here was first presented in a slightly different form during these seminars and has this ongoing work on Blanchot as its immediate context.<sup>11</sup>

"The Law of Genre" begins in a performative way with the question of genre and an appeal not to mix genres (Derrida 1980, 55). This appeal applies not only to literary genres, but to the different senses in which the word "genre" is used in French. Derrida demonstrates that it is impossible not to mix genres, the different genres of "genre", in particular those pertaining to *physis*, or nature, and those that have to do with *techné*, or art and technique. This redoubling of genre (i.e. the "genres of genre") makes the question about genre very difficult, but precisely for that reason it helps Derrida introduce his hypothesis of a law of impurity or principle of contamination regarding the place of the genre (59). Curiously enough, he articulates it "at least figuratively" (59) in the language of set theory claiming that with genre one is faced with a sort of participation without belonging. Before explaining in length what he means by this, Derrida makes a detour into a particular genre theory, namely the one proposed by Gérard Genette in *Architext* ([1979] 1992). Commenting on Genette, Derrida marks two motifs that make him refrain from using a genre theory. These two motifs are the too-readily employed distinction between nature and the series of its others (history, art, technology, etc.) and the undecidability in particular

cases between mode and genre, two terms proposed by Genette. The logic behind the passage on Genette may seem enigmatic. Why is a reference to a particular theory included in a text that insistently refrains from using that theory? It is noteworthy that when Derek Attridge included “The Law of Genre” in the celebrated volume *Acts of Literature*, he omitted precisely the paragraphs on Genette (Derrida and Attridge 1992, 228n4).<sup>12</sup> The reasoning behind the two motifs, however, is clear. On the one hand, Derrida points out that while important and productive, Genette’s critique of naturalization of deformations observable in the history of genre theory opposes nature to history in a simplistic manner. According to Derrida, the most general concept of “genre” with the notions of engendering, generation, and classification it comprehends, is both on the side of nature and on the side of history; it is a fold “which turns *phyein* over to itself across others” that are not simply its others (1980, 61). On the other hand, Derrida finds Genette’s distinction between mode and genre problematic. Modes are defined as categories which are based entirely on linguistics in general, and on pragmatics in particular. They are manners of presentation or enunciation that depend on linguistic means and are formal. The storytelling (*récit*) is such a mode; it does not depend on the content of the story; it is all about the way in which one presents it. Unlike mode, genre is not a linguistic but a literary category that is necessarily content-bound (the detective novel and the love poem are genres) and the relation between modes and genres is complex. In the part where he expresses his dissatisfaction with the distinction between modes and genres, a distinction whose “stringent necessity” he admits (62), Derrida hints at the analysis of *The Madness of the Day* he will propose in the second part of his text.

It is only then, after the detour to a theory of genres he insists that he will not use, that Derrida explains his hypothesis at length, which is the following:

a text cannot belong to no genre, it cannot be without or less a genre. Every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text; there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging. And not because of an abundant overflowing or a free, anarchic, and unclassifiable productivity, but because of the *trait* of participation itself, because of the effect of the code and of the generic mark. Making genre its mark, a text demarcates itself. If remarks of belonging belong without belonging, participate without belonging, then genre-designations cannot be simply part of the corpus. Let us take the designation “novel” as an example. This should be marked in one way or another, even if it does not appear, as it often does in French and German texts, in the explicit form of a subtitled designation, and even if it proves deceptive or ironic. This designation is not novelistic; it does not, in whole or in part, take part in the corpus whose denomination it nonetheless imparts. Nor is it simply extraneous to the corpus. But this singular topos places within and without the work, along its boundary, an inclusion and exclusion with regard to genre in general, as to an identifiable class in general. (65)

As Derrida sums up his main argument more succinctly: “The re-mark of belonging does not belong” (65). If there were a theory of genre proposed by Derrida, it would have this (hypo-)thesis as its basis. Any literary text participates in a genre but belongs to no genre. Expressed in these terms, the hypothesis may seem paradoxical and obscure, but Derrida has stated that these terms come from set theory,

so it is only logical to look at their meaning in that context in order to grasp better what is said here.

The above hypothesis has to do with the distinction between two types of relation in set theory: *belonging* and *inclusion* (or participation). A term *belongs* to a set if it is an element of that set. Belonging is a primitive relation in set theory and is expressed by the sign “ $\in$ ”. For example, if a student has enrolled in a class, then she or he is an element of the set of all the students that have enrolled in that class (or belongs to the set of all students enrolled in the class). A set is *included* in another set if all the elements of the first set are elements of the second, and the included set is called a subset. The subset relation (that is, the relation of inclusion) is not a primitive relation, and the included set is not necessarily an element of the set it is included into. Inclusion is defined solely by the fact that all the elements of one set are also elements of another. The distinction between belonging and inclusion can be also expressed as a distinction between elements and subsets. Let us take, for example, one of the Zermelo-Fraenkel set theory axioms, the axiom of power set, which seems to be partly behind Derrida’s idea. According to this axiom, for every set, there is another set which consists of all the subsets of the first set. The second set is called power set (*Potenzmenge* in German; see Zermelo [1908] 1967, 203). The axiom does not mean that the first set is an element of (or belongs to) the second set; it states only that there is a power set that has as elements all the subsets of the first set.

If we go back to Derrida, we can articulate his hypothesis in the following terms. A participation (or inclusion) without belonging would imply that while the elements of a first set are elements of another set, the first set itself is not an element of the second. In terms of literary genres, it may be said that the elements of a literary text, such as the types of characters, the plot twists, the rhetorical devices, etc., are also elements of a genre, and belong to a particular genre, for example detective fiction. In this sense, the work, the concrete detective novel, will be participating (or included) in the said genre because its elements are elements of the genre. The work itself, however, will not be an element of the genre – according to the hypothesis, it will not belong to the genre in the sense of set theory. The work will not belong to the genre, only its elements will belong, and the work will be but a subset of the genre. The reason why the work only participates and does not belong, or why it is a subset but not an element, is that what inscribes the novel as a subset in a genre, the trait that marks the belonging of the elements to the genre does not belong to the genre. As Derrida points out, the designation “novel” is not an element of the novel. Marking the genre, it exceeds it, and there is no need to explicitly mention the genre – all traits that mark the genre function in this way. This marking of the genre is a way in which the text turns over to itself, a way in which the text re-marks itself. The mark is re-marking, and the remark does not form part of the genre, or, more generally, of the class it marks. It is in this sense that Derrida argues that “[t]he re-mark of belonging does not belong” (1980, 65).<sup>13</sup> The remark is excessive, and shows that the inclusion without belonging is an excess: “Such a distinctive trait qua mark is however always a priori remarkable. It is always possible that a set – I have compelling reasons for calling this a text, whether it be written or oral – re-marks on this distinctive trait within

itself” (64). The mark or the trait marks the text and thus re-marks itself, becomes remarkable. Remarkable here would mean both noticeable (the readers will notice the trait, will notice the genre) and open for a self-reflexive movement back to itself. In this movement there are two sides. On the one hand, there is the self-referential aspect of the literary work turning to itself. Hence the redoubling – the *re*-marking. On the other hand, remarking itself, the literary work deviates, digresses from itself, or rather opens itself up to something that is not and cannot just be there. It indicates its non-identity with itself. These two sides of the same movement suggest that there is an “inevitable dividing of the trait” that marks the belonging (59). The trait, the re-mark is immanently divided. Therefore, the same movement that self-referentially marks the work does not lead to its closing off on itself but on the contrary opens it up. And this is determinant not only of the relation with a genre but for any relation defining literature: “this re-mark – ever possible for every text, for every corpus of traces – is absolutely necessary for and constitutive of what we call art, poetry, or literature” (64).

This is not the first time Derrida developed the logic of the re-mark, he has dedicated a large part of the texts included in *Dissemination* (and especially “The Double Session” on Mallarmé) to this problematic (see 2000a, 173–285); but to my knowledge this is the first time he articulates it in terms of set theory. In the years to follow he will take up the reference to set theory rarely but the reference is not entirely absent, as can be seen from one of his last books dedicated to a reading of Hélène Cixous. There he argues that the belonging of an element to a set does not exclude the inclusion of the set within the element it is supposed to contain, outlining a logic of the smallest being bigger than the biggest (Derrida 2003c, 84).<sup>14</sup> The set theory is used “at least figuratively” (Derrida 1980, 59; one has to analyze what is the role played by the words “at least [au moins par figure]”) but even if only figuratively, it offers a strict formalization.<sup>15</sup> What is curious in this case is the fact that such a formalization demonstrates that the literary text does not have a fixed form as it is always other than itself. Its form would be “a form without form” (65). It is always possible for a text, “*ever possible for every text*” (64), to remark itself in a different way, to open itself in a new way, and this possibility is part of the way the text will have always already remarked itself.

If the text participates without belonging not only to the different genres but also to the class of texts called “literature”, neither the generic nor the literary set will be able to provide a complete and thorough explanation for the text. It would be rather the other way around – the texts would open the classes – all types of literary classifications up to the very thing we call “literature”. In this case, the critic should pay attention in the first place to the text and the ways in which it re-marks itself in its self-referential moves, or in other words, to the ways in which a text gives itself its own law and at the same time transgresses the law.

### THE LAW GOES MAD

After having stated the general hypothesis that the relation between a particular text and a genre is that of a participation without belonging, Derrida turns to Blan-

chot's *The Madness of the Day* (1999). From the start he notes that one can make "a non-finite number of readings" of the story and therefore his own reading will involve "a brutal and mercilessly depleting selectivity" (66), and he proceeds to give a short account of Blanchot's text, analyzing its status as a *récit* (story, narrative, tale). Derrida stresses the fact that when the text was first published in 1949 in the revue *Empédocle*, the title on the cover was "Un *récit* ?"; while inside the question mark was missing.

Blanchot's first-person narrative relates an accident where the narrator almost loses his sight when someone crushes glass in his eyes, after which he has to go to an institution where an eye doctor and a specialist in mental illness keep asking him to tell them what happened. It begins with sentences that are later repeated within the text as the beginning of the account that the protagonist tries to give to the doctors. When he finishes his story, they claim that it was just the beginning and ask him to get to the facts, and this is when the narrator realizes he cannot form a story out of these events. The work ends with the words "A story? No. No stories, never again. [*Un récit? Non, pas de récit, plus jamais.*]" (1999, 199; 2002, 30).<sup>16</sup>

Many of Blanchot's fictional works offer a narrative that, in the words of Sean Gaston, "is always undone by what cannot be named" (2010, 145), but in the case of *The Madness of the Day* there is also an explicit refusal to tell the story, or any story.<sup>17</sup> Yet, if one takes into consideration the fact that, as Gerald L. Bruns notes, "the refusal to speak is the starting point of Blanchot's poetics" (1997, 23), the last words of *The Madness of the Day* can be read as an epitome of the place from which Blanchot's writing stems. The refusal to tell your own story can be interpreted as a refusal to be formed by the authority, by the law. In his analysis of Blanchot's story and Derrida's reading, Patrick Hanafin argues that such a refusal "reverses the power relation" (2013, 47). As far as the story itself is concerned, however, the case is more complicated, because the law is also the law of the story, and the performative claim that there will be no more stories can be read as a part of the story, one of the ways in which the story re-marks itself.

In Derrida's reading, the repeating of the first lines within the narrative makes the story contain itself, appearing to be at the same time smaller and bigger than itself. At the same time, the problematization of the story-like character of the story at the end puts in question the status of the text as such.<sup>18</sup> These are just two of the ways in which the story re-marks itself and Derrida calls such a re-marking a double chiasmatic invagination of the edges: "What has been remarked on the double chiasmatic invagination of edges should suffice to exclude any notion linking all these complications to pure form or one suggesting that they could be formalized outside the content" (Derrida 1980, 74; translation modified by D. T.). This is a continuation of the conversation with Genette's theory. In Genette's terms, the narrative, or *récit*, is just a mode that can be accounted for in linguistic terms, and not a genre, since the genre is to a large extent defined by its content. For Derrida, Blanchot's *récit* cannot be just a mode, a linguistic and purely formal way of enunciation or presentation because *récit* and "*récit*" are also thematized within the story; in other words,



*récit* here is content-bound. In the case of Blanchot's short work the distinction between mode and genre becomes unstable and undecidable.

In the final part of his analysis Derrida turns to the question of "genre", pointing out how the different meanings of the French word entangle when one tries to interpret the short story and focuses on the sense of sexual difference which the word conveys. "Genre" is also etymologically connected to *engendrer* (engender), which can be expressed in French with the idiom "donner le jour" which means "give birth" but literally can be translated as "to give the light": Ronell has found a solution for this idiom with the expression "brings something forth to the light of day" (Derrida 1980, 76). In Derrida's analysis the narrator is in principle male but the way in which he uses the pronoun "I" (*je*) makes him closer to the way he describes women and allows him to mix the genres/genders. The narrator "then, can keep alive the chance of being fe-male or of changing sex" (76). The genres and the sexes "pass into each other" (76). It is the transsexual narrator who makes it possible to "donner le jour", to bring something forth to the light of day. What the narrator engenders, i.e. gives birth to, is the law.

The law appears in Blanchot's short story as a female character whom the narrator meets during his stay in the hospital-like institution where he goes after the accident which affected his eyes and his mind. After the accident every time the narrator sees the daylight, he feels tremendous pain. The law plays with the narrator and in one of her plays makes him touch her knee (*genou*). The French word for knee is homonymous with the pronouns for "I" (*je*) and "we" (*nous*) and Derrida interprets the scene with the touching of the knee as indicating the mixing of genres. In her play the law wants to see the light, to be born as person, this is her madness. Giving birth to the law, the narrator gives her the daylight. The light itself, however, as related as it is to all European conceptualizations of knowledge and thinking, is the law, and the narrator giving the light (giving birth) to the law, gives the law of the law – and this is the madness of the light, the madness of the law. In this reading no point of view, no sight and no knowledge can be left unaffected.<sup>19</sup> To take but the example of viewpoint, so central for any narratological theory, it is directly connected to the question of light: where it falls, what perspectives it makes possible, etc. the madness of the (day-)light in *The Madness of the Day* would inevitably indicate the problem of the viewpoint and in this way will put into question one of the basic structures of the story, the *récit*. The genre in the sense of sexual difference and the genre in the sense of literary genre, the natural and the artistic meaning of the genre are no longer divided by a single and clearcut line.

In Derrida's reading, Blanchot's text gives itself the law and at the same time undermines, subverts, transgresses and transforms this law. Timothy Clark points this out in his analysis of "The Law of Genre": "The law is not merely transgressed but outlawed, transformed, in the very movement that transgresses it" (1992, 143). It shows how the law is born – and this is the madness of the law.<sup>20</sup> The law of the law, the way the law re-marks itself in the story, reveals the transformability of the form, its playfulness, its potentiality.

## INDETERMINABLE POTENTIALITY

Having reconstructed Derrida's text in a reduced and depleting way, let us go back to its beginning and try to re-read it with regard to its strategy.

The text, it may be said, has two beginnings. The one poses the question of genre (with the constative or performative about not mixing of genres), and the other introduces Blanchot's *récit*. In both cases Derrida insistently warns about the multiple possibilities to read a text. In the first case, the text is Derrida's own. The performative element is not so much in the possibility to read the opening words "Genres are not to be mixed" ("Ne pas mêler les genres", 1980, 55; 2003a, 233) as a directive or a promise, as in the way Derrida stresses the plurality of possible interpretations. The interpretive options "form an open and essentially unpredictable series" (Derrida 1980, 55). In this way he turns the attention of the reader to the potentiality of his own text. And then, when he moves to Blanchot, he repeats the move, even more insistently, this time regarding the interpretative possibilities of Blanchot's work:

One could fashion [*peut faire*] a non-finite number of readings from *La Folie du jour*. I have attempted a few myself, and shall do so again elsewhere, from another point of view. The *topos* of view, sight, blindness, *point of view* is, moreover, inscribed and traversed in *La Folie du jour* according to a sort of permanent revolution that engenders and virtually brings to the light of day points of view, twists, versions, and reversions of which the sum remains necessarily uncountable and the account, impossible. (66)

And a sentence later: "A brutal and mercilessly depleting selectivity will obtrude upon me, upon us, in the name of a law that *La Folie du jour* has, in its turn, already reviewed [...]" (66). Ten pages further Derrida indicates the non-finite possibilities for interpreting the different titles of the story with a series of questions left open.

It is noteworthy that the possible readings of Blanchot's text are articulated with terms (words and idiomatic expressions) stemming from the text itself. In other words, Derrida uses elements of the text as tools for his own analysis. In Arleen Ionescu's succinct formulation: "Derrida writes on Blanchot with Blanchot's means" (2011, 63). In this way, he lets the text self-referentially remark itself. Or, put simply, he lets the text talk about itself. What is important is that the law of this self-referentiality is not taken from elsewhere, it is traced as a movement within the text, a movement that does not close but opens the text to the coming of the other. And it is not a coincidence that the text speaks thematically of the law, of the birth of the law and of the madness of the law. As it is not a coincidence that question of point of view is posed in the text making any theoretical claim for a general understanding of the term "point of view" suspicious. Law, point of view, sexual difference, light, madness are all elements by which the text re-marks itself giving and withdrawing its own laws. It turns out that it is not the work that is modelled after the genre but the other way around: it is the genre that gets modelled after the work. This is one of the many outcomes of the interpretation of the law in *The Madness of the Day* in light of the question of the law of genre.

Borrowing his analytical instruments from the text he analyzes, Derrida outlines the singularity of the text, the dimension of the text that is irreducible to any general theory, or classification. The texts make theories and classifications simultaneously

possible and impossible. Impossible, in the sense that in the division of its re-markings, the text remains always open to a different reading, to another interpretation, to yet another theorization. And this is the case not only here but also in most of Derrida's published readings of literary texts. This can be seen already in *De la grammatologie* (1967; Eng. trans. *Of Grammatology*, 1976) and even more clearly in the "Double Session" on Mallarmé in *Dissemination*, where the mimic, the mirrors, the phantoms and phantasms, the hymen and the fans as instruments for the theorization all come from Mallarmé (Derrida 1972 and 2000a). In the same vein, the right column in *Glas* takes its tools from Jean Genet's writings (see Derrida 1986), while in his analysis of Francis Ponge's poem "Fable", Derrida singularizes terms such as "fable", "mirror", or "reading" following the poem and letting it speak about itself (1998, 11–61). In these and in many other cases, one can easily see how the analytical tools come from the text under analysis and as a result the text's singularity becomes tangible. From this point of view, the mention of set theory in the book on Cixous referred to above, is influenced by the play with "set theory" and "jet theory" stemming from Cixous's own puns with "jet" and "je t'.." (Derrida 2003c, 64).

In order to show this, Derrida lets his own writing be affected by the text he reads. This is nothing new but what is important from the perspective of the present essay is that in his readings, in these deconstructive models he builds of what he writes on, the model has its own potentiality. Affected by the text under analysis, Derrida's writing opens up its own field of possible readings. The language of the commentary is not immune to contamination from the commented text. It is the opposite that is true. Hence the endless remarks at the beginnings of Derrida's texts, the introduction of a sentence or an expression (like the abovementioned "Genres are not to be mixed") and then the long discussion on its many possible meanings.

The singularization of the work which becomes visible through the way it indicates itself means that no general theory would be directly applicable. In the case of Blanchot's *écrit*, Genette's distinctions between nature and its others (history, *tekhne*, etc.), on the one hand, and between mode and genre, on the other, turned out to be problematic and undecidable. As I have already asked, why introduce them in the first place? Is it just because Derrida wanted to show the limitations of Genette's theory? What seems to me decisive is that an entirely naïve approach to a text is a fantasy. The readers always have their preconceptions, pre-comprehensions, and prejudices. Introducing a theory from the start makes the point of departure clearer, it elucidates an initial understanding, even if this understanding is not shared by the reader. This could be one of the reasons why the whole first part of "The Law of Genre" deals with generalities (including both set theory and Genette's genre theory) before moving to the story. On another note, the use of a theory when the elements of the work become analytic instruments results in the singularization of theory correlative to the singularization of the work. Imagine a theory suitable for one and only one object. It would no longer be a theory in the proper sense, but it would help in the attempt to grasp the singularity of the work. One can interpret in this direction Derrida's frequent reference to literary theory and criticism when he comments on literary works. To give but one example, in "Double Session" such

a point of departure for the singularization of Mallarmé in the second part would have been Jean-Pierre Richard and his great book on the French poet – the point is not to criticize the previous research but to use it as a stepping stone and transform it (Derrida 2000a, 231n40).

For all these reasons, Derrida's deconstruction is not and should not be a method when dealing with literary texts. The methodological element would remain on the level of theory before its singularization. If one starts with whatever theory, but then borrows one's instruments from the work under analysis and lets the work indicate in a formal manner its own potentiality, each time the method will be different. In other words, there will be no method. As long as one follows the ways and modes in which each text self-referentially re-marks itself, there will be no general or generalizable method.

Would not however singularization lend itself to the reductions of the particular reading? How can the critic (if this word should still be used) be sure they are not just substituting their own interpretation for the text? Derrida's strategy seems to be aware of this risk. That is why he not only offers several paths of interpretation but insists that there are countless other possibilities. In other words, in this case the strategy consists in using the multiple interpretations outlined in the text as indices to something that remains outside and beyond them. If there is more than one interpretation included in the text, the very fact of juxtaposition of several readings will be an indication that there could be other possibilities. In this way, the tools borrowed from the work will be indicating formally the work not as something given and determinable, but as possibility that can never be fully determined.

What is then the nature of the potentiality in literature? The trait which re-marks the text opens it to the other. The other can be an empirical reader but before any empirical reader it is the inscription of the possibility for a non-determinable reading. What on the phenomenological level would appear as unforeseeability or unpredictability, ontologically appears as indeterminacy. If in its relation to itself the literary text is open to the other and is thus indeterminable by nature, then literature cannot have an essence. The text will always be then something different, something else. It will be impossible to say "this is that", impossible to catch it. One reading will find one thing, another will interpret it differently; each reading can attempt to reduce it to a particular interpretation but the possibility to read it yet again, otherwise, will remain. And it will remain in the text as long as in its relation to itself the text re-marks and opens itself. Having no essence means that its potentiality cannot be predetermined. This is a very peculiar sort of potentiality (*puissance*), a "rare force", to use Derrida's words quoted at the beginning. The force of the literary text has inscribed the other as something eternally to come, or rather, the force is this inscription. Traditionally, potentiality is conceived as something pre-given that has only to be actualized. In the case of literature, the possible is not pre-given. If it is not pre-given and is indeterminable, the possible cannot be distinguished from the impossible. And the impossible happens, unpredictably. What this means with regard to the force of literature is the following: this force is without force. "At the limit, null" (Derrida 1986, 198–199). The power (*puissance*) of the text is powerless. No actualization can

exhaust it or dry it up, so it remains, and remains in *potential*: an impossible possibility and the possibility of the impossible. It is because of this that literature is infinitely fragile and vulnerable. Its potency is its gallows – and it is so easy to hang it, or make it hang itself. But the gallows that it is, can indicate, each time in a singular manner, the non-finite number of other readings already inscribed, and thus its survival, and thus the coming of the impossible.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> For Derrida's own general account of his understanding of literature, see Derrida and Attridge 1992, 33–75. For a more comprehensive discussion on the relation of Derrida to literature, see also Attridge 1992, 1–28; Clark 1992, 108–191; Markowski 1997; Kronick 1999.
- <sup>2</sup> How this tendency can lead to travesty is documented by the recently published volume edited by Emmanuelle Hénin, Xavier-Laurent Salvador, and Pierre-Henri Tavoillot, *Après la déconstruction : L'université au défi des idéologies* (After deconstruction: The universe in defiance of ideologies, 2023). It gathers the texts presented at a conference at the Sorbonne in 2022, which was one of the most virulent attacks on deconstruction. Tavoillot offers what he calls a “genealogy of deconstruction” and distinguishes three periods arguing that the first two periods took place with the beginning of Modern times (the first one from Descartes to Kant, and the second one with Schopenhauer and Nietzsche) and that the third period, which he calls precisely “deconstructionism”, is what came into being with thinkers such as Derrida, Foucault, and Bourdieu and is deconstruction proper (Tavoillot 2023, 22). Salvador uses deconstructionism and deconstructivism interchangeably (2023, 83–85). The misunderstandings, intentional or not, in that volume, should be discussed in a separate article. As it should be clear, “deconstructivism” here (a form more used in the Slavic-language academia; see, for example, Georgiev 2006, 242–249) is not to be mistaken with the architectural movement.
- <sup>3</sup> Thomassen is very careful when arguing about the method of deconstruction and notes not only that the method of deconstruction implies a deconstruction of method, but also that each time deconstruction is put in use as a method, it rearticulates both its object and the method (2010, 44).
- <sup>4</sup> “La déconstruction n'est pas une méthode et ne peut pas être transformée en méthode” (Derrida 2003b, 12).
- <sup>5</sup> “La déconstruction n'est ni une théorie ni une philosophie. Ce n'est ni une école, ni une méthode” (Derrida [1990] 2009, 243).
- <sup>6</sup> Barbara Johnson attempts to account for the different possible meanings of the French expression by translating: “Its steps allow for (no) *method*” (Derrida 2000a, 271).
- <sup>7</sup> “C'est 'ce qui arrive'” (Derrida 2009, 243).
- <sup>8</sup> “La déconstruction a lieu, c'est un événement qui n'attend pas la délibération” (Derrida 2003b, 12).
- <sup>9</sup> “La littérature telle que la 'défini' Derrida – disons plutôt telle qu'il l' 'infini' – est soustraite à toute détermination ou spécificité typologique, générique, formelle, etc.” (Michaud 2006, 34). Unless otherwise noted all translations from French are by the present author.
- <sup>10</sup> On the singularity in literature and the singularity of literature, interpreted from a deconstructive perspective, see Attridge 2004.
- <sup>11</sup> The most important part of “The Law of Genre” was presented during the lecture course on “Right to Literature” (“Du droit à la littérature”) from 1978–1979 (see Derrida 1978, Box 14, Folders 13 and especially 14), but some aspects were developed the previous year during the seminar on “Given Time” (“Donner le temps”) (Derrida 2021, 179–208) or earlier. So it is not by accident that, as Leslie Hill points out, “much of what is mobilised by Derrida in his account of the gift is closely linked to his reading of Blanchot's story *La Folie du jour*” (2010, 344).
- <sup>12</sup> There are nearly four pages missing in the translation published in *Critical Inquiry* (Derrida 1980, 59–63).

- <sup>13</sup> Several years after “The Law of Genre” another French philosopher, Alain Badiou, was also to turn to set theory and to develop some of the other philosophical corollaries of the power set axiom, noting that there can be three options: belonging and inclusion, belonging without inclusion, and inclusion without belonging, the last one being called by him “excrescence” (“excroissance” in French; 1988, 75–76, 109–128).
- <sup>14</sup> Other texts that refer to the set theory distinction, include Derrida [1988] 2000b, 127–128 and Derrida 1993, 13–14.
- <sup>15</sup> On the question of formalization in logical or logico-mathematical terms of the self-referential deconstructive operations traced by Derrida, see Norris 2004, 16–65; Priest [1995] 2002, 209–224; Livingston 2010, 221–239. Unfortunately, none of these works takes into account Derrida’s reference to set theory. Paul Livingston uses Gödel and the notion of diagonalization in order to demonstrate the manner in which the undecidables in Derrida (including the “re-mark”) produce the aporia of the limit: “The system is closed only at the price of an inherent paradox of tracing its limits, and open just insofar as this paradoxical closure also operates as the diagonalization that generates a contradictory point that is both inside and outside” (233). This is very close to what Derrida’s reference to set theory demonstrates. However, it is difficult to follow Livingston when he claims that this would imply that the outside of the system “is necessarily a *specific* ‘outside’” (235). From the viewpoint of the discussion here, it is rather the opposite that is the case – through the way it is self-referentially re-marked the system is opened to an outside that is not *its* outside and therefore cannot be predetermined. Such is the case with the possibility for a still indeterminate future reading of a work: the work would have made the reading possible via its own re-marking and yet it does not predetermine the reading. I discuss the question of possibility this problematic suggests at the end of the paper and give a different interpretation to Derrida’s “possibility as impossibility” than the one proposed by Livingston who solves the problem by reducing the possibility/impossibility dyad to a contradiction grasped in terms of undecidability (234–236).
- <sup>16</sup> This account of *The Madness of the Day* is very misleading in the way it chooses to focus on some parts of the story while reducing others that may have been as equally – or even more – important. To give but an example: at one point the narrator mentions how during the war he was “made to stand against the wall” but the “guns did not go off” (Blanchot 1999, 191–192). This event was retold again by Blanchot in “The Instant of my Death” (2000, 2–11) and has an autobiographical origin (Bident 2019, 462–464). “The Instant of My Death” suggests that Blanchot’s survival after the assassination attempt during World War II has played an important role in his writing and in his concept of writing. It implies that the mention of the event in *The Madness of the Day* should not just be passed over in silence. On “The Instant of My Death”, see Derrida’s 2000c, 15–103 and Lacoue-Labarthe’s 2011. Michaud argues that as both *The Madness of the Day* and “The Instant of My Death” start with the ending, both works can be read as if what follows the experience of the quasi-execution comes before it and conditions the testimony (2006, 100–101).
- <sup>17</sup> On the relation between naming and *récit*, Arleen Ionescu argues that *récit* as the name given to what cannot be named is related to Blanchot’s concept of the neutral (2011, 65–66).
- <sup>18</sup> Here I use the English “story” to render the French *récit* which is simplifying and misleading, especially with regard to Blanchot. For Blanchot’s theoretical understanding of *récit*, see Blanchot [1959] 2003, 5–7. For a genealogy and a detailed analysis of the way Blanchot has theorized on *récit* and used the word in his literary works, see Takayama 2021. Hanako Takayama discusses *The Madness of the Day* and Derrida’s interpretation (49–62) and argues that until the end of the 1940s Blanchot used the word predominantly in its traditional sense of “narrative” (62). For a general discussion on the uses of *récit* in the context of 20th century French literature and the place of Blanchot in it, see Rabaté 2018.
- <sup>19</sup> According to Hill, Derrida was already indirectly commenting on *The Madness of the Day* in *Glas* precisely via the focus on the themes of giving and taking of light, sight and vision, etc. In his interpretation, Blanchot’s *The Writing of the Disaster* can be read as a response to *Glas* – which would imply that *The Writing of the Disaster* is a reevaluation not only of Blanchot’s own references to Hegel, but also to his early *récits* such as “Death Sentence” and “The Madness of the Day” (see Hill 2016).

<sup>20</sup> This can be linked to what Derrida will call ten years later “the mystical foundation of authority” borrowing the expression from Montaigne and Pascal (see Derrida [1994] 2002, 230–298) and in this sense is directly related to the problem of sovereignty as discussed by Patrick Hanafin (2013).

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