

BJÖRN MEIER

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Subversive Narrative Techniques and  
Self-Reflexivity in Vladimir Nabokov's  
*The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, Lolita,*  
*Pnin, Pale Fire* and *Ada, or Ardor:*  
*A Family Chronicle*

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A Critical Investigation into the  
Application of the Theory of Deconstruction  
in Contemporary Literary Criticism

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**DISSERTATION**

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Presented in the Faculty of Arts of the  
University of Cape Town for the degree of  
Master of Arts

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*For*

.....

*(fill in appropriately)*

*10/11/12*

*Car qu'est-ce que penser – si ce n'est à autre chose? C'est le cours qui est beau, oui, c'est le cours, et son murmure qui chemine hors du boucan du monde. Que l'on tâche d'arrêter la pensée pour en exprimer le contenu au grand jour, on aura, comment dire, comment ne pas dire plutôt, pour préserver le tremblé ouvert des contours insaisissables, on n'aura rien, de l'eau entre le doigts, quelques gouttes vidées de grâce brûlées dans la lumière. C'était la nuit maintenant dans mon esprit, j'étais seul dans la pénombre de la cabine et je pensais, apaisé des tourments du dehors. Les conditions les plus douces pour penser, en effet, les moment où la pensée se laisse le plus volontiers couler dans les méandres réguliers de son cours, sont précisément les moment où, ayant provisoirement renoncé à se mesurer à une réalité qui semble inépuisable, les tensions commencent à décroître peu à peu, toutes les tensions accumulées pour se garder des blessures qui menacent – et j'en savais des infimes –, et que, seul dans un endroit clos, seul et suivant le cours de ses pensées dans le soulagement naissant, on passe progressivement de la difficulté de vivre au désespoir d'être*

—JEAN-PHILIPPE TOUSSAINT  
*L'appareil photo*

*Words are very unnecessary,  
They can only do harm*

—DEPECHE MODE

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# CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION .....	1
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## I. DECONSTRUCTION

<b>1.1. Principles of Deconstruction .....</b>	<b>6</b>
1.1.1. The "Concept" of Deconstruction .....	6
1.1.2. Différance and Temporality.....	9
1.1.3. The Deconstructive Method .....	14
1.1.4. Dissemination .....	18
1.1.5. Iterability of the Sign and Grammar of the Text .....	24
1.1.6. History as Transformation of Structure .....	29
1.1.7. Subjectivity and Meaning .....	34
1.1.8. Text and Textuality.....	37
<b>1.2. Deconstruction in Literary Criticism .....</b>	<b>43</b>
1.2.1. Definitions .....	43
1.2.2. Grammar and Rhetoric .....	49
1.2.3. Literariness of Discourse.....	54
1.2.4. The Aesthetic Code .....	58
<b>1.3. Metafiction.....</b>	<b>65</b>
1.3.1. Definitions .....	65
1.3.2. Metafiction and the Evolution of the Genre 'Novel'.....	70
1.3.3. Metafiction and Postmodernism.....	71
<b>1.4. Deconstruction and Postmodernism.....</b>	<b>76</b>

## II. VLADIMIR NABOKOV

<b>2.1. Œuvre and Reception History .....</b>	<b>80</b>
<b>2.2. Aesthetics .....</b>	<b>84</b>
<b>2.3. Selected Novels .....</b>	<b>89</b>
2.3.1. <i>The Real Life of Sebastian Knight</i> .....	89
2.3.2. <i>Lolita</i> .....	95
2.3.3. <i>Pnin</i> .....	100
2.3.4. <i>Pale Fire</i> .....	107
2.3.5. <i>Ada, or Ardor: A Family Chronicle</i> .....	119

## III. CONCLUSION

<b>3.1. Deconstruction in the Novel .....</b>	<b>132</b>
<b>3.2. Self-Deconstruction as Postmodernism in Literature? .....</b>	<b>135</b>
<b>3.3. Deconstruction as Interpretation Theory .....</b>	<b>139</b>
REFERENCE.....	143
INDEX .....	153

## ABSTRACT

This dissertation has three aims. First, the establishment of the theoretical foundations of deconstruction and its appropriation by literary criticism. Second, the application of deconstruction to the novels of Nabokov; it has to be stressed that this application is not itself a deconstructive reading, rather that deconstruction offers the interpretative horizon for an analysis of the inner logic of self-reflexivity in the novels in question, which is defined with de Man and against Derrida as a procedure of textual self-deconstruction. The procedure, evident in the proliferation of textual strategies in Nabokov's work, marks the point at which literary modernism transforms itself through the radicalisation of the critique of narrative, subject and meaning into a postmodern aesthetics of deconstruction. The interpretation of the novels then serves thirdly to pose the question of the value of the theory of deconstruction for the task of interpretation, or more generally, the value of deconstruction for literary theory.

The interpretation of Nabokov's novels reveals a paradox: self-deconstructive literature does not require a deconstructive reading. On the contrary, the textual deconstruction of meaning and reference requires the non-deconstructive standpoint of a coherent literary analysis for its demonstration. Comparably and conversely, a deconstructive reading presupposes a text and/or an author committed to the intention of a meaningful whole (however ambiguous).

The author's distinction between deconstruction as a method of interpretation and as a literary theory thus points to the limitations of deconstruction as interpretative method in relation to modern and postmodern texts precisely because of their metafictional affinity to deconstruction. Beyond this, however, deconstruction's treatment of the text as pretext for its own operations, taken to its logical conclusion, would dissolve the very cognitive object and interest of literary studies.



# INTRODUCTION

This dissertation combines an interpretative interest with a question of literary criticism. On the theoretical side, I will be discussing 'deconstruction' as the French philosopher Jacques Derrida has developed it, while the literary anchor point will be a critical reading of a selection of Vladimir Nabokov's novels. I will thus attempt to link a relatively recent philosophical and text-theoretical school of thought that, with its global attack on the history of traditional western philosophy, brings up against itself Neomarxists as much as defenders of the established American literary criticism, with the work of an author that is marked by a proliferation of textual strategies.

Reading Nabokov's novels it is interesting to detect an increasing aspect of reflexivity: this development, in fact, commands the aesthetic evolution of his entire novelistic work. Reflexivity here at first only means that the subject of Nabokov's writing is writing, or maybe language itself. Thus, he radicalises the concept of the modern novel, which stands for the loss of world and a subsequent tendency toward language. I believe, however, that with the application of 'subversive' narrative techniques that deconstruct both narrator-subject and meaningful discourses, Nabokov's novels not only make the fullest use of the aesthetics of the modern novel but also eventually surpass it. The proposition of this dissertation is therefore that Nabokov's non-mimetic literature is an expression of aesthetic self-deconstruction.

The reaction to extremely reflexive literature is generally characterised by interpretative helplessness: in Anglo-American literary criticism Nabokov ranks among the most-critiqued authors of the twentieth century. The extensive history of the reception of Nabokov's work must thus draw attention to the limitations of a traditional literary criticism that is still operating with clear-cut concepts of 'meaning' that result from the generally felt loss of mimetic relationship between work and world.

The aspect of reflexivity links literature to the theory of deconstruction. Point of departure for the textual analysis is the assumption that the formal construction of Nabokov's novels is highly reminiscent of the theory of deconstruction. It is this dissertation's theory that subjectivity, mimetics and meaning are deconstructed in Nabokov's texts.

Deconstructive theory, critically examined, will thus be the interpretative background against which I will read Nabokov's novels. His critique of the traditional concepts of linguistic meaning and of subjectivity as the origin and centre of meaning will be captured through the application of this theory. The subversive narrative techniques in his novels can be understood as

the methods of textual self-deconstruction which were developed by Paul de Man: a rupturing, non-identifying reflexivity contained within literary texts.

This analysis of Nabokov's novels will therefore not be a deconstructive reading but will examine aesthetically realised deconstructive strategies; deconstruction will not be *applied* to the novels in question but will instead be *located* within the poetic texts themselves.

With the departure from the poetics of mimetics in favour of a radically rupturing reflexivity, Nabokov surpasses philosophical modernism; his aesthetics (in contrast to his decidedly metaphysical concept of art in general) practises what Derrida and de Man theoretically postulate.

Deconstruction in theory and in the novel marks the point at which modernism exceeds itself through an act of reflexivity. Tentatively, one could define Nabokov's position with the pair of modernism and postmodernism. It is especially the subversive deconstruction of the genre's traditional values and—with regard to deconstruction—of the dominance of presence in western philosophy respectively that suggest that postmodernism can be thought only in *relation* to modernism, and not in isolation.

The term 'postmodernism' requires further elucidation as situating Nabokov hypothetically only indicates his *philosophical* and *theoretical* standpoint. Concerning aesthetics, though, we have to recognise that already literary modernity aesthetically and critically reflected on the categories of history<sup>1</sup> and subjectivity.<sup>2</sup> It remains therefore vague what exactly it is that marks *literary* and *aesthetic postmodernism*.<sup>3</sup> Here, the critical literature argues controversially; my assumption is that the conception of postmodernism is only tenable if we choose to understand it as the aesthetic radicalisation of modernism, of which it has always already been an inherent quality. With the concept of *literary self-deconstruction* a postmodern aesthetics, which goes beyond the reflexive critique of modernism, is conceivable. This hypothesis, however, will have to admit that a rigorous systematic separation of the two concepts is problematic.

From the confrontation of literary texts and theory follows, that deconstruction, as a literary and interpretative theory, requires a metatheoretical reflection. With the novels' readings, deconstructive theory will be examined retrospectively for its significance as a possible interpretative theory or method; what can deconstruction accomplish that goes beyond the other critical techniques' achievements which are criticised by it? Moreover: does it have any significance as a *literary* theory? The Anglo-American discussion of this theory was centrally interested in the radical challenges of deconstruction.<sup>4</sup> In the controversy about deconstruction's

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<sup>1</sup> One example would be Joyce's rehabilitation of mythos in *Ulysses*.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Musil's *Man Without Qualities* is a paradigm for a reflexive critique of subjectivity as an unifying instance of experiencing the world.

<sup>3</sup> The eclectic aesthetics of especially postmodern architecture, i.e. the haphazard citation of pre-modern forms, will be omitted from this dissertation.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. 1.1.1. The 'Concept' of Deconstruction

dominance within the range of literary techniques (and this is deconstruction's claim for universality), the supporters of deconstruction were confronted only with defenders of traditional critical 'values' – the advocates of the New Criticism and of reception aesthetics (supported by Stanley Fish).

In this conflict, the fundamental methodological reflection, i.e. whether the 'philosophical school' of deconstruction is generally applicable to literary criticism was entirely lost.<sup>1</sup> A discussion about deconstructive theory will however only make sense if we first systematise the basic principles of this theory which completely eludes the demands of 'scientific discourse'—consistency and comprehension—to examine it for its relevance in literary theory in a subsequent step.

According to the dual perspective of this dissertation—deconstruction and Nabokov—, I will begin the first part with a systematic introduction to the theory of deconstruction.<sup>2</sup> Considering the complexity of the topic, this dissertation cannot possibly hope to present a comprehensive introduction; the exposition will therefore focus on relevant aspects. Among these are Derrida's critique of the classical concept of the sign as well as of the 'traditional' concepts of subjectivity and meaning. Here I will refer mainly to Derrida's texts up to 1972 as they are composed most systematically and are therefore conducive for a discussion from a literary theory viewpoint. Later writings, like for example *The Truth in Painting* (1978) and *The Post Card* (1980) are too complex and too coded in their argumentative strategies and their philosophical allusions that an analysis would exceed the limited frame of this dissertation.

Following the introduction of the basic principles of deconstruction, I will discuss the American deconstructive literary theory, especially of the American Romance scholar and comparatist Paul de Man. Following this theoretical preparation, a discussion about the possibility of typological and historical definition of *reflexive* and *self-deconstructive* novels will ensue. Almost like a provisional appraisal I will then attempt a first metatheoretical positioning of deconstruction in relation to postmodernism.

In the second part, I will analyse Vladimir Nabokov's novels, with focus on *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, *Lolita*, *Pnin*, *Pale Fire* and *Ada, or Ardor* in chronological order after a brief introduction to Nabokov's aesthetics. The selection of these novels follows the representation of an increasing radicalisation of reflexive and self-deconstructive narrative strategies. I will not deal with Nabokov's late prose in detail as it does not seem to present any further innovation concerning the evolution of reflexivity in his *œuvre*. My interpretation of this fact is that

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<sup>1</sup> Gasché ("Deconstruction as Criticism") seems to be the first to mention this deficit – in the recent past a vast amount of publications about Derrida has discussed single aspects of his theory without either establishing its theoretical significance for literary theory nor testing its application as an interpretative method.

<sup>2</sup> For which I will make use of the seminal works of Culler (*On Deconstruction*), Gasché (*The Tain of the Mirror*) and Frank (*What is Neostructuralism?*).

these texts are ultimately expressions of an *aesthetic stagnation* which, however, is in accordance with the immanent logic of reflexive texts and thus unavoidable (Here I am referring to *Transparent Things* and *Look at the Harlequins!*.)

In the third and final part I will summarise the whole field 'deconstruction in the novel' and will contextualise it with the debate around postmodernism. The aim of the concluding meta-theoretical contemplation is to provide a small contribution to the discussion about the significance of deconstruction in literary theory.

# I.

## DECONSTRUCTION

*A poetry exists whose sole object is the relation between the ideal and the real, which one should therefore call, by analogy with the technical language of philosophy, transcendental poetry [...]. No doubt a transcendental philosophy would not have much credibility if it were not critical, if it did not represent the producer as well as the product, if it did not contain, in its system of transcendental thought, a characteristic of the act of transcendental thought. The same is true for this poetry. Thus it should combine material of a transcendental nature, and the exercise that lays the groundwork for a poetic theory of the literary faculty (which one finds quite frequently in modern writers), with artistic reflexion and the fine self-reflexion that is at work in Pindar, in Greek lyric fragments, in the elegies of the antiquity, and, amongst the moderns, in Goethe – it should represent itself in each of its representations, and throughout be both poetry and poetry of poetry.*

—FRIEDRICH SCHLEGEL  
*Athenaeum* fragment 238

## 1.1. PRINCIPLES OF DECONSTRUCTION

### 1.1.1. The "Concept" of Deconstruction

In spite of the widespread reception of Jacques Derrida's work by Anglo-American criticism there is still much disagreement about the question what exactly 'deconstruction' actually is. The secretive dark cloak with which this poststructuralist theory seems to wrap itself is not only incentive for numerous bitter polemics<sup>1</sup> but it also nourishes parodistic portrayals of its idiosyncratic attitude toward language<sup>2</sup> as well as of its far-reaching effects on academia in general.

A tentative definition of deconstruction is, indeed, at first easiest achieved with a sequence of eliminations, or negative descriptions, as Rodolphe Gasché demonstrates:

Deconstruction is not to be mistaken for a nihilism, nor for a metaphysics of absence, nor for a negative theology. It is not a demolition and a dismantling to be opposed by or calling for a rebuilding and a reconstruction. It is not to be taken for what Heidegger calls destruction. (Gasché, "Deconstruction as Criticism": 180)

This, however, determines neither the concept of deconstruction nor its theoretical status. Yet this very uncertainty, which has been multiplied since deconstruction's annexation by Anglo-American literary criticism, is an inherent quality of the theory itself:<sup>3</sup> radically refusing the possibility of techno-scientific domination in its field of interest, it likewise refuses self-definition.<sup>4</sup>

Thus the concept of deconstruction is by now laden with a double equivocation: an intrinsic part of the deconstructive endeavour is the intentional elusion of its own fixation into a concept;<sup>5</sup> apart from that—possibly because of deconstruction's relatively early transition to the field of literary theory—a methodological legitimatisation has generally been neglected. The reception of deconstructive theory was then further tainted by the divergent academic socialisations in Anglo-America and Europe respectively.

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<sup>1</sup> The Austin/Searle vs. Derrida debate about speech act theory or the Woollen vs. Derrida affair about Heidegger might be named here as examples.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Italo Calvino's *If On A Winter's Night A Traveller*.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Gasché's critique of the reception of Derrida's works ("Deconstruction as Criticism". *The Tain of the Mirror*), and concerning the situation in German academia, see Forget (*Text und Interpretation*: 20).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. especially Gasché's work – I will later focus on this problematic of definition.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. especially Gasché's critique ("Deconstruction as Criticism"; "'Setzung' and 'Übersetzung': Notes on de Man" and "Joining the Text").

In accordance with recent writings on this topic we can come, however, to a preliminary definition of the concept and the location of deconstructive theory. Following Culler, there are three discernible areas of application of deconstruction: as *philosophy* it aims to be fundamental critique of Western metaphysics, as *interpretation method* it attempts a *subversive* reading of texts, and as a specifically *poststructuralist theory* it develops a concept of the sign and of structure which transcends the taxonomic structuralism (Culler, *On Deconstruction*: 154).

These three areas of application have a common theoretical foundation: the point of departure of deconstruction, as philosophical or linguistic school or as reading strategy is—in correspondence with classical structuralism and the analytical philosophy of language<sup>1</sup>—the paradigm shift from the priority of (self-) consciousness, or the subject, toward the signification system of language. Frank sums this up:

It is no longer consciousness that is the transcendental place of the "condition of possibility" for meaning, significance, and reference, rather it is the sign. Transcendental philosophy is transformed or dissolved into semiology, i.e. in the theory of signs. (Frank, *What is Neostructuralism?*: 217)

Here, with the turning away from the subject, Derrida takes up Ferdinand de Saussure's thoughts: language (*langue*) as a system of differences exists prior to all individual meaning and is therefore never to be understood as an expression of pre-semiotic or pre-linguistic conceptions. Deconstruction is thus situated *after* the *linguistic turn*.

With this we have implicitly mentioned two of Derrida's fundamental thoughts: first, the exclusively social character of language with its priority over the individual (with this notion Derrida places himself, without emphasis, into the tradition of hermeneutics),<sup>2</sup> and, second, the linguistic character of all relations between subject and world and the subject's perception of itself. The autonomy of a thinking and meaning-endowing individual consciousness is subordinated to the trans-individual system of language. In fact, language itself becomes both centre and model of the Human Sciences in general.<sup>3</sup>

Situating deconstruction after the paradigm shift of the *linguistic turn* seems to imply a radical new beginning of thought. This, however, requires some limitations if one does not want to deprive Derrida of his anchor points in the historical tradition. Especially Anglo-American criticism, in its attempt to determine and conceptually fixate deconstruction, has—probably be-

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<sup>1</sup> Frank renders these correspondences precisely as, first, the break with metaphysics, second, recourse to language and third, the rejection of the representational model of language (*What is Neostructuralism?*).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Frank's substantiation of correspondences between deconstruction's language theory and hermeneutics (*What is Neostructuralism?*).

<sup>3</sup> The heuristic value of such transition is demonstrated by Lévi-Strauss and his structural anthropology, which is based on the assumption that the structure of social systems is organised analogously to the structure of language.

cause of its methodological past that is chiefly text immanent—emphasised the aspect of discontinuity, of rupture, much more strongly than Derrida himself;<sup>1</sup> he in fact explicitly relativises the radical new approach of Saussure (of whom he considers himself a successor) by showing that there were contradictions already in Rousseau's conception of language which indicate the arbitrariness of the sign. Consequently, he re-locates and relativises aspects of the epistemological break historically into the past. This is why Derrida does not accept the term *linguistic turn* as a demarcation of a linguistic presence that completely breaks with its non-linguistic past. Instead, he presumes an all-encompassing tradition of a phonocentric and metaphysical philosophy of presence that increasingly undermines itself.

When Manfred Frank, who is probably the most prominent German critic of French post-structuralism,<sup>2</sup> claims that the *linguistic mediation* of all world experience and the impossibility of 'catching up' with meaning were already integral components of Friedrich Schleiermacher's hermeneutics, with which he then challenges poststructuralism,<sup>3</sup> his critique applies more to Derrida's adepts and interpreters than to Derrida himself. It has to be admitted that Derrida apparently never explicitly expressed his special links to German Romanticism and Idealism; Derrida's frequent historical associations, however, clearly indicate his indebtedness to the philosophical tradition.

In the many threads of textual recourses, with which Derrida tries to expose the various motives of metaphysical-logocentric Western philosophy and its immanent rupturing force, he always comes back to three authors as crucial supporters of his theory about the end of metaphysics: Nietzsche, Freud and Heidegger.

For Derrida, each of these three philosophers represents a specific turning point in the conclusion of the era of metaphysics, or of a beginning of a post-metaphysical, post-logocentric era. Nietzsche is seen as the one who overcame the longing for the absent origin, i.e. for truth, and who in fact affirms this 'origin-lessness'. Freud is interpreted by Derrida as the thinker of the *trace* and the *supplement* and is therefore seen as support in his, Derrida's, attack against the idealistic philosophy of the subject. Finally, with the deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence, Derrida takes up Heidegger's critique of onto-theology (i.e. metaphysics). Just like him, Heidegger, according to Derrida, views the philosophical tradition with a dual perspective: the veiling of the truth of Being in the history of ontology on the one hand, and at the same time the

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<sup>1</sup> An exception are Gasché's studies of Derrida which refer especially to Derrida's relations with Heidegger and Husserl, and Rorty's classification of deconstruction as following in the tradition of Hegel, Heidegger and Gadamer ("Philosophy as a Kind of Writing"). (The affinity to Gadamer, however, seems to be more than problematic, as the controversy between Forget and Rorty demonstrates [Forget, *Text und Interpretation*]).

<sup>2</sup> For Frank, poststructuralism is a continuation of, rather than a rupture from structuralism. Hence his term *Neostrukturalismus*.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Frank (*Das Sagbare und das Unsagbare; What is Neostructuralism?* and *Die Unhintergebarkeit von Individualität*). – cf. 1.1.7. Subjectivity and Meaning.

emergence of the hidden on the other hand. The function of Heidegger's *destruction* is to lay bare the origins of the truth of being. In *destruction*, says Derrida in his paper on Heidegger, Being is revealed.

Following from Heidegger's thinking, which, according to Derrida, is still tied up with fundamental ontology and metaphysics, Derrida develops his conception of *deconstruction* which is, even more than Heidegger's *destruction*, marked by an inclusion of what it is eventually trying to overcome.<sup>1</sup>

Derrida's ambivalent relation to the philosophical tradition, here only briefly mentioned, indicates first, a historical perspective and second, his understanding of *reading as critique*. This critical reading, however, does not aim to posit an oppositional other but rather emphasises the extrapolation of inherent contradictions within the text.

Significant for a preliminary definition of deconstruction, with which I will be working in this dissertation, is therefore deconstruction's position after, or in context with, the *linguistic turn*, the double or ambivalent relationship with the philosophical tradition, and the emphatic insistence on the possibility of critique.<sup>2</sup> In the following, I will try to substantiate this basis with an analysis of deconstruction's theoretical foundations and strategic methods.

### 1.1.2. Différance and Temporality

Deconstruction's critique is aimed at the paradigms of philosophy as well as of language and sign theory; the basis for this enterprise is a concept that is common to both and which works as a counter model: *différance*.<sup>3</sup>

Derrida's neologism combines a double semantic: 'to differ' and 'to defer'. *Différance* is the radicalised product of a new reading of Saussure's structuralism; simultaneously, Derrida

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<sup>1</sup> About the development of the word 'deconstruction', cf. Leitch (*Deconstructive Criticism*: 63ff), and Frank (*What is Neostructuralism?*: 216f). – Harari criticises Derrida's choice of the word because of its alleged connotation of a falling back upon an old, fixed order ("Critical Factions/Critical Fictions": 36f). As an alternative he proposes 'de-sedimentation' denominating a "technique of de-sedimenting the text in order to allow what was *always already* inscribed in its texture to resurface" (ibid.: 37). It remains unclear in what ways his alternative suggestion is different to Heidegger's 'destruction'. If one remembers that Derrida, with his concept of *displacement*, tries to counter the connotation that Harari suspects (cf. 1.1.3. The Deconstructive Method), then Harari's disagreement does not seem justified.

<sup>2</sup> To me, this point seems to be of significance because especially in the course of the critique that claims deconstruction's neoconservatism the accusation was voiced that with the epistemological and the language theoretical premises, deconstruction was not able to analyse society critically (cf. Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse on Modernity*). See also 1.1.8. Text and Textuality.

<sup>3</sup> I will keep the French term of Derrida's neologism, i.e. *différance*, in order to mark the distinction to the classical 'difference'.

falls back on Heidegger, Freud and Bataille (in *Writing and Difference*) to introduce *temporality* as the second condition for the constitution of meaning and consciousness in general.

The French philosopher's argument, which in fact has been broadly accepted even by opponents to deconstruction,<sup>1</sup> runs roughly as follows: meaning, as a meaningful presence, constitutes itself, according to Saussure, only through a system of differences, in an endless process of ever-deferring signs. Exclusively its relation to all other elements of the system generates the value of a sign (Derrida, *Of Grammatology*: chap. 2). However, if meaning is not generated by the pure synchronicity of differences but in the temporal succession of the play of deferral, then every linguistic expression always contains a *moment of deferral*: the place of presence of meaning (and consciousness alike) is taken up by an original absence – the present is thus always already belated. Temporality is therefore fundamental for all understanding and meaning.

Derrida's *différance* is not located on the same level as the oppositions that he detects in the history of philosophy but it is as a neither active nor passive, neither perceptual nor intelligible force the very basis of these oppositions; *différance* is the "constitutive, productive, and originary causality, the process of scission and division which would produce or constitute different things or differences" (Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*: 9).<sup>2</sup> He often describes *différance* visually as a gap or an interval with which it possesses a spatial as well as a temporal dimension.

Contrary to a static model, the French philosopher sees—in a definitely poststructuralist view—the differential operation as a three dimensional *play*, namely on the levels of *langue* and *parole*, and in the exchange between these two levels (Derrida, *Writing and Difference*: 17f). But it is only the bilateral co-operation between language system and language that provides for a theory explaining subjective understanding of meaning and for the innovative production of signification (which then can establish themselves in the language structure), in short: for the historical evolution of language.

With this explication we therefore come across two crucial aspects of deconstruction with which Derrida goes beyond structuralism: the *lack of subject in the production of meaning*, i.e. the auto-production of language, and the concept of *historicity*, i.e. the temporality of language.

The innovative character of deconstruction, however, is not yet explained by the radicalisation of the meaning generation exclusively through differences. There are indeed similar ideas to be found in, for example, Peirce's (to whom Derrida explicitly refers) and later in Eco's writings (*A Theory of Semiotics*). Deconstruction's speciality is not exhausted in the coupling of meaning-generation and deferral. On the contrary: from this combination Derrida develops a wholly new concept of language and ultimately questions, via the aspect of temporality, the very possibility of self-consciousness.

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<sup>1</sup> For a further critique of the classical concept of the sign, cf. 1.1.4. Dissemination, for the sign-theoretical relevance of *différance*, cf. Norris (*Deconstruction*) and Frank (*What is Neostructuralism?*).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. the representations of Eagleton (*Literary Theory*) and Ryan ("Self-Evidence").

The development of the notion of *différance* is an exemplary model for Derrida's critique of a philosophy that presumes origin and presence, which he understands as a categorical, *fundamental critique*.

He introduces *différance* as a cluster<sup>1</sup> to avoid its classification as either a word or a concept and to situate it instead on a *quasi-transcendental* level that allows thinking in concepts and oppositions. The cluster, says Derrida, means that *différance* cannot posit itself outside the totality of the global semantic field, and that it has an intrinsic "strategy without finality" which protects it from any kind of dichotomization into coincidence and necessity (Derrida, "Différance": 6f).

The very fact that the neologism is created on a graphematic level, indiscernible to the ear, is crucial for Derrida's semantic operation. The graphematic modification ('différence' becomes 'différance')—the play of difference that remains silent—repeats in itself what is the most important aspect of *différance*: the gap divides two elements that paradoxically are only perceptible because of the silent differential interval (ibid.: 4). In a typical doubling, Derrida's innovation marks on the one hand the transition of difference, on the other the implicit inversion of the traditional prioritisation of speech and writing. Thus, the 'cluster' *différance* already hints at the deconstructive strategy as well as at the core of its critical endeavour: the emancipation of writing.

Derrida posits *différance* against the whole tradition of ontological thought when he states programmatically, "that it has neither existence nor essence. It derives from no category of being, whether present or absent" (ibid.: 6). *Différance* is therefore, in contrast to Culler's assumption, not identical with a *non-deceivable dialectics* between presence and absence, but in fact it is what produces this opposition in the first place (Derrida, *Of Grammatology*: 46f).

As a further category, whose separation from *différance* is difficult, Derrida introduces the *arche-trace* which marks the asymmetrical state of uncertainty between presence and absence, the integral movement of an in itself divided present:

An interval must separate the present from what it is not in order for the present to be itself, but this interval that constitutes it as present must, by the same token, divide the present in and of itself, thereby also dividing, along with the present, everything that is thought on the basis of the present, that is, in our metaphysical language, every being, and singularly substance or the subject. In constituting itself, in dividing itself dynamically, this interval is what might be called *spacing*, the becoming-space of time or the becoming-time of space (*temporization*). (Derrida, "Différance": 13)

Taking up Husserl, Derrida calls such "traces of protention and retention" (ibid.: 13) which explode a present that is thought as an isolated presence, *arche-trace* or *arche-writing*.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Derrida ("Différance": 12n).

If, in the conventional understanding of time, past appears as a modified presence, i.e. an experienced present, then with the concept of the *trace* Derrida starts even before the hierarchic opposition of present and derived past:

The concepts *present*, *past* and *future*, everything in the concepts of time and history which implies evidence of them—the metaphysical concept of time in general—cannot adequately describe the structure of the trace. (Derrida, *Of Grammatology*: 67)

As a part of the deconstructive undermining of the scientific variant of the thinking of presence, namely the semantic static of terms, Derrida never offers a precise rendering of the concept; he thinks the (*arche-*)*trace* as an underlying movement, as the generating momentum of the Other, as the irreducible absence and the arbitrariness of the sign (*ibid.*: 46f). The separation from *différance* is, however, kept indistinct; in some places, Derrida seems to use both notions synonymously.<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere he calls the *arche-trace* explicitly a 'concept' which exceeds the *Ursprungsphilosophie*, the philosophy of origin: "[...] the trace is neither a ground, nor a foundation, nor an origin, and [...] in no case can it provide for a manifest or disguised onto-theology."

This rejection, though, seems rather strangely more like an incantation of what Derrida himself in fact fails to do. Whether he, with his *arche-trace*, can ultimately escape recourse to transcendental principles—an origin—remains questionable.

The critique—that Derrida does not transcend an *Ursprungsphilosophie*—has been voiced several times; it is especially Habermas who criticises Derrida's uninhibited falling back on *arche-writing* in the sense of a philosophy of origin and concludes:

Against his will, he lays bare the inverted foundationalism of this thought [Heidegger's] by once again going beyond the ontological difference and Being to the difference proper to writing, which puts an origin already set in motion yet one level deeper. (Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse on Modernity*: 181)

Habermas' critique is in so far legitimate as the status that the *arche-trace* (as distinct from *différance*) takes up in Derrida's theory of deconstruction remains blurred. Furthermore, the proclaimed parting from the thinking of an origin occurs predominantly rhetorically and is not developed systematically. Gasché, in contrast, attempts to systematise the *arche-trace* within Derrida's thinking:

The *primordial structure of the arche-trace* with its three functions is that which determines the scope and significance of deconstruction. This threefold structure simultaneously accounts for the possibility (and impossibility) of the self-presence of the present, of time, and of sense. Deconstruction aims at nothing less than producing such a primordial threefold structure that can

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<sup>1</sup> This fragility in Derrida's conception of the *arche-trace* is partly mirrored by the critical literature; Culler and Norris, for example, accept the synonymous use of *différance* and *arche-trace* without questioning a deficiency in their differentiation.

account for the exteriority constitutive of three fundamental and interrelated *topoi* of Western Metaphysics: presence, time, and sense. Since Western Metaphysics conceives of these three concepts or ideas as generating themselves in a movement of unmediated auto-affection, the primordial structure of the *arche-trace* assumes the role of reinscribing them back into the non-reflexive and non-present exteriority of the absolute other of the *arche-trace*. (Gasché, "Deconstruction as Criticism": 194f)

The Other—non-identical and non-present—is not to be found in writing, or in the text (this is, according to Gasché, a common misunderstanding of superficial interpretations of Derrida): the *arche-trace* will therefore never 'come out' in a phenomenology (Derrida, *Of Grammatology*: 61ff; Gasché, "Deconstruction as Criticism": 194f). It is defined as the irreducible, non-phenomenal structure through which, with the dialectics of presence and absence, the opposition of empiricism and transcendental/ideality is produced:

[...] deconstruction begins when a concept that designates a real, empirically apprehensible experience and the concept of its "ideal" and phenomenal opposite that vouches for a transcendental experience are explained by means of an irreducible non-phenomenal structure that accounts for the difference under examination. [...] Thus pointing out blanks, pauses, punctuations, intervals, etc. that is to say negatives without which there is no signification, or in short, establishing the textuality of a discourse, is not yet deconstruction. (Gasché, "Deconstruction as Criticism": 203)

But with this, and this is Gasché critique of the notion's corruption in Anglo-American literary criticism, deconstruction as a method cannot be identical with merely detecting the disruptions of the Other – which means that the argument would remain within the given frame of metaphysics, or to be more precise, within the frame of the dialectical school of thought which Derrida tries to transcend.

Concluding, we can characterise the *arche-trace* as the foundation of a theory that attempts to shift the traditional oppositions of philosophical thought, while at the same it describes their necessity as 'effect' of the movement of the *arche-trace*: the historical era of metaphysics and the thinking of presence is therefore the manifestation of just that movement that eventually motivates its transcendence – the deconstruction of its constituting oppositions. Just as the *arche-trace* is fundamental to the differential movement, it is in Derrida's conception the basic mechanism of the process of temporisation and spatialisation as principles of meaning and consciousness in general.

### 1.1.3. The Deconstructive Method

Derrida sees his conceptions of *différance* and *arche-trace* in fundamental opposition to the logocentric and phonocentric thinking of the metaphysical era. In this global approach, "the metaphysical era" alludes rather imprecisely to the belief in the existence of a supersensory world, to thinking in principles, and to knowledge as a means of domination. The attribute 'logocentric' then designates any kind of thinking that reverts to a point of reference system external to the system. Hence these conceptions are not used in the sense of scholarly periodisation but they rather indicate, following Ryan, "a permanent function of a kind of thinking which overlooks (that is, theorizes it away) its own historicity, differentiability, and materiality [...]" (Ryan, *Marxism and Deconstruction*: 117).

Within the general perspective on Derridean critique, further historical differentiation—in the sense of the shaping of metaphysical-logocentric thinking specific to the era—is required which Derrida delivers with his analyses of individual texts and authors of different eras.

Distilling these studies about the idiosyncratic semantics of individual texts, we can perceive a basic pattern of a rigorously kept twofold deconstructive procedure, which is also taken up—more or less rigidly—by the Yale Critics. Manfred Frank, explaining Derrida's technique, says that

he [Derrida] does it such a way that he estranges his subject matter by means of an interpretive procedure that goes against the grain, a procedure that from the standpoint of phenomenology appears to be a distortion, but which from the perspective of diagnostics, however, seems to divulge profitable new recognitions. (Frank, *What is Neostructuralism?*: 222)

Frank calls the deconstructive task "a tearing-down of the philosophical system and its reconstruction on rearranged foundations" (ibid.: 6). The strategic procedure does therefore not aim at a substitution of a philosophical school by another, but at an *inversion* and *displacement* of an inherent structural order of concept that manifests itself in fixed hierarchic oppositions.

Consequently, the method of deconstruction presents itself as an *immanent critique*. Gasché explains this critique's philosophical legitimisation:

Deconstruction does not operate from an empirically present outside of philosophy since that outside is only the outside *of* philosophy. Deconstruction does not proceed from a phenomenological existing exteriority (like literature, for instance) that would claim to represent the truth of philosophy, because that truth is only the truth *of* philosophy itself. In order to shake the heritage to which concepts belong, *all* the inherited concepts have, on the contrary, to be mobilized. They are all indispensable. (Gasché, "Deconstruction as Criticism": 196)

Mark Krupnick elucidates that the concept *displacement* is a central aspect in Derrida's theory insofar as it characterises the unity of theoretical conception and strategy in deconstruction: as a second step to *inversion* follows *displacement*. At the same time the concept *displacement* itself

functions as a counter-idea to the metaphysical notion of presence: following Saussure and Freud, it expresses the infinite deferral of wish fulfilment as a survival strategy (Derrida, *Writing and Difference; Of Grammatology*), as well as the condition of civilisation on the whole. Derrida here uses consciously the two semantic components, *deferral* and *displacement*, i.e. with a displacement in which the identity of the displaced is never retained (Krupnick, *Displacement*: 6). Put to a specific *reading strategy*, this means that a deconstructive reading pays careful attention to the suppressed and the excluded.

What remains problematic in the theoretical conception of this strategy is the equalisation of semantic oppositions with metaphysical thinking; this, however, can be justified—with a hermeneutic perspective—from the reading: that which is marginalised by an established order proves to be an indicator of an 'un-thought' Other, of an excluded part of a hierarchical opposition.<sup>1</sup> The 'crisis', the alien (i.e. the intrusion of the excluded into the hermetically sealed inside of the prioritising part of a conceptual opposition) is declared an 'essential possibility'. Instances are, for example, the quote in speech act theory (Derrida, *Writing and Difference*: "Limited Inc") or the non-phonetic elements of language in de Saussurian linguistics (Derrida, *Of Grammatology*: chap. 2).

Part of the suppressed and excluded are especially, according to Derrida, semantic ambiguities and rhetorical figures which, even though they appear to be mere ornamentation, can undermine a whole system of thought. In them, the contrary play of an intended semantic order and its evading subversive textual logic manifests itself, which is exactly what a deconstructive reading attempts to demonstrate.

Similarly, Miller formulates the place of deconstruction as the controversy between argument and rhetoric, theoretical concept and narrative discourse, by saying that "there is no conceptual expression without figure, and no intertwining of concepts and figure without an implied narrative [...]". He concludes that "deconstruction is an investigation of what is implied by this inherence in one another of figure, concept, and narrative" (Miller, "The Critic as Host": 223).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Leitch (*Deconstructive Criticism*: 180).

<sup>2</sup> Leitch's presentation emphasises even more the impetus of the semantic displacement in this process: "Whether employing a rhetorical or conceptual method of analysis, the deconstructive interpreter carefully traces and repeats certain elements in the text, which may include the figures, the concepts, or the motifs in a work. As he or she repeats the selected documents, the critic unleashes the disruptive powers inherent in all repetition. In other words, the critic through seemingly innocent repetition foregrounds and sets in motion the operation of difference, bringing into play a disorienting chain of substitutions and displacements that ultimately destabilize and decentre the text" (*Deconstructive Criticism*: 65). – As a suggestive example for this method, I think of the deconstructive argumentative strategy in Miller's essay in which he tries to re-think the traditional hierarchic relationship between literature and literary criticism. To this end, he brilliantly employs the tactics of inversion ("The Critic as Host": 222). Simultaneously, however, it becomes increasingly obvious how the essential second step of deconstruction, the displacement, is often bogged down in a mere rhetorical-polemical exercise: he indeed fails to work out the semantic displacement properly. The insight gained—the understanding in the dialectical relation of text and recipient (ibid.: 224f)—does not provide what has not already been postulated by

The perspective on the rhetorical undermining of the textual logic requires that in the course of the deconstructive procedure logic loses its typical dominance over rhetoric. With this premise, philosophical texts can be read as literary ones. Furthermore, Habermas concludes, philosophical or theoretical texts can no longer be judged depending on their logical consistency but only according to their rhetorical proficiency (Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse on Modernity*: 223f). Deconstruction transcends, according to the conception of itself, a purely cognitive endeavour. This is why the deconstruction of the ontological structure of metaphysics cannot be described as an analytical method but as a *critique of style*. The text's rhetorical abundance of meaning turns against itself:

Thanks to their rhetorical content, texts combed against the grain contradict what they state, such as the explicitly asserted of the primacy of signification over the sign, of the voice in relation to writing, of the intuitively given and immediately present over the representative and the postponed-postponing. (ibid.: 189)

Although Derrida emphatically adheres to a conception of critique, an obvious displacement that exceeds a purely cognitive-rational foundation is undeniable.

Two consequences for the practice of deconstructive writing follow from the practice of deconstructive reading: first, deconstruction requires, for its own production, the background of a *pre-text* whose semantic it can extrapolate and displace. Leitch describes this:

Deconstruction is production. It is not self-effacing repetition or doubling commentary, although it uses such methods along the way. It always works within the text and the intertext. But there it produces the imperceptible: the traces of the supplement, for example. (Leitch, *Deconstructive Criticism*: 178)

Second, Derrida's way of writing is an interpretation of his concept of text; in this he increasingly distances himself from his earlier scholarly/scientific style, as in *Writing and Difference* or in *Of Grammatology*, and tends toward a practice of delimited semantics which tries to situate its own discourse outside the logocentric system, e.g. in *Tympan* or *Glass*.

Part of this is the play with semantic ambiguities and etymological derivations and the refusal of clear definitions. Thus Derrida's changing use of words 'pharmakon' (*Dissemination; Of Grammatology*), and 'supplement' (*Margins of Philosophy; Writing and Difference; Of Grammatology*) can be understood as attempts to evade semantic fixation: the words mean simultaneously the inside *and* the outside, deficiency and excess. In *Spurs: The Styles of Nietzsche*, Derrida reflects upon this mode of thinking and writing. He quotes Heidegger's interpretation of Nietzsche's text *History of an Error in Twilight of the Idols*, "How the 'True

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'traditional' literary theories, such as hermeneutics or reception aesthetics. Considering deconstruction's radical claim, Miller's attack falls short and, at best, only assaults its most vulnerable opponent, the New Criticism.

*World' Finally Became a Fable,*" as a paradigm of a text in which the transcendence of, in contrast to a simple retreat from, the conceptual oppositions is accomplished:

In his consideration of the problematic of *Umdrehung* Heidegger emphasises the very strongest of torsions, that in which the opposition which has been submitted to reversal is itself suppressed [...]. What must occur then is not merely a suppression of all hierarchy. for an-archy only consolidates just as surely the established order of a metaphysical hierarchy; nor is it a simple change or reversal in the terms of any given hierarchy. Rather, the *Umdrehung* must be a transformation of the hierarchical structure itself. (Derrida, *Spurs*: 81)

But if it is important to avoid the fixation of hierarchies, or an 'origin' (which, for instance, would be the development of a new concept of truth) respectively, the writing practice has to be one of heterogeneity, and Derrida's discourse proves this:

For the reversal, if it is not accompanied by a discrete parody, a strategy of writing, or difference or deviation in quills, if there is no style, no grand style, this is finally but the same thing, nothing more than a clamorous declaration of the antithesis. (ibid.: 95)

However, Derrida's usage of language is especially due to the imitations of his followers in "danger of becoming another form of accepted signification and thus falling into the very trap it denounces" (Harari, "Critical Factions": 36).

The possibility of a new re-inscription of linguistic fixations is also considered by Derrida, even if he is probably not concerned with the reduced copies of his own writings in the discourses of his adepts; this re-inscription is named as the essential *aporia* of the deconstructive method on the whole: even in its own practice of a 'close reading' deconstruction is not capable to free itself from all oppositions; even when displaced it necessarily re-inscribes them.

This contradiction is inherent to the method of immanent critique, of handicraft work, i.e. an operation of concepts whose truth-value is disputed. In this, Habermas sees a relation to Adorno's negative dialectics: "The tools of thought, which miss the 'dimension of non-identity' are nevertheless the only available means for uncovering their own insufficiency'" (Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse on Modernity*: 185). One has to be careful, though, to stress that this relationship lies rather in the strategy of thinking, namely to dissolve fixed conceptual barriers, than in the argument from the point of view of content.<sup>1</sup>

The 'infiniteness' of the deconstructive process is therefore generated by the paradox of the attempt to use language to deconstruct linguistic constructs, i.e. to try to find it guilty of its metaphysical presumptions.

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<sup>1</sup> One could maintain, though, that formal ('immanent critique') as well as contents parallels exist: whether Derrida's *différance* can be set equal to Adorno's *non-identical* is a question which would have to be more closely examined than this dissertation allows for.

The aporia that is postulated by Derrida is far-reaching insofar as it theoretically establishes the dialectics of language scepticism also of other (post)modern discourses: articulated language scepticism itself requires a self-deconstructive discourse which, due of its semantic deferral character, concludes in an infinite spiral.

#### 1.1.4. Dissemination – Language as Decentred Structure

In his early essay "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" (delivered as a lecture in 1966), Derrida programmatically announces his departure from structuralism, especially from Levi-Strauss' structural anthropology. He later refined his argument's linguistic basis ("Limited Inc"; *Writing and Phenomenon; Of Grammatology*).

As Derrida sees himself in so far as a productive recipient of Levi-Strauss, and elsewhere of Saussure, as he attempts not only to invalidate their theories but to free them from their metaphysical rudiments and to thus radicalise them (cf. Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play": 282). His multi-levelled critical approach is directed in particular at Lévi-Strauss' structural model, at Saussure and Husserl's concept of the sign, and at the dominance of speech over writing with which both linguistics and pragmatist theories of understanding customarily work.

The sketching of Derrida's different threads of argument will serve, in the following, as evidence that the development of his poststructuralist theory of the sign and of language is rooted in the philosophical tradition.

As a representative of taxonomic structuralism, Lévi-Strauss is positioned "on the edges of the passing *épistème*" (Leitch, *Deconstructive Criticism*: 32) of metaphysical thinking: although his structural thought is based on the notion of differentiability, Lévi-Strauss is unable to rid himself of the idea of an organising centre or of a structural origin, says Derrida (Derrida, *Writing and Difference*: 281). This, being ultimately trapped in a philosophy of origin, leads Lévi-Strauss, according to Derrida, to deduce the binary oppositions 'nature vs. civilisation' and, analogously, 'speech vs. writing' (ibid.: 279ff; *Of Grammatology*: 101f).

Derrida, in contrast, defines his notion of structure with the features 'decentred' and 'structural openness', without recurring to underlying principles of order or universal rules. It is only by his departure from Lévi-Strauss (and, similarly, from Saussure) that Derrida can develop a conception of himself as a poststructuralist, so that any undertaking to differentiate between structuralism and poststructuralism will have to start at this very point.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Harari, in contrast, sees the split between structuralism and poststructuralism in the transcending of the representative model of language while the deconstructive critique of the notion of subject had already been introduced by structuralism ("Critical Factions": 29). However, he does not acknowledge the

Norris, in turn, sees the difference between structuralism and poststructuralism not so much in the transcendence of the dualistic concept of the sign or of the notion of a centred structure, but predominantly in the transformation of the ontological notion of structure into a methodological one.<sup>1</sup> While especially the conservative variant of structuralism operates with the equalisation of structure and mental competence or reality,<sup>2</sup> poststructuralism no longer infers this correspondence of theoretical model and (psychological) reality (Norris, *Deconstruction*: 1). Deconstruction, Norris concludes, negates the "assumed correspondence between mind, meaning and the concept of method which claims to unite them" (ibid.: 3).

This view is contradicted by Lévi-Strauss' emphasis on the hypothetical character of his conceptions. The problem of the ontological versus the methodological approach marks, to a certain degree, both structuralist and poststructuralist concepts. Even if Derrida himself avoids ontological concepts, the literary criticism variant of poststructuralism is indeed principally concerned with the critique of the concept of structure as centred, non-individual and invariable (cf. Barthes, *S/Z*), as for example when criticising narratology (as reconstruction of trans-individual textual structures); the problem of a concept of structure's purely heuristic function is nonetheless never the focus of its reflections.

Lévi-Strauss' thinking of origins, which contradicts his concept of structure (in which the identity of its elements is only constituted by the relation to other elements) is, according to Derrida's comprehensive argument, comparable to Saussure's adherence to the classical dualistic concept of the sign.

In contrast to Saussure's theory of the arbitrariness of the sign and the indivisibility of its two components<sup>3</sup>, the integration of the classical concept of the sign already implies the division of signifier and signified, say Derrida. To talk about a dualistic concept of the sign would come close to a tautology (Derrida, *Of Grammatology*: 13). The assumed totality is actually a heterogeneity in which the order of the signified is never simultaneous with the order of the signifier.

Saussure's entanglement with the implications of a metaphysical concept of the sign necessarily demands, following Derrida—in spite of Saussure's original intention—, first, the prioritisation of the signified (the intelligible) over the signifier (the material) and second, the privileging of the sign's phonetic aspect which, in contrast to writing, keeps a close proximity to the *logos*. Temporality is always implied<sup>4</sup>—the sign refers to a no-longer-present—while the classi-

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fact that the latter, with its phonocentric foundations, firmly embraces the concept of a speaking subject: even though structuralism is situated after the 'linguistic turn' it does not surpass the metaphysical thinking of a subject, as Derrida proves in his reading of Saussure.

<sup>1</sup> I am referring here to Eco's discussion of 'ontological' vs. 'methodological' structuralism (*A Theory of Semiotics*).

<sup>2</sup> Norris sees, for example, Culler as a representative (*Deconstruction*: 7).

<sup>3</sup> Saussure compares 'signifier' and 'signified' as the two sides of the same leaf.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Samuel Weber's contention that Saussure's theory of language includes temporality as an indivisible dimension of synchronicity ("Closure and Exclusion": 39f).

cal conception subsumes the supplement as 'derived' under an absolute presence (Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy; Of Grammatology*: chap. 2).

Derrida interprets this pattern of thinking as the core of metaphysical thought by accusing Saussure's concept of the sign of falling back upon a notion of the absolute: "The sign and divinity have the same place and time of birth. The age of the sign is essentially theological" (Derrida, *Of Grammatology*: 14).

Derrida explains that in the era of rationalism the notion of the divine as absolute presence, or as the presence of the absolute, becomes the subject's phonocentric self-presence for which the linguistic expression itself is in fact only secondary, i.e. merely a medium for the subject's desire for a primarily ideal expression. The notion of the voice's self-affection in the immediate articulation of speech mirrors the *telos* of an unbroken self-presence – therefore the prioritisation of the phonic aspect of the sign (Derrida, "Signature, Event, Context"; "Limited Inc"; *Speech and Phenomenon; Of Grammatology*).

The separation of the sign into a mere material exteriorisation of sound and an immediate meaning that is derived from a present subjectivity is also the underlying principle of Husserl's differentiation between 'expression' as a pure carrier of meaning devoid of communicative function which assumes the identity of meaning, and exterior 'Anzeichen' or indicative sign (Derrida, *Speech and Phenomenon*: 17, 32ff). Yet meaning and expression are, in Husserl's idealistic understanding, transformations of a pre-expressive intentionality.<sup>1</sup>

The concept of the sign is therefore based on a metaphysical notion of a pre-linguistic self-realisation that in itself is rooted in the supposition of a presence as a point in the moment (ibid.: 62).

However, in attempting to explain the pre-expression of the intentional acts and their relation to the linguistic expression, Husserl cannot maintain the supposition of a sphere of a pure consciousness that is independent of linguistic communication without contradicting himself:<sup>2</sup> as the expression in linguistic communication has to realise itself in the *Anzeichen*, the indicative sign, Husserl has to suspend the communicative function of language – in favour of a conception of a fulfilled expression in monologic speech. To avoid that *Ausdruck*, expression, is separated from the subject's immediate self-presence by mixing it with the function of the indicative sign,<sup>3</sup> its communicative dimension is truncated. Derrida concludes that with this move Husserl implicitly abandons his sign concept's differentiation in *Ausdruck* and *Anzeichen*:

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<sup>1</sup> I am referring here to the comprehensive presentations of Derrida's critique of Husserl in Habermas (*The Philosophical Discourse on Modernity*: 167ff) and Gasché ("Deconstruction as Criticism": 189ff).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Habermas' critique of Husserl (*The Philosophical Discourse on Modernity*: 167ff).

<sup>3</sup> Derrida interprets the differentiation of *Ausdruck* and *Anzeichen*, which remains diffuse in Husserl's thought, as meant purely functional.

The reduction to the monologue is really a putting of the empirical worldly existence between brackets. In "solitary mental life" we no longer use *real* (*wirklich*) words, but only imagined (*vorgestellt*) words. And lived experience—about which we were wondering whether it might no be "indicated" to the speaking subject by himself—does not have to be so indicated because it is immediately certain and present to itself. While in real communication existing signs *indicate* other existences which are only probable and mediately evoked, in the monologue, when expression is *full*, nonexistent signs *show* significations (*Bedeutungen*) that are ideal (and thus nonexistent) and certain (for they are presented to intuition). (ibid.: 43)

Derrida's critique now is that Husserl's phenomenology, just like Saussure's, can only maintain the metaphysical separation of pre-expressive intentionality and expressive linguistic signification as a supplement of a present-presence by paying the high cost of inherent contradictions.

The priority that Saussure concedes to speech forces him to consider any workings of writing upon speech as 'usurpation', as eruption of the *outside* of the *inside*' (Derrida, *Of Grammatology*: 34).<sup>1</sup> With his polemic against Saussure's evaluation and elimination of the problem of writing, Derrida demonstrates the affinities of the Saussurian problem as a dominant theme in occidental thought.

Saussure's adherence to the notion of presence, whether conceived of as presence of meaning or self-affection of the voice, stands, like Lévi-Strauss' organising centre, in stark contrast to his theory that sense and meaning are exclusively constituted by differentiability: as soon as the *indicated* has 'value' as a linguistic construct, i.e. that can be thought at all, it takes its place within the system, is thus no longer outside, is not a centre, but an element whose meaning is generated only through the difference to all other elements. The movement of differentiability therefore does not manifest itself as a fixed binary opposition but as a sequence of differences that in the play of differentiability have to undergo constant transformations.

The deconstruction of a fixed point that would escape the influence of differentiability dissolves the separation of signifier and signified, of intelligibility and materiality; the production of meaning in the signification system is understood as an infinite process of semiosis, of the referral of one signifier to another.<sup>2</sup>

Derrida does not really present a semiotic foundation for his concept of meaning-constitution, but refers explicitly to Peirce's tripartite concept of the sign and especially to the function of the 'interpretant' (ibid.: 48ff). In this regard, it remains unclear to what extent he transcends Peirce's thoughts. Derrida seems to have appropriated Peirce's theory of the conception of meaning and reduced its dimension of the object relation. In the French philosopher's understanding, the difference between signifier and signified is not a qualitative one but one that

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<sup>1</sup> As an example, Derrida names Saussure's rejection of graphically registered rules of pronunciation.

<sup>2</sup> The prominent aspect of deferral in the meaning-constituting process finds its place in Derrida's *leitmotiv* of the *supplement*: the *supplement* denotes a lack while at the same time it produces, in trying to augment this deficiency, a surplus – in this case the infinity of the linguistic system.

is dependent on context. Every linguistic element can function as 'interpretant', i.e. as something *indicated*, to which is referred to; simultaneously, it itself is *indicating* something that is not the last link in the semantic chain, but which requires an 'interpretant' itself. It is embedded in an infinite, multidimensional context of referral. The dualistic concept of the sign is reduced to a monadic entity that confers, as Culler says, a certain 'autonomy' to the signifier (Culler, *On Deconstruction*: 189).

The structure's radical temporisation begs the question whether a code model of language, to which critics of the taxonomic structuralism like Barthes and Eco adhere and which Derrida—with his notion of the decentred structure—only seems to modify, has to be abandoned. The merits of interpreting language as structure and code are becoming dubious in light of the increasing poststructuralist 'liquefaction'. When dealing with Eco's semiotic theory, Ray maintains that

From a theoretical point of view, unlimited semiosis puts into question the pre-eminence of the code over the act of sign production. If the code is neither '*a natural condition of the Global Semantic Universe nor a stable structure underlying the complex of links and branches of every semiotic process*' [...], but rather a momentary 'magnetization' of cultural units that arise out of usage, its value as the end of all semiotic is difficult to maintain – as is the objective superiority of such analysis over more traditional forms of inquiry. (Ray, *Literary Meaning*: 126)

Derrida's deconstruction of the classical sign concept, and subsequently of the category of 'meaning', initiated a far-reaching controversy in academic circles which was initially marked by accusations that he had neglected pragmatics, later by a general confusion of 'deconstruction of meaning' with 'negation of meaning'. The prioritisation of the signifier does in no way intend a negation of content, but is instead *a critique of the representative model of language*. The latter is based on the assumption that signs are representations of elementary perceptions of the senses or of elementary (and intrinsic) ideas of the human mind, i.e. they bestow meaning (as a supplement, for communicative reasons) to entities that are, by themselves and without signification, immediate to the mind. If this were so, the universal rules of grammar would apply equally to the rules of human reason.

Derrida does by no means get rid of the category of meaning; what he negates is the immediate relation between object and linguistic sign (whether as objective reality or mental imagination). *Deconstruction of meaning* does therefore not imply *non-reference as condition of the possibility of the function of language and infinity of the semantic play of referral*.<sup>1</sup> The post-structuralist concept of semiosis, which claims the limitless of semantic processes, does not void

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Derrida (*Spurs*: 134). –American deconstruction shares, in fact intensifies, Derrida's critique of the representative linguistic model, whereas Foucault, even if he enriches it with the dimension of reflexivity, is bound to it. Frank (*What is Neostructuralism*: 150ff) and Sloterdijk ("Michel Foucaults strukturelle Theorie der Geschichte": 175) have proven that Foucault cannot be called a neo- or post-structuralist due to his conception of language.

language of content or meaning. On the contrary, the problem of linguistic meaning is that it is infinite and no longer calculable in the flow of its differential relations – otherwise, it would be a language in which all meanings are calculated simultaneously. The problem of escaping the limits of language becomes, then, the problem of determining all meanings.

If one considers that referential semantics is generally seen as having been overcome (Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*), it seems necessary to shift the discussion about the problem of meaning to two central implications of Derrida's approach: first, with the abolishment of the referential character of language and the proof that non-literary texts also employ rhetoric, the systematic differentiation between literary and non-literary text can no longer be maintained. Second, the methodological premises of text interpretation have to shift, considering the un-limitable plurality of meanings in the sense of an eventually un-controllable, or 'un-reconstructable', referential network. There can be no doubt that with these shifts deconstruction vigorously attacks the theoretical foundations of the New Criticism. However, it will have to be examined to what extent Derrida's text-theoretical premises are reasons enough for a radical revision, if not an abolition, of the hermeneutic technique.

Beginning with the decentred conception of sign and structure, which does not require a transcendental signified, Derrida develops his notion of *play*.

Play is the disruption of presence. The presence of an element is always a signifying and substitutive reference inscribed in a system of differences and the movement of a chain. Play is always play of absence and presence, but if it is to be thought radically, play must be conceived of before the alternative of presence and absence. (Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play": 292)

This programmatic definition is crucial to a metatheoretical reflection and a historical situating of deconstruction. The fact that the notion of *play* is to represent an epistemological and semiotic model of a structure without centre—without transcendental signified—marks Derrida as a poststructuralist. Beyond this, his definition demands (following Nietzsche) a *thinking of play* as the *joyful affirmation of the lack of origin*.

This second dimension of *play* achieves the association with Lyotard's concept of postmodernism, which centrally rests on a notion of *linguistic play*, or language games, too, and which calls for the autonomy and the lack of legitimisation of discourses (Lyotard: *The Postmodern Condition*: 79ff). It seems strange that neither the supporters of deconstruction nor the critical discussion of postmodernism raised this relationship.<sup>1</sup>

With this perspective we can tentatively interpret Derrida's notion of play as follows: with the shifting from an epistemological and semiotic base to a Lyotardian historical-sociological

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<sup>1</sup> An exception is Umberto Eco who describes the analogy between his semiosis system and the analysis of postmodern novelistic techniques as a multidimensional labyrinth (*A Theory of Semiotics; The Name of the Rose*). However, I might be missing threads of the discussion around postmodernism/deconstruction.

point of view, the affirmation of the lack of origin seems to be a specific aspect of postmodernism and more or less as paradigm of socio-discursive reality. Derrida's theory of the end of the metaphysical era (*Of Grammatology; Margins of Philosophy*) can be understood, with Lyotard, as the entry into postmodernism (Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*: 11ff). This placing of deconstruction is possible in Lyotard's understanding of postmodernism as the era after the loss of the grand emancipatory or historio-philosophical narratives which legitimise the various linguistic games (ibid.: 15ff). The immanent reflexive movement of discourse, as exemplified by deconstruction, matches (on an epistemological level) Lyotard's paradigm of the postmodern discourse which can only itself produce its own legitimatisation: "[...] the striking feature of postmodern scientific knowledge is that the discourse on the rules validate it is (explicitly) immanent to it" (ibid.: 159).

That the thinking of *différance* becomes possible only now appears against the background of the concept of postmodernism as a symptom of transformation from modernism to postmodernism which has to do without a framing grand meta-discourse (e.g. the self-presence of the subject). (Derrida's recourse to the philosophical tradition shows at the same time that this transcendence has always already been inherent in metaphysical thought.) The loss of Enlightenment's sociological 'legitimation narratives', as Lyotard postulates, opens new ways of thinking beyond a discourse that has an inherent compulsion to fall back upon an organising centre. It is only in the era of postmodernism that structure without centre, language without subject and transcendental signified in general become imaginable, and can, in retrospective, be projected onto previous epochs. Derrida himself implicitly talks about such a historical perspective when claiming that the beginning of writing is only now beginning to be felt (Derrida, *Of Grammatology*: 6ff; *Spurs*).<sup>1</sup>

### 1.1.5. Iterability of the Sign and Grammar of the Text

In his discussion of speech act theory, Derrida widens his critique of Husserl and Saussure's idealistic-phonocentric sign concept. Furthermore, he develops a deconstructive conception of the sign that is defined by the essential possibility of the absence of an intentional consciousness.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> He argues, for example, similarly in his essay "The Ends of Man".

<sup>2</sup> Derrida's argument about speech act theory took predominantly place in a debate with Searle that was published by *Glyph*. This debate was in turn provoked by the publication of his essay "Signature Event Context" which is a critique of Austin.

From the realisation that *infelicity* and *citation* are structural possibilities of each speech act, Derrida develops two fundamental objections:

The intentional consciousness that is already stricken with temporal belatedness cannot govern the pragmatic context in the moment of the expression – context is infinite.

A further (potential) destabilisation follows from the fact that every sign can be taken out of its 'original' context and be used in a new, unforeseen context. A moment of non-identity is thus always already an inherent quality of every linguistic element.<sup>1</sup> The danger of citation is the "internal and positive condition of possibility" (Derrida, "Signature Event Context": 17) of every speech act. Like citation, which in light of the deconstruction of intentionality and contextual definition informs every utterance, every understanding becomes misunderstanding in the sense that the 'true' meaning can never be present and neither its semantic nor its pragmatic embedding can ever be verifiable.

Yet, whether Derrida would follow Culler's apodictic judgement that "'Serious' behaviour is a special case of role-playing" (Culler, *On Deconstruction*: 119) in any other way than provocatively is dubious. For Derrida argues on the level of *structural conditions of the possibility* of the production of performative utterances, and of the *systematic classification* of speech acts, "If conventions are, in fact, never entirely adequate, [...] if language can always 'normally' become its own 'abnormal' object, does this not derive from the structural iterability of the mark?" (Derrida, "Limited Inc a b c": 82)

Iterability—as structural possibility of the sign separated from its context—deconstructs the concept of a meaningful present intentionality; it produces the difference of the sign to itself:

Iterability supposes a minimal remainder (as well as a minimum of idealization) in order that the identity of the *selfsame* be repeatable and identifiable *in, through,* and even *in view of* its alteration. For the structure of iteration—and this is another of its decisive traits—implies *both* identity *and* difference (ibid.: 53).

The notion of the *marque*, which Derrida wants to be understood as a counter-concept to the representational model of language, includes the two moments of the sign—identity and difference—: the *marque restante* describes that minimal remainder of the 'sign-container' without which the continuity of communication and of transmission would be unthinkable, yet through which the respective meanings are simply just welded to their 'container'. The graphematic structure of all signs—and nothing else is iterability—destroys the self-presence of intention as well as the pure ideality of meaning. It negates the perception of something that can be indi-

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<sup>1</sup> Leitch summarises this point: "Beyond the subject and his intentionality and past particular moments of tradition and history, the cited or reiterated sign breaches the border of one enclosure and gets (mis)read into others. Signs live on. Contexts pass away. The play of context is illimitable" (*Deconstructive Criticism*: 161).

vidually meant which would escape the structural principle of iterability (ibid.: 61f). Derrida summarises his position in this debate:

What is limited by iterability is not intentionality in general, but its character of being conscious or present to itself (actualized, fulfilled, and adequate), the simplicity of its features, its *undividedness*. (ibid.: 105)

Derrida's variant of the concept of intentionality is decisive for the rejection of the category 'authorial intention' in deconstructive criticism.

To a certain degree, however, Derrida does not get rid of authorial intention – he merely questions its text-controlling status as well as its hermeneutic reconstructibility. He explains, for example, that the question whether Plato consciously manipulated the fluctuation of the *pharmakon's* semantics is not answerable (Derrida, *Dissemination*: 95f). The consequence of iterability is therefore not the absence of intentionality but the obliteration of its wholeness and its systematic reconstructibility. What is true for the individual sign is likewise true for the speech act: communication is only possible because of the iterability of the performatives (as elements of the pragmatic meta-code), which then gives up the individual in favour of the general. Even the reference to a context does not allow a safe reconstruction of the speech act's intended meaning because, being structurally open, it evades the fixations of a closed regulatory system.

Pointing out the background of his universal pragmatics, Habermas confronts Derrida that the process of understanding remains unproblematic as long as the communicating partners believe in the *possibility* of understanding. He provides, however, only a weak explanation for his concept of intersubjective understanding as contra-factual condition of communication: "Under the pressure for decisions proper to the communicative practice of everyday life, participants are dependent upon agreements that co-ordinate their actions." (Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse on Modernity*: 198). Formulated somewhat more strongly, he tries to substantiate his thesis:

The interpreter does not impose this idea on his object; rather, with the performative attitude of a participant observer, he takes it over from the direct participants, *who can act communicatively only under the presupposition of intersubjectively identical ascriptions of meaning*" (ibid.: 198).

This mutual consensus of the communicating partners, namely that an all-encompassing idealising supposition is the basic condition of all language games, would be open for criticism on the basis of the validity claimed by Habermas (ibid.: 196ff).

Habermas, on the other hand, seems to misunderstand the level of Derrida's argument which refers to the structural conditions for the possibility of the sign's functioning. As his formulation of the intersubjectively identical meaning-attribution already shows, Habermas', with his universal-pragmatist defence of the concept of understanding, misses the core of deconstruc-

tive critique: notwithstanding Derrida's compelling argument against the presumption of identical meanings, he still utilises exactly this notion in his counter-concept as if it did not require any further explication.

Habermas' critique, which I have here sketched as a representation of the controversy<sup>1</sup> that is prevalent in the whole of literary criticism, suffers from its ignorance of Derrida's deconstruction of centrally pragmatist categories, such as *identity*, *meaning*, and *verifiability* or *reconstructibility* of contexts. Consequently, Habermas' critique necessarily falls short of Derrida's level of discussion.

In a second step in his deconstruction of linguistic meaning and intersubjective understanding, Derrida deduces from the iterability of the sign the necessity for "a certain generalization and a certain displacement of the concept of writing" (Derrida, "Signature Event Context": 310). Writing is not to be understood as a secondary medium that is subordinate to speech, as it in fact goes beyond this special field of semantic communication. Derrida develops his thesis of the *general graphematic character of speech* (Derrida, *Of Grammatology*: 30ff) against Saussure's exclusion of writing from linguistics, its characterisation as a 'pathological' and 'violent' intrusion of the outside. That which traditionally reduced writing to a supplement, namely iterability and an essential functionality even with the absence of recipients, is an intrinsic quality of every sign (Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*: 134). *Iterability* is the *structural condition of the possibility of the function of language in general*. Derrida re-thinks writing's devaluation to a signifier of a signifier, when he argues

that "signifier of the signifier" no longer defines accidental doubling and fallen secondarity. "Signifier of the signifier" describes on the contrary the movement of language: in its origin, to be sure, but one can already suspect that an origin whose structure can be expressed as "signifier of the signifier" conceals and erases itself in its own production. (Derrida, *Of Grammatology*: 7)

In the potential absence of intention and reference, the semantic sign acquires its meaning solely through its syntactic context; this can however, and this is what the principle of iterability states, be doubly refracted:

This force of rupture is due to the spacing which constitutes the written sign: the spacing which separates it from other elements of the internal contextual chain (the always open possibility of its extraction and grafting), but also from all forms of a present referent (past or to come in the

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<sup>1</sup> An argument similar to Habermas' (if theoretically less profound) is the basis for most critical discussions of deconstruction: e.g. Abrams ("The Deconstructive Angel": 429), Norris (*Deconstruction*) or Butler (*Interpretation, Deconstruction and Ideology*).

modified form of the present past or to come) that is objective or subjective. (Derrida, "Signature Event Context": 317)<sup>1</sup>

With the extended concept of writing, deconstruction links text theory with sign theory. On both levels we can find the suspension of reference; at the same time, however, both Derrida and de Man (in contrast to other representatives of American deconstruction) emphasise the necessity of illusion of reference as present meaning.<sup>2</sup>

De Man explains the discrepancy between referential and figurative textual modes, analogously to Derrida's *iterability*, with its *grammar*, i.e. its being-bound to a fundamental code. Grammar is the structural condition for the possibility of textual meaning, but simultaneously, in the abstraction of the individual text, it suspends its referentiality. "Just as no text is conceivable without grammar, no grammar is conceivable without the suspension of referential meaning" (de Man, *Allegories of Reading*: 268f).

If one understands text as discourse, i.e. as a linguistic structure whose smallest constituting units are sentences, then an analogy of de Man's *grammar* and Derrida's *iterability* as structural quality of the sign is obvious:<sup>3</sup> as guarantor of a certain *identity* of meaning, both Derrida and de Man's concept always implies non-reference and abstraction of an individual generation of meaning.

The insight into the exclusively differential and graphematic structure of all languages doubly revises the concept of (intersubjective) meaning. Derrida describes the semantic exploding which is produced by the auto-referential, and simultaneously intertextual, movement of language :

A writing that refers back only to itself carries us *at the same time*, indefinitely and systematically, to some other writing. At the same time: this is what we must account for. A writing that refers only to itself and a writing that refers indefinitely to some other writing might appear noncontradictory; the reflecting screen never captures anything but writing, indefinitely, stopping nowhere, and each reference still confines us within the element of reflection. Of course. But the difficulty arises in the relation between the medium of writing and the determination of each textual unit. It is necessary that while referring each time to another text, to another determinate system, each organism only refer to *itself* as a determinate structure: a structure that is open and closed *at the same time*. (Derrida, *Dissemination*: 202)

He speaks about a scattering of meaning—*dissemination*—because the differential movement of the text can never be fixed.<sup>4</sup> A text refers to itself and at the same time to other texts. The ques-

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<sup>1</sup> About the origin-lessness of language, cf. Derrida ("The Linguistic Circle of Geneva," in Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Derrida (*Spurs*) and de Man (*Allegories of Reading*: 51).

<sup>3</sup> This is not supposed to be an equation but a fundamental correspondence within the frames of the two respective concepts.

<sup>4</sup> Said defines this effect of *dissemination*, which replaces the concept of meaning, as "the power of textuality to burst through semantic horizons." It produces "the perpetual disruption of writing, maintains

tion about its boundaries thus becomes undecidable. For interpretation, however, this means that *dissemination*, which Derrida posits against the traditional concept of polysemie,<sup>1</sup> radically contradicts every conception of the semantic totality of text. Meaning dissolves into a web of textual auto-reflexivity and intertextuality.

### 1.1.6. History as Transformation of Structure

So far, Derrida has done little to clarify the socio-historical dimension of deconstruction. In the following, a rough sketching of Foucault's understanding of history will show the implications for the global thematic field that arise from the poststructuralist concept of structure. By rejecting the criticism that deconstruction is ahistorical, we can thus gain a perspective that allows us to think about the concept of structure in terms of history and to consider which critical potential there is at the disposal of poststructuralist discourse analysis.

As it is this dissertation's objective to link Derrida with a historical perspective, I will dispense with a systematic introduction of Foucault's concepts<sup>2</sup> as well as with a subsequent discussion of his theories' inherent contradictions.<sup>3</sup> In addition, I will leave out differences to Derrida in favour of a 'field' that is common to both philosophers.<sup>4</sup>

The insight into the *structurality* of structure requires the renunciation of any meta-historical frame of orientation beyond that of linguistic differentiality. Thus for Foucault,<sup>5</sup> his-

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the fundamental undecidability of texts whose real power resides [...] in the possibility of their infinite generality and multiplicity" (*The World, The Text, and the Critic*: 204f).

<sup>1</sup> "If there is thus no thematic unity or overall meaning to reappropriate beyond the textual instances, no textual message located in some imaginary order, intentionality, or lived experience, then the text is no longer the expression or representation [...] of *any* truth that would come to diffract or assemble itself in the polysemie of literature" (Derrida, *Dissemination*: 262).

<sup>2</sup> For further clarifications of these, cf. Sloterdijk ("Michel Foucaults strukturelle Theorie der Geschichte"), and Frank (*What is Neostructuralism?*).

<sup>3</sup> Especially Frank's question whether, or to what extent, Foucault with his retaining of the representational model of language can be ascribed to *neostructuralism*. Foucault, thus goes Frank's delineation of the central contradiction of his theory, on the one hand posits '*subjectlessness*' and *discontinuity* as paradigms of his non-teleological concept of history; on the other, he criticises post-classical thought, which he defines as the 'intrusion' of discontinuity, for it abandons the representational concept of language (*What is Neostructuralism?*: 118ff).

<sup>4</sup> The major differences in the respective concepts of text will be discussed in 1.1.8. Text and Textuality.

<sup>5</sup> According to Foucault, a civilisation's communication is differentiated into three separate *codes*: under *primary codes* fall colloquial language and forms of manners and perceptions, under *secondary codes* he classifies world-explanations specific to epochs and civilisations, and *tertiary codes* subsume scientifically proven knowledge. The *historical a priori*s that are situated on a second level, are labelled *discourse* (*Archaeology of Knowledge*: 45) – Significant is here that Foucault does not see the organisation of the discourses constituted through the object but through the play of the rules (ibid.: chap. 2).

tory is a series of fortuitously connected discourse levels that are organised by the principle of differentiability. In discursive practice the subject ceases to exist as the supposed producer of meaningful totality/continuity, i.e. of history. On the contrary, Foucault claims that consciousness is dependent on the discursive practices of an epoch: "[...] the consciousness that begins in and with each use of signs is not the effect of a projection of meaning, but rather a process of self-reflection of this field" (Frank, *What is Neostructuralism?:* 95).

Foucault develops his historical work *archaeology* from this concept of history, which he situates in the dimension of discontinuity without recourse to the subject. This *archaeology* opposes the interpretative practice of a teleological concept of history that explains empirical data—documents—in context with other facts in order to extrapolate *meaning* from them. *Archaeology* radically abstains from (re-)constructing continuity, i.e. the presumptions of tradition, development or evolution, which intrinsically assume an all-embracing, meaningful coherence:

Archaeology tries to define [...] discourses as practices obeying certain rules. It does not treat discourse as *document*, as a sign of something else [...]; it is concerned with discourse in its volume, as a *monument*. It is not an interpretative discipline: it does not seek another, better-hidden discourse. It refuses to be 'allegorical'. (Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge:* 138f)

*Archaeology's* interest is not aimed at the hidden meaning of discourse, but at its governing regulatory system as the instance of meaning production specific to an epoch, e.g. the production of cultural tradition and identity which can only function through a series of semantic exclusions.<sup>1</sup> To lay bare these exclusions in the discursive practice of an epoch is what *archaeology* attempts to achieve.

It is due to the conception of *archaeology* as *discourse analysis* that creates its ambivalent theoretical status, which Sloterdijk accurately calls a "Zwitterstelle zwischen Kulturgeschichte und Erkenntnistheorie" (Sloterdijk, "Michel Foucaults strukturelle Theorie der Geschichte": 164).<sup>2</sup> Analogous to the structural analysis of language and speech, *archaeology* examines—on an *epistemological* level—how history constitutes (and is allowed to constitute) itself as product and object of a discourse. At the same time it requires, as Foucault demonstrates all too clearly in *Madness and Civilisation* and in *The Order of Things*,<sup>3</sup> on another level, the collection of facts and documents in order to achieve historical differentiations. On the other hand, discourse analysis does not assume historical facts to be unambiguous,<sup>4</sup> so it remains unclear how Fou-

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Descombes (Modern French Philosophy: 95).

<sup>2</sup> "an ambiguous position between cultural history and epistemology. [my translation]"

<sup>3</sup> Note the voluminous accumulation of facts in Foucault (*Madness and Civilisation*).

<sup>4</sup> This might be seen as a central contradiction in Foucault's theory, as Descombes explicates (*Modern French Philosophy:* 110ff).

cault perceives the relation between the historical-documentary and the archaeological-epistemological approach.<sup>1</sup>

Foucault thinks that the diachronic dimension of archaeological discourse analysis is guaranteed by the description of transformations (Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*: 24) without ascribing a causal law to this movement.<sup>2</sup> Thus, history is defined as a *transformation of a de-centred structure that is* quasi-autonomous, i.e. subject-less or not controllable by a subject.

If the building of a theory is to be generally possible, a certain moment of static is required within the permanent transformation of structure, i.e. "a minimal unity and regularity" (Frank, *What is Neostructuralism?*: 174):

Otherwise it [archaeology] would not even be a theory, but simply a conceptless ad thoughtless list of singularities that are not the singularities of something (for example, of a discourse). [...] If these individualities are not reducible to *one* single and overriding law, that does not mean that they are not reducible to any law at all, for example, that of the series to which they belong. In other words, *a multiplication of the codes from which events are deducible is no principal dismissal of the code model of classical structuralism*; with this there are only *many* sub-codes work instead of *one* global code [...]" (Frank, *What is Neostructuralism?*: 174)

As already shown with Derrida's model of a decentred structure (cf. 1.1.4. Dissemination) the contradiction of Foucault's archaeology lies in its aspiration to poststructurally abandon taxonomic structuralism while, at the same time, it cannot do without a model of structure. The splitting into subcodes only transfers the problem to a different level whose constitutive elements are smaller; yet, it needs a momentarily fixed constellation as a 'point of reference' for its discourse analysis.<sup>3</sup> However, a radical decentralisation and historicalisation of the model of structure, as understood by deconstruction, would include its own abandonment and at the same time the desertion of the instruments of discourse analysis. Derrida achieves this overcoming of

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<sup>1</sup> See the critique in Descombes (*Modern French Philosophy*: 110ff).

<sup>2</sup> Here it seems that Foucault's critique does not follow his theoretical conception: the archaeologist's historical view, free from assumptions of causality or telos of history, contradicts Foucault's evaluation of epistemological formations (cf. Frank, *What is Neostructuralism?*: 150ff). – Derrida's critique of Foucault goes further when he questions the compatibility of structuralism and the concept of history: "[...] Without establishing, moreover, whether an event such as the creation of the house of internment is a sign among others, whether it is a fundamental symptom or cause. This kind of question could appear exterior to a method that presents itself precisely as structuralist, that is, a method for which everything within the structural totality is interdependent and circular in such a way that the classical problems of causality themselves would appear to stem from a misunderstanding. Perhaps. But I wonder whether, when one is concerned with history [...], a strict structuralism is possible, and especially, whether [...] such a study can avoid all the etiological questions, all questions bearing, shall we say, on the center of gravity of the structure" ("Cogito and the History of Madness": 43f).

<sup>3</sup> With respect to the concept of structure, it seems sensible to speak here about a *radicalisation* rather than an abandonment.

a static model with his theory and practice of *dissemination* more radically but at the cost of having largely to do without the evidence of semantic constellations specific to epochs.<sup>1</sup>

Through the proof of its narrativity, Hayden White widens this discussion around the problematic of continuity and causality in traditional historiography:

The authority of the historical narrative is the authority of reality itself; the historical account endows this reality with form and thereby makes it desirable, imposing upon its processes the formal coherency that only stories possess. (White, "The Value of Narrativity": 19)

Beneath the form of narration—as constituent of a modern, non-postmodern or non-poststructuralist historiography<sup>2</sup>—lies its desire for causality and totality of meaning, "a desire to have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary" (ibid.: 23), which becomes subject of Derrida's and Foucault's deconstruction.

Historical condition of narrated history is, as developed by White following Hegel, the conception of a 'legal subject', i.e. a subject that perceives itself within a global, social context—the state—:

The more historically self-conscious the writer of any form of historiography, the more the question of the social system and the law which sustains it, the authority of this law and its justification, and threats to the law occupy his attention. If, as Hegel suggests, historicity as a distinct mode of human existence is unthinkable without the presuppositions of a system of law in relation to which a specifically legal subject could be constituted, then, historical self-consciousness, the kind of consciousness capable of imagining the need to represent reality as history, is conceivable only in terms of its interests in law, legality, legitimacy, and so on. (ibid.: 13)

Going beyond the mere sequencing of events (as in annals and in chronicles), the narrative dimension gains the ability to interpret *narratingly* the occurrences from a 'moralising'-teleological perspective: "every historical narrative has as its latent or manifest purpose the desire to *moralize* the events of which it treats" (ibid.: 14).

This function of interpretative moralising introduces the *plot* (in contrast to *story*) to historiography. But as the thus produced totality has to be presented as reality, the difference between the occurrence and its narrated rendition is blurred in the act of fictionalisation by pretending that the organisation of *plot* was always already the fable:

The historical narrative, as against the chronicle, reveals to us a world that is putatively 'finished', done with, over, and yet not dissolved, not falling apart. In this world, reality wears the

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<sup>1</sup> See about this the comparison of Derrida and Foucault's concept of text in 1.1.8. Text and Textuality.

<sup>2</sup> White defines annals and chronicles as non-narrative forms of historiography ("The Value of Narrativity": 5).

mask of a meaning, the completeness and fullness of which we can only *imagine*, never experience. Insofar as historical stories can be completed, can be given narrative closure, can be shown to have had a *plot* all along, they give to reality the odor of the *ideal*. This is why the plot of a historical narrative is always an embarrassment and has to be presented as 'found' in the events rather than put there by narrative techniques. (ibid.: 20)

With his novel interpretation of the various forms of historiography which, like Foucault's approach, does without a prioritisation of a concept of history organised by continuity, White produces a possible coupling point to the deconstructionists' discourse analysis, or deconstructive literary criticism.<sup>1</sup> In this, the moment of narrativity represents the point of intersection between the interpretation of historical and literary discourses: just as moralising, which aims at totality, is the basis of both fictional and historical discourse, the differentiation of 'fictitious' and 'real' is inherent to both narrated fiction and narrated history. According to White, it is only the *history proper* as *closed narrative* from which the opposition of *true* and *fictitious* event can arise: its truth measured only by its narrativity. White's thesis is that

the very discussion between real and imaginary events, basic to modern discussions of both history and fiction, presupposes a notion of reality in which 'the true' is identified with 'the real' only insofar as it can be shown to possess the character of narrativity. (ibid.: 6)

Nevertheless, as this differentiation demands that *fictitious* and *real* discourse be kept separate, narrating itself can become problematic. To the same extent in which the narrating subject can no longer conceive itself within a global, continuous, historical frame—this would be Foucault's frame of the grand metanarratives—the continuity of narration as interpretation of (fictional) events toward such totality becomes difficult. At the same time, the criteria that enable the classification into true and fictitious are withdrawn. (Referring to literature, this difference could be reinterpreted as *mimetic* or *non-mimetic*.)

Against the background of White's theory of narrativity we can relate the question of the continuity of fables and their disintegration to the general problematic of the constitution of history as meaningful course toward the present moment. At the same time this provides a model for explaining why in (post)modernism narration necessarily becomes impossible for the narrating subject. White's approach can thus be productively be applied to literary analyses.

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<sup>1</sup> In spite of the established crossover with Foucault, I would not classify White as a poststructuralist.

### 1.1.7. Subjectivity and Meaning

It corresponds with Derrida's own positioning after the *linguistic turn* that for the deconstruction of the concept of subject he centrally refers to the linguistic 'mediacy' and the 'untranscendability' of the supplementary character of self-consciousness.

His critique thus quintessentially aims at the *classical subject*. In his outline of the history of philosophy—beginning with Plato and Aristotle via Hegel to Nietzsche and Heidegger—Derrida claims that, in spite of all their terminological variants, they all have the underlying common topos of *presence of self-consciousness*.

On the occasion of his discussion of neostructuralism, Frank undertook to differentiate historically between the variants of the classical concepts of the subject, or of self-consciousness.<sup>1</sup> His classification distinguishes *egologic* from *non-egologic* models of self-consciousness. With the help of this separation, we can now define Derrida's historical perspective more precisely: in his discussion, he pursues especially the egologic (i.e. the reflective) models of self-consciousness. These have the underlying principle that

Jeder Bewußtseinsvollzug mit dem Vorstellen eines Gegenstandes identifiziert [wird], von dem in diesem Fall lediglich gelten soll, daß es sich um das (verdinglichte) Bewußtsein selbst handelt. Dieses Sich-selbst-Vorstellen des Bewußtseins nennt die philosophische Tradition *Reflexion*. Wir können also vom Reflexions-Modell des Selbstbewußtseins sprechen.<sup>2</sup> (Frank, *Die Unhintergebarkeit der Individualität*: 30)<sup>3</sup>

The privileging of consciousness, which is traditionally thought as self-perception of being-present, is based upon the notion of an unbroken presence. However, it is not through self-evidence<sup>4</sup> with which the subject's self-consciousness is constituted—as deconstruction claims—but as an effect of *différance*.<sup>5</sup> It is in particular its second component—the supplemental—with which Derrida explodes the reflection model of self-consciousness.

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<sup>1</sup> Especially in the outline of the concepts' history in chapter 1 of Frank (*Die Unhintergebarkeit von Individualität*).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. also Gasché ("Deconstruction as Criticism": 186).

<sup>3</sup> "each performance of consciousness [is] identified with the imagining of an object which in this case shall only be regarded as the (reified) consciousness itself. The philosophical tradition calls the consciousness' ability to imagine itself *reflection*. We can thus speak of the model of reflection for self-consciousness. [my translation]"

<sup>4</sup> Ryan explains the significance of the notion of self-evidence: "Self-constituted and exempt from negotiation, it precedes discourse and is more primordial than history" ("Self-Evidence": 2).

<sup>5</sup> Frank draws attention to of Althusser's poststructuralist concept of subject whose thesis is that "[...] the consciousness that begins in and with each use of signs is not the effect of a projection of meaning, but rather a process of self-reflection of this field" (*What is Neostructuralism?*: 95).

Employing Husserl as an example,<sup>1</sup> Derrida follows the argumentative threads up to the contradictions of the notion that assumes a self-present subject. By proving how the idea of a pre-semiotic inner experience becomes increasingly problematic for Husserl's own argument, Derrida is able to operate from within the text without applying an external counter model (cf. 1.1.4. Dissemination).

Derrida's point of departure is that Husserl dismisses the consciousness' self-presence derived from linguistically mediated operations, i.e. the signification process in the subject's world experience. Hence, he seeks to discern a pre-expressive level from an expressive one in the conditions of consciousness.<sup>2</sup> Against the internal life that refrains from all language and physicality, Husserl posits the "psychical" as the external life of the consciousness which in contrast to the transcendental ego is derivative (Frank, *What is Neostructuralism?:* 230f).

The presence of the ideal self-consciousness, however, excludes the very difference that has to be generated through the reflection of the self on itself. Husserl tries to circumvent this contradiction by pretending that the internal differentiability of self-consciousness is a *virtual difference* and thus hopes to defuse the problematic. One can contend, as Frank does, that with such a modification of difference Husserl's self-consciousness transforms into something virtual and thus into an "unreal element": "The idea of a merely virtual consciousness annuls itself; there is consciousness of virtualities, but no virtual consciousness" (ibid.: 233).

If an *experience* of consciousness cannot, *per definitionem*, be virtual, then Husserl gets rid of differentiability and supplementarity of self-consciousness at the high cost of intrinsic contradictions.<sup>3</sup>

As (non-virtual) self-consciousness is only constituted in the mirror of reflection, it is split into three temporal moments: first, the moment of a still-unconscious innerliness; second, the moment of going outside itself and mirroring itself; and finally, a third moment of reinternalising the mirror image within the self (ibid.: 235). Consequently, Derrida attacks Husserl's concepts from two sides: first, with the demonstration of temporality in the act of reflection that enables self-consciousness and second, with the no longer guaranteed identity of self and mirrored

<sup>1</sup> Derrida rejects, as already, with a different perspective, shown in 1.1.4. Dissemination, on the one hand in his analysis of Husserl's idealistic concept of the sign the untenable splitting of intended meaning and linguistic expression, on the other he demonstrates the self-consciousness' temporality.

<sup>2</sup> I am referring here to Frank's exposition of Husserl's phenomenology and its critique (*What is Neostructuralism?:* see especially lecture 15). – Frank explains in detail the central function of self-consciousness in Husserl's philosophy (ibid.: 229ff).

<sup>3</sup> Frank sums up Derrida's critique on Husserl's theory of consciousness: "This [Husserl's] model seeks to guarantee the unity of the divided consciousness by transforming the Other into the Other of itself. To accomplish this, however, reflection has to (temporarily) surrender itself to the reality of the opposition, to the division, and to the nonsimultaneity of the two moments of consciousness (*Bewußtseins-Relate*). Once delivered over to the medium of reality, of temporal sequentiality, and of contrast, reflection can no longer return to the sphere of pure ideality and instantaneousness, at least as long as this sphere is understood as pure nonbodily and transtemporal autoaffection" (*What is Neostructuralism?:* 234).

self. Elsewhere, Derrida describes this non-identical relation metaphorically as "folding" of the presence to itself.

Gasché concludes this doubled aporia, which marks all philosophies of reflection, with Merleau-Ponty:

[...] the reflection recuperates everything except itself as an effort of recuperation, it clarifies everything except its own role. [...] the temporal differences between the always belated movement of recovery and return on the one hand, and on the other hand the originary constitution, their dissymmetry, forbid all contemporaneity of reflection with itself. [...] The aporia between the constitutive principle and reflection as a retrospective construction is non-existent for the philosophy of reflection. (Gasché, "Deconstructive Criticism": 186f)

The pure ideality of meaning is in the same category as the concepts of subject and meaning. In reversing Husserl, who understands repeatability as the consequence of the ideality of meaning, Derrida defines a certain *totality* of meaning by its iterability. But if the transcendental ego is supposed to be both guarantor and place of realistic experience, then its totality cannot be attested in the moment in which the 'I' itself is suspected of supplementarity and non-identity. Subordinate to *différance*, the subject no longer has the possibility of experiencing a meaning-endowing totality. Beyond the question of reference—meaning—*undecidability* takes the place of totality/ideality (Frank, *What is Neostructuralism?*: 417). Thus, *dissemination* undermines the process of meaning-endowing and understanding (which hermeneutics attempts to salvage) in two ways: language *and* subject are subordinate to the principle of temporality.

Following the disintegration of the notion of consciousness or of the subject as being present to itself into a *double* non-identity, Derrida tentatively formulates which bearing, regarding a revision of these concepts, deconstruction has to take:

Thus we no longer know whether what was always presented as a derived and modified representation of simple presentation, as "supplement," "sign," "writing," or "trace," "is" not, in a necessarily but newly, ahistorical sense, "older" than presence and the system of truth, older than "history." (Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*: 103)

At the core of such a deconstructive or poststructuralist concept of the subject would thus be: the relation to Being as a presentic reality is, with the principle of *différance*, always deferred.<sup>1</sup> There is no (Husserlian) transcendental consciousness that is located outside of language through which it yet has a medium for expressing pre-linguistic, evidential self-experience. Language, the force of *spatialisation* and *temporalisation*, always comes before consciousness and

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<sup>1</sup> Derrida sees Freud, who explains the constitution of consciousness with supplementarity and graphematisation, from a neurological-psychological perspective ("Freud and the Scene of Writing").

disproves its identity.<sup>1</sup> The subject's self-presence exposes itself as a—linguistically motivated—illusion.<sup>2</sup>

### 1.1.8. Text and Textuality

The notion of *textuality* forms the basis for the deconstructive theory (or theories) of text. Within the poststructuralist spectrum the notion of *textuality* is subject to variations, as the broad span of meaning of the concurrent notion of *epistème* (i.e. as the rules of discourse of a semantic structural system underlying the individual texts) illustrates: At the cost of having to withdraw specific historical contextualisations in favour of transhistorical constants,<sup>3</sup> Derrida's comprehensive notion of *epistème* covers the entire metaphysical thinking of the western world. Contrary to this, Foucault works with a considerably narrower variant that is specific to epochs. Roland Barthes, according to Hempfer, subsumes, under his notion of *écriture*, styles specific to epochs as well as "transepocheale Vertextungsformen"<sup>4</sup> (Hempfer, *Poststrukturelle Texttheorie und narrative Praxis*: 13).

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<sup>1</sup> If subjectivity is a consequence of the differential structure of the sign, it remains unsolved in Derrida how (unstable, only minimal) identity of meaning can be recognised or be conceived as such. This is where Frank's debate with Derrida begins: self-consciousness can only be thought if something exists, of which the self in the reflective act then becomes aware, *before* the self-experience. The Fundamental dilemma, according to Frank, is that "self cannot be deduced from the existence of a relation whose constituents are both not – or *principally* both not – directly accessible" (*Die Unhintergebarkeit*: 42). The paradoxes of the egologic and non-egologic models of the philosophical tradition (which Derrida criticises quite rightly) are only solvable, Frank argues, if one presumes the existence of an incorporeal, irrelational consciousness as one "that does not from the outset press the subject into the position of an object (of itself)" (ibid.: 32). From this Frank concludes the existence of an *immediate* consciousness that does not require a self-presentation (ibid.: 32). Furthermore, the identity of signs necessitates an act of meaning or significance attribution by the *individual*; the dependence on signs is no "sufficient reason for signification" (ibid.: 25). – With his objection to Derrida, Frank turns the problematic of the *aporias* of the traditional explanation attempts into a virtue for individuality. He posits his *irrelational self-consciousness*, without for example discussing the question to what extent this has to be thought as pre-linguistic: it remains unclear how the *irrelational self-consciousness* has to be understood in relation to the linguisticity of consciousness. Language itself is, and Frank would undoubtedly follow here Derrida's argument, always social and relational. I assume that Frank has the situating of the individual outside language in mind and thus going back before the *linguistic turn*, without discussing deconstruction's objections against such a conception. He does not confirm this explicitly, though. [all my translations]

<sup>2</sup> The often-cited thesis that poststructuralism celebrates the *death of the subject* corresponds at best as a metaphorical rendition with Derrida's theory. His aim is clearly not the negation of the category of the subject in general but the turning away from the *metaphysical subject as one that experiences itself in an immediate self-presence*.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Lentricchia's critique of Derrida's ahistorical notion of text (*After The New Criticism*: 176).

<sup>4</sup> "Trans-epochal forms of textualisation [my translation]" .

With the central problem of the relation of material/social reality and text/*écriture* put forward, we can define the width of the conceptual field of *textuality* within poststructuralism.<sup>1</sup> The differences are not to be found, for example, in the intratextual definition, but in the definition of the relation between text and extra-textual context. To this end I will bring Derrida's approach up against that of Foucault (and Edward Said).<sup>2</sup>

Foucault criticises the deconstructive reduction of all extra-textual factors to a purely textual function; text, on the contrary, is to be conceived of as manifestation of an *epistème* which is trying to conceal its being part of a network of power in the play of the text: "the activation of an immensely complex tissue of forces, for which a text is a place among other places (including the body) where the strategies of control in society are conducted" (Said, *The World*: 215). The reduction of the text's origin back to the author springs from the desire to limit and control the semantic limitlessness: "The author is yet another, more subtle precautionary measure whose function is to control, censure and police the excesses of polysemic discourse of fiction" (Foucault, quoted in Harari, "Critical Factions": 44).

Hence Foucault's discourse is defined as a *double historicity*: First, the *meaning* of the text is constituted in the process of semantic and pragmatic contextualisation, decontextualisation and recontextualisation and is therefore principally historical (Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*: 105). Second, the individual text is situated within the *epistème* (i.e. the discourse form) of a specific epoch and therefore within its historical boundaries (ibid.: 116f).

The second aspect marks Foucault's difference to Derrida. While the intratextual perspective on the non-expressed, on that which manifests itself only in the ruptures of discourse and disproves the totality of meaning (or its controlled heterogeneity) is common to both, the epistemological interest, which guides Foucault's discourse analysis, puts a greater emphasis on historio-social critique. Although his concept of the text is dynamic, he has to arrest structures through which he can mark the discourse forms of a certain epoch: "Archaeology [...] seems to treat history only to freeze it" (ibid.: 166). In order to make the rupture—the discontinuity between two formations—visible, a description of these formations is required which necessarily has to presume a certain *immobility* of the structure (ibid.: 166ff). His work has therefore, in contrast to his theoretical propositions, a decidedly more structuralist orientation.

Derrida defines *textuality* by the general graphematic character of language, i.e. with the potential absence of author and reference (cf. 1.1.5. Iterability of the Sign and Grammar of the Text), with language's lack of origin and its general priority over the subject (cf. 1.1.7. Subjectivity and Meaning). This then strips text of an intentional subject's authority over the produc-

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<sup>1</sup> I will however not discuss the question whether Foucault has to be regarded as structuralist or as poststructuralist.

<sup>2</sup> I will chiefly follow the discussions of this controversy in Harari (*Textual Strategies*), Leitch (*Deconstructive Criticism*) and Said (*The World, The Text, and The Critic*).

tion and control of text and the subject's relation to world. That Derrida, with his understanding of text and writing, takes up the Jewish conception of writing has been succinctly developed by Susan Handelman.<sup>1</sup>

However, *textuality* in Derrida's conception is—in contrast to Foucault's—not a real, provable structure or movement on a textual level but, as Gasché says, a *quasitranscendental structure* which itself generates absence and the illusion of presence. Text(uality) does not equal the written text (Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror*: 274);<sup>2</sup> Derrida himself does not keep up this systematic separation either terminologically or with regard to his theoretical conception and continually oscillates between the phenomenological and transcendental level.

Playing with the semantic possibilities of the word 'hymen',<sup>3</sup> Derrida demonstrates with an analysis of Mallarmé's *Mimique* (Derrida, *Dissemination*) the peculiar double structure of presence and absence intrinsic to the infinite-deferral character of text.<sup>4</sup> Derrida uses this text as a paradigm for his conception of textuality beyond mimesis, beyond a differentiation of interior and exterior, text and world, original and representation:

We are faced then with mimicry imitating nothing; faced, so to speak, with a double that doubles no simple, a double that nothing anticipates, nothing at least that is not already itself double. There is no simple reference. It is in this that the mime's operation does allude, but alludes to nothing, alludes without breaking the mirror, without reaching beyond the looking-glass. (ibid.: 206)<sup>5</sup>

The historicity and self-referentiality of the textual structure is accompanied by the shifting from a 'closed' conception of text, in the sense of a static model of structure, toward a model of an *individual* and exclusively *textual practice* as *play*.

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<sup>1</sup> Handelman explains: "The poet and the Jew are not rooted in an empirical, natural present: they are never here but always there [...] They are natives only to the world and the Scripture: the home of the Jew is a sacred text in the middle of commentaries" ("Jacques Derrida and the Heretic Hermeneutic": 99). – Handelman draws a parallel between Derrida's and entanglement of text and interpreter and the relation of divine and oral Torah in which human interpretation becomes part of the divine text. It is against this background that Handelman describes Derrida's theory as "re-emergence of Rabbinic hermeneutics in a displaced way" (ibid.: 111). In this, the moment of the Derridean *displacement* has to be situated in his notion of the *trace*: while in Jewish tradition text and world are effects of God's trace, it is only, according to Derrida, the *trace* which as movement of differentiability motivates the conception of God as an absolute presence by referring to its Other: presence (ibid.: 117).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. 1.2.1. Definitions.

<sup>3</sup> 'hymen' signifies both consummation of marriage and proof of inviolate virginity.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. the excellent presentation by Gasché ("Joining the Text": 164ff).

<sup>5</sup> An important issue, unfortunately not quite adequately worked out, of this one of the best essays on Derrida (Gasché, "Joining the Text"), is Derrida's relation to Heidegger in this context: Gasché demonstrates the analogy of Derrida's conception of text and Heidegger's *Sein* with Heidegger's fundamental dissymmetry of *trait* and *retrait*. It is this asymmetry on which *Seinsvergessenheit*, but also the possibility of its destruction is based upon, which prompts Heidegger to determine *Sein* in a temporal and historical definition as *Unter-Schied* ("Joining the Text": 158). – About the differences between Derrida and Heidegger, see Gasché (ibid.: 172).

The radical levelling of the differences between text and world—with the disintegration of the hierarchy of cognitive argument against the rhetoric of the text (in the sense that the rhetoric surplus explodes the illusory control over its semantics)—prompts Derrida to postulate the *essential undecidability* of literary and philosophical, or critical, discourses.<sup>1</sup>

Such a differentiation is based, according to Derrida, on the metaphysical opposition of *outside* and *inside*: while the non-literary discourse is subject to the requirements of verification, soundness of argument, etc., literature is granted a special mode: figurality. Even if, as deconstruction does, particular attention is paid to the figurative, or metaphorical, component of philosophical texts as an indispensable part, philosophy merely appears as a single form of a general literary discourse. With this, the binary opposition between literature as playful marginality and rational-analytical forms of discourse becomes void; a categorical separation of aesthetics/aesthetic practice and epistemology becomes invalid.<sup>2</sup> Discourses might operate with various textual strategies, but Derrida contests the possibility of a systematic separation, for example, into discourse types. The Yale Critics undertake a slight terminological shift in their attempt to replace Derrida's concept of text with a globalisation of literature, or literariness (see Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse on Modernity*: 224f).<sup>3</sup>

While the Yale Critics (excluding de Man) adopt the levelling of genre distinctions as it legitimises the critical discourse's emancipation from the priority of the pre-text (Miller, "The Critic as Host"), other critics suspect this thesis of—as has occurred already in the loss of the relation to world—abandoning the notion of reason and subsequently the possibility of critique.<sup>4</sup>

Derrida indeed eliminates—similar to Lyotard in his theory of postmodernism—exactly the systematic differentiation in social spheres (with their specific forms of discourse and claims of validity) which Habermas defends as indispensable for the conclusion of *modernism*. It is therefore no coincidence that Habermas takes precisely Derrida's flattening of genre distinctions as subject matter for his universal-pragmatic countermove. It is in this context that he charges Derrida that this "*aestheticizing of language*" is bought at the cost of the "*twofold denial of the proper senses of normal and poetic discourse*" (Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse on Modernity*: 205). The demolition of genre distinctions neglects, says Habermas, the entirely dissimilar functions of rhetoric in philosophy and literature: in literature it operates as the poetical expression's self-reference, whereas it is "tamed" in the discourses of the social spheres of law, moral, economics and politics and merely functions for specific reasons of problem solution (ibid.: 245).

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<sup>1</sup> See 1.1.3. The Deconstructive Method.

<sup>2</sup> For further elucidation cf. 1.2.3. Literariness of Discourse. – In this context, de Man would not use the concept of aesthetics but the concept of poetics.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. 1.2.3. Literariness of Discourse.

<sup>4</sup> This is the tenor of the works of Hempfer, Abrams and Butler.

Again, Habermas' critique suffers in that his argumentative level misses Derrida's more fundamental critique. What Derrida is attempting is not a (certainly possible) gradual differentiation of stylistic "rhetoricity" according to the text's pragmatic function, but a fundamental, *systematic distinction of types of discourse with regard to linguistics and pragmatics*.

The fact that Derrida, with his version of textuality, does not give up the possibility of a critical practice (of writing) has to be emphasised against Habermas. Evidence for this is Derrida's deconstruction of Lévi-Strauss' anthropology whose basic differentiation between writing-less on the one hand and civilised people on the other is derived from a narrow concept of text and which therefore does not transcend the traditional opposition—as already demonstrated in Derrida's readings of Rousseau and Saussure—of "innocent nature" and "violent civilisation" but, to the contrary, actually affirms it. Lévi-Strauss demonstrates this opposition's inherent ethnocentrism and phonocentrism through *anti-ethnocentrism* – by attributing violence to civilised peoples (Derrida, *Of Grammatology*: 132). Derrida, in contrast, argues that—in opposition to the presumption of an originary presence, innocence, purity of the uttered word—at every stage an always already existing *non-identity* as a moment of *violence* is demonstrable. For him this means, referring to the taboo of the proper name in the Nambikwara tribe, that already the original act of classification, of (self-)denomination, is an act of violence. In a subsequent act of violence the prohibition of the proper name (as the phenomenon of Lévi-Strauss' ethnographical interest) tries to conceal the first; in a third step the "non-self-sameness [*non-propriété*] at the origin" is reflexively revealed (*ibid.*: 109).

Derrida's contention against Lévi-Strauss' idealisation of the tribe as natural and non-violent—which experiences violence only through the ethnographer's intrusion and the force of writing—is the following: the obliteration of the proper name in fact signifies the *possession of writing* and an *originary violence* – the abstraction of individuality and presence of its bearer. This then collapses Lévi-Strauss' opposition of *nature* and *civilisation*, and *speech* and *writing*. The seemingly secondary, i.e. historically following, reveals itself as the definition of the *origin*, which it then no longer is (*ibid.*: 101ff).

Derrida's argument against Lévi-Strauss is based on his (at first implicit) much wider concept of text with which he operates: he interprets the tribe's acquisition of writing as the transition from arche-writing (as becoming aware of differences, proper name, act of classification) to writing in the narrow sense. Writing is a symbolic operation that is the foundation of all insight, experience and communication, and which, in the moment of classification into the general system of symbols, necessarily violates the unnameable individual (which never existed). With this, however, Lévi-Strauss' equation of 'possession of writing' with 'exploitation of man' is null and void, as it is based on an untenable categorical differentiation of non-violent speech and violent writing (*ibid.*: 219).

With this brief example of Derrida's deconstructive argument, we can gauge its potential for criticising ideology. On the one hand, it becomes obvious that Derrida's theory can be ap-

plied to criticism against ideologies; this is made evident with Derrida's theory-immanent demonstration of non-validated presumptions and customary patterns of thinking (e.g. the opposition of *nature* and *civilisation*) with which Lévi-Strauss' operates. This also shows that deconstruction by no means evades or voids the notion of critique. On the other hand, however, Derrida limits the reach of his critique (and not only in this context) by often not clarifying with which concept of writing, or on which level, he is arguing: writing as an underlying quasi-transcendental structure of epistémé and language in general (cf. 1.1.5. Iterability of the Sign and Grammar of the Text), or writing as a specific, graphematic form of linguistic expression. His not always entirely clear widening of the concept of writing then leads to an understanding of *violence* that is very different to Lévi-Strauss' critique of contemporary civilisation, and whose stretched semantic range shifts the critical discourse to another level. This however does not keep Derrida from playing off his very own conception of *original violence* against Lévi-Strauss' much more specifically aiming critique of contemporary civilisation. (In fact, Lévi-Strauss does not negate the power-stabilising function of writing.)

With his polemic, which blends a 'medium range' theory with a radically epistemological critique, Derrida forgoes an opportunity of specific social criticism in subsuming, and thereby diminishing, all forms of political power under *original violence*. It is the levelling of the difference between quasi-transcendental and phenomenal/social categories—which does not necessarily follow from his premises—that evokes the impression of an affirmation of the existing order. This then demonstrates why—not regarding its *potential* for critique—the deconstruction of critical approaches to contemporary civilisation could be branded as tending toward neoconservatism.

## 1.2. DECONSTRUCTION IN LITERARY CRITICISM

### 1.2.1. Definitions

On the occasion of the Johns Hopkins Symposium in 1966, Jacques Derrida presented his paper "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences". It is now generally accepted that this event marked the beginning of poststructuralism in Anglo-American literary criticism.<sup>1</sup> However, the Yale Critics and others—Paul de Man, Geoffrey Hartman, Harold Bloom, Joseph N. Riddel, Paul Bové and William Spanos—do not develop a systematic theory of a deconstructive literary criticism but pursue—at least according to their understanding—a *deconstructive interpretation practice* that is chiefly motivated by philological or literary interests and not by Derrida's philosophical problems.<sup>2</sup>

The reception of Derrida, which supplied the theoretical foundations for the critical exegesis, is confined to but a few text—depending on their systematic 'exploitability'—: *Of Grammatology*. "Signature Event Context", "Limited Inc a b c", and "Freud and the Scene of Writing". It is curious to note that the two texts that are, in my estimation, highly relevant for literary criticism, namely *Dissemination* and *Spurs*, have generally been ignored.<sup>3</sup>

That the perception of Derrida's work is subject to various Anglo-American distortions has been mentioned more than once. For this, especially the different academic socialisation, or the New Criticism's deficit in theory,<sup>4</sup> the skipping of other phases of literary theory (e.g. of structuralism, and of phenomenological or reception-oriented approaches) as well as the Anglo-American literary criticism's tendency to assimilate new theories or methods 'pluralistically'<sup>5</sup> can be regarded as responsible. The general slant for the defence of Derrida's deconstruction is the accusation of a "domestication of Derrida".<sup>6</sup> Leitch articulates this critique succinctly: "The development from Derrida to de Man to Miller manifests itself as a continuous narrowing and reduction" (Leitch, *Deconstructive Criticism*: 52).

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<sup>1</sup> About the history of the symposium and the reception of Derrida's paper, cf. Lentricchia (*After the New Criticism*: 158ff, 168).

<sup>2</sup> Derrida strategy of the *close reading* can be seen as a link to the New Criticism – cf. de Man (*The Resistance to Theory*: 116ff).

<sup>3</sup> This might be due to their relatively late translation into English. An exception is Gasché who refers centrally to these texts in his analysis of Derrida's concepts of *text* and *meaning*.

<sup>4</sup> cf. de Man's analysis (*The Resistance to Theory*) and Lentricchia (*After the New Criticism*: 158ff).

<sup>5</sup> cf. Norris (*Deconstruction*: chapter 1) and Eagleton (*Literary Theory*: 148).

<sup>6</sup> The notion was introduced to the debate by Godzich (*Reading de Man Reading*) and was taken up by Gasché ("Joining the Text"). Norris (*Deconstruction*) and Ryan ("Self-Evidence") argue similarly. The latter criticises in particular the reduction of deconstruction's radically political dimension through the rather conservative Yale Critics.

This assessment of deconstructive literary critics—whose highly divergent orientation is generally not recognised, especially not by their polemic opponents—remains within the framework of the concession that the attribute 'deconstructive', or 'deconstructionist', apply to all of them. Two more recent works, however, question even this: Leitch proves convincingly that Bloom, Riddel and Spanos can only with limitations be subsumed under the heading of 'deconstructive literary studies' (*ibid.*). Gasché, on the other hand, questions deconstruction's very applicability to problems of literary theory and criticism.

In the following, I will briefly sketch, as an overview of Derrida's influence on Anglo-American criticism, the most important approaches.<sup>1</sup> Their generally very different orientation is the reason for my later focus in Paul de Man's theory.<sup>2</sup>

Joseph Hillis Miller, with his radically epistemological scepticism and subversive attitude toward thought, takes up both Derrida's critique of metaphysics and de Man's theory of text. In this he proceeds at times in a unsystematical and contradictory manner; for instance, he adopts Derrida's *différance* but not the *trace*; he equally accepts de Man's '*rhetoricity*' of the text, yet not its '*grammatical dimension*'.<sup>3</sup> It is in only a few texts that Miller explicitly develops the foundations of his theory. He himself warns in a methodological contemplation against the danger of a short-circuit between deconstructive interpretation practice and deconstructive literary theory (Miller, "Theory and Practice": 609). For the subsequent discussion of a possible application of Derrida's work to problems of literary criticism, I will therefore refer to Miller on only a few relevant points.

Geoffrey Hartman adheres, in spite of his self-conception as a playful Derridean, to the concept of literature as representation (Hartman, *The Fate of Reading*: xii, 97). His consistent recourse to interpretation's psychological motivation for interpretation (*ibid.*: 8ff) seems to imply furthermore the recognition of a subject as authority for text production and text reception. His (implicit) model of text and interpretation oscillates between a conservative appeal for the *close reading* of the traditional canon (*ibid.*: xiii, 270); taking up Derrida, the theorising of a radical *hermeneutics of indeterminacy*; a phonocentric orientation of an analogous, non-arbitrary language, a general abandonment of linguistic theory and metacritique in the sense of a methodological reflection.<sup>4</sup> Hartman maintains that interpretation is not a meta- but a *paralanguage*, an at times arbitrary creative act (*ibid.*: 268).

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<sup>1</sup> A more comprehensive introduction can be found in Norris (*Deconstruction*), Culler (*On Deconstruction*) and Leitch (*Deconstructive Criticism*).

<sup>2</sup> The question whether the other Yale Critics could be regarded as deconstructionists is, at least within the frame of this dissertation, of relatively little importance as their critical practice leaves but few approaches for theoretical systematisation.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. the critical discussion in Leitch (*Deconstructive Criticism*: 52).

<sup>4</sup> Hartman himself describes his approach a critical-tentative in contrast to Derrida's "transcendentally reductive" deconstruction (*The Fate of Reading*: x). Elsewhere he calls his work "deconstruction without licence" (*ibid.*: 269). – McCallum accuses Hartman of an 'wild' eclecticism ("Indeterminacy":

The contradictions are obvious: on the one hand Hartman refers to an institutionalised concept of literature that assumes the literary text's priority, on the other he attempts—against Derrida, yet with Derrida's theorem of the *supplement*—to raise the status of interpretation by trying to diminish the difference between primary and secondary text. A widening of the concept of the *supplement* as characteristic of psychological operations in general weakens their specific attribution to the relation between interpretation and primary text (ibid.: 16f). It is simply a misinterpretation, though, to reduce Derrida's *supplement* to such a difference. Again, Hartman's differentiation from Derrida remains more than unclear in his argument.

Harold Bloom, like Hartman, has not developed a systematic language theory or text theory. With regard to interpretation, his views about the dissolving of the notion of reference match deconstruction's theoretical foundations, even though he holds on to the notion of meaning, as Leitch demonstrates: the constitution of meaning remains interpretation's ultimate (not explicitly named) objective. Simultaneously, Bloom's Darwinist model of the history of literature is based, even more so than Hartman's, on a re-personalisation and a re-psychologisation of the concept of text, which Spanos quite rightly criticises as a relapse into logocentrism (in the sense of an idealised concept of meaning that is based on subject).<sup>1</sup>

William Spanos, and his disciple Paul Bové, can be associated to the field around deconstruction. With the phonocentric foundation of their theory of text, however, they stand closer to Heidegger than to Derrida<sup>2</sup> and I will for that reason not focus on them in the following chapters.

In his seminal work *The Tain of the Mirror*, Gasché maintains the more radical thesis that all deconstructive critics essentially miss the philosophical and theoretical implications of Derrida's deconstruction. In order to ascertain whether literary criticism requires a deconstructive revision, or to what extent Derrida's theory is actually applicable, I will briefly outline Gasché's argument.

Following an analysis of Derrida's philosophy, Rodolphe Gasché attempts to develop the basis of a methodologically reflected deconstructive literary criticism. He sees the fact that Derrida's work can only be partially applied to literary criticism as based on the *quasi-transcendental status* of its categories. At the core of his contention lies that an application of

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78); he lacks "a notion of critical consciousness loyal to the *specifica differentia*" of the theories he cites (ibid.).

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed critique of Bloom's history of literature, cf. Leitch (*Deconstructive Criticism*: 130ff) and Norris (*Deconstruction*: 116ff).

<sup>2</sup> Spanos himself talks explicitly about his relation to Heidegger and Derrida ("Breaking the Circle"). He compares Heidegger's *Seinsvergessenheit*, as the forgetting of the temporality of being, with the closed, or closed-off, form of the work of art and with New Criticism and structuralism's understanding of the work of art as a final product. The breaking up of form in postmodern art thus mirrors the breaking up of *Seinsvergessenheit*, i.e. the consciousness of temporality. Writing is then interpreted as the veiling of temporality; speech, in contrast, as its paradigm. – cf. also Leitch's critique (*Deconstructive Criticism*: 84).

the concepts on the level of the 'real text' fails to recognise their non-ontological, non-phenomenological character (Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror*: part III) as it does not pay attention to their systematic standing within Derrida's theory.<sup>1</sup>

The concepts of writing and speech, as they are commonly used, cannot serve to explain arche-writing. Writing, in its colloquial sense, as the visible and coded script in the world, is only the metaphor of general writing. [...] Major writing, as Derrida calls the arche-synthesis of writing in the context of his essay on Bataille, and which is opposed to minor writing, is not reducible to the sensible or visible present of the graphic or the 'literal'. [...] Writing in Derrida's sense is not determined by what it is about, nor has it anything essentially in common with the signs present on the page [...]. Despite its quasitranscendental status, or precisely because of it, arche-writing is not essence. It has no proper value of its own, positive or negative [...]. (ibid.: 274)

Thus thematically oriented as well as formalistic interpretations are intrinsically logocentric approaches. They assume a totality of the signified<sup>2</sup> or try to suppress the delimited play of signifiers with a grammar; they ultimately adhere to an essentialist, i.e. ontological, notion of literature in their efforts to determine the specifically poetic (ibid.: 263ff). The essentialist definition of literature, says Gasché, is also valid for the Yale Critics who proclaim the literary character of all discourses. He, in contrast, considers this assumption a misreading of Derrida's concept of text; rather, the orientation of literature to the signified as representation displays its submission to the conception and ethos of philosophy. *Literature*, in Derrida's thinking, i.e. a "radically non-phenomenologizable structure" that is unconnected to the paradigms of philosophy, does not yet really exist (ibid.: 259).

If however, and thus goes Gasché's surprising conclusion, there barely exists such *deconstructive* literature, then the traditional literary criticism is not without a certain justification. It is, so to speak, the theoretical pendant of a literature that is trapped in a conception of expression (in the sense of the expression of a non-verbal signified) and it therefore fulfils an appropriate function (ibid.: 259f). Derrida's theories can, if at all, only find entrance to literary criticism as transcendental philosophy.

Even though Gasché's explication of the theoretical status of Derrida's thought is unquestionably innovative in the critical literature on deconstruction, his contention seems to fall prey to his own purist systematisation of Derrida. Gasché's cutting off of the real text level goes too far; he—under the mistaken impression of supporting Derrida—criticises in the Yale Critics' work what especially the later Derrida than practices himself. Derrida's notoriously playful, semantically indeterminable and fractured discourse seems at least to hint at the blurring of the

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<sup>1</sup> Gasché demonstrates this paradigmatically with the concepts of *writing*, *text*, and *metaphor* (*The Tain of the Mirror*: 271ff). – cf. also 1.1.8. Text and Textuality.

<sup>2</sup> The concept of polysemie, which tries to circumvent the reduction of a single meaning, falls prey to this tendency toward totalisation, too, says Gasché corresponding with Derrida.

difference between transcendental (*infrastructures*) and phenomenological structures. This, for example, happens in the equation of (transcendental) writing (*écriture*) and graphical writing in *Of Grammatology*, of figurality and metaphorical language of discourse in *Dissemination*, of spatialisation and time/temporalisation of space, of the *trace* and the exploding of *closure* with the juxtaposition of two texts in "Tympan", etc. It is especially Derrida's technique in his essay on Mallarmé that confirms my disagreement with Gasché. Even though Derrida emphasises *blanche*, the white space of the *diacritical nothing* between word and word, meaning and meaning, as the 'unthematized' movement of the self-reflective multitude of the text, he concurrently remarks on its double on the textual level, namely Mallarmé's metaphorical field of *blanche*, *snow*, *swan*, *virginity*, *hymen* (Derrida, *Dissemination*: 258). A systematic differentiation between phenomenological and quasitranscendental structures would indeed require the very dichotomy of original and representation for the discourse that Derrida dissolves in his essay. Although quasitranscendental structures are underlying the disseminating movement on the textual level, the latter is ultimately the only access to, or indicator of, the quasitranscendental. Truth is, as Derrida suggests in his reading of Plato, dependent on its representation, and thus it ceases to be what it is (*ibid.*: 156ff). Both Derrida and Gasché find such discourse practice that is beyond philosophical definition realised in modernity, especially in Mallarmé's work. Paradoxically, it appears that it only becomes *literature* through its own negation:

[...] it is by suspending its *being* as literature that literature becomes capable of challenging philosophy's dominant categorization. Literature puts itself between quotation marks by opening itself to the absolute loss of its meaning, whether of content or of form. Literature becomes a radical interrogation of philosophy, and of most past literature as well, not only by refusing its foundation in a preceding and prior being of meaning but also by disclaiming any formal essence as concerns its substance or expression. (Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror*: 258)

The de-limitation of writing in modernity demands, according to Gasché, first, a new literary criticism which does not ask for fixed or totalised meaning, and second, a revision of literary criticism's approach to pre-modern text (*ibid.*: 261ff). The impossibility of an objective, limiting interpretation is thus not the result of a hermeneutic problem but is rather firmly rooted in the decentred structure of text itself.<sup>1</sup> In turn the openness/infinity of interpretation causes a deficiency which—in a new interpretation—requires supplementation.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Frank (*What is Neostructuralism?*: 65ff) and Butler (*Interpretation, Deconstruction and Ideology*: 62).

<sup>2</sup> Here the double semantic of the *supplement* becomes obvious: the supplementing to the deficiency, *finding of meaning* the interpretation is an *inventing*, i.e. an extension, an *addition* to the text.

An exegesis that does without a descriptive and analytical doubling of the text falls, according to Gasché, prey to pure arbitrariness. What is required is a literary criticism that is both deconstructive and scholarly.<sup>1</sup>

Deconstruction's call for the dissociation from the traditional concept of meaning is shared by phenomenological approaches and, to a certain degree, by hermeneutics. Derrida himself demands a rigorous hermeneutic analysis of the text's semantics as the first step in a deconstructive reading. However, only the "account for the text's meaninglessness" (ibid.: 266) would be the deconstructive work in such an interpretation. Yet, what Gasché aims at in his project is not meaninglessness as subject but as the (non-phenomenal) structural moment before any 'thematization':

[...] such a structure must withdraw itself from being mastered in totality, from being decidable, from being itself a theme if it is to account for the possibility of the meaninglessness of a text. If it could be fully determined, in fact, it would be the text's ultimate meaning and would no longer account for its essential undecidability. If, *in the last resort*, the unthematizable because undecidable agencies of modern literary texts [...] radically subvert the possibility of literary hermeneutics, it is because they represent the limits from which understanding and knowing become possible. (ibid.: 267)

Gasché admits that such textual infrastructures are barely developed (ibid.: 269). As an example for unphenomenologisable, unthematizable unity, he names *supplementarity*, *mise en abyme* and *re-mark*, which however become manifest only as products of a deconstructive discourse (it would be a mistake to equate, for example, a mirror metaphor in a text with a *mise en abyme*).

Concluding this contemplation about deconstruction's literary-critical relevance, we can state the following. Systematically, three fields of literary criticism require a fundamental revision: first, the field of *poetics/aesthetics*, second, questions of interpretation techniques or methods and third, various *thematic aspects*. Gasché has demonstrated that the methodological reflection of differences between the transcendental and the real textual level is required for all three ranges of application. Questions on the poetic practice, against which the deconstructive interpretation strategy's merit will have to be measured, are to be given the highest priority: the dominance of text over interpretation has to be emphasised.<sup>2</sup> Concerning the thematic focal points, a certain methodological caution is required: pseudo-deconstructive themes—e.g. metaphors for writing—can, as thematic units, again be elevated to undeconstructed, semantically fixed signifieds. And yet we can tentatively assert, without running the risk of committing such a reduction, that traditional thematic complexes, e.g. *identity through recollection*, *epiphany* and

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<sup>1</sup> Gasché does not explain, though, how he perceives a "scholarly" criticism that would not contradict deconstruction's most fundamental premises.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of these theses on deconstructive literary criticism, cf. 3.2. Deconstruction as Interpretation Theory.

*involuntary recollection* require, in light of Derrida's introduction of temporality to the question of identity, new interpretations.

### 1.2.2. Grammar and Rhetoric

Paul de Man's critique on Derrida's reading of Rousseau, in which the French philosopher exemplarily demonstrates the deconstructive strategy by opposing *intention* and *gesture* (Derrida, *Of Grammatology*: part 2), is of importance for the link between deconstruction and Nabokov's novelistic/poetic techniques which this dissertation assumes.

Paul de Man counters Derrida's allegation that Rousseau is caught up in the phonocentric and logocentric tradition by postulating the text's self-deconstruction. In accordance with Derrida, he relates the chain of substitutions that dominate a text to a subject-centred thinking, but analyses how the text itself already deconstructs these through the mutual obliteration of its oppositions. De Man holds that Rousseau's language is not blind to its own ambivalence – the consciousness of contradiction already exists in the text itself (de Man, *Allegories of Reading*: 17).<sup>1</sup> In relation to the priority of text, de Man allocates a secondary position to the recipient – almost as the 'accomplisher' of the text's cognitive performance. Paradoxically, this hierarchical conception eliminates the traditionally perceived difference of aesthetic text and the interpreter's cognitive explication.

The text's ambivalence, its dialectic of *blindness* and *insight*,<sup>2</sup> is mirrored on the reception level as the discrepancy between "the aesthetically responsive and the rhetorically aware reading."<sup>3</sup> In this sense, de Man defines the function of metacritique as the reflection on intratextual *and* intertextual ambivalence, i.e. as the reflection on the text's self-deconstruction and the interpretation's hovering between *blindness* and *insight*: "To write critically about critics thus becomes a way to reflect on the paradoxical effectiveness of a blinded vision that has to be rectified by means of insights that it unwittingly provides" (ibid.: 106). The personal perspective is, in turn, based on a specific blindness which provokes a further metacritical interpretation – the constitutive blindness of texts initiates a whole chain-reaction of discourses (ibid.: xx). Bové's summary, especially with its Heideggerian tint, of de Man's text and interpretation theory demonstrates his closeness to hermeneutics:

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<sup>1</sup> De Man summarised his differences to Derrida in an interview (*The Resistance to Theory*: 118).

<sup>2</sup> Unlike Derrida, de Man uses the word 'dialectic' himself in this context.

<sup>3</sup> There is, for example, a difference between the theoretical premises of the interpretation of (in the case of New Criticism, the closed literary form as the object of analysis) and the insight into the openness (and thus uncontrollable) literary structure through the interpretative practice.

Destructive reading always presupposes as part of the hermeneutical situation the closure of a historical period, a breakdown within the traditional language being examined, and the discovery of contradiction. A destructive misreading must therefore emerge from a *partially* 'privileged' position, in incomplete understanding of what the mystified rhetoric of another discourse is covering-over. When, however, the opening up of the horizon of meaning involves destroying one's own rhetorical stance, the destructive process is brought up short by the necessary 'error' or 'blindness' of one's own position. The historical rhetoric is not available for destruction until the time when that rhetoric has itself displaced. (Bové, *Deconstructive Poetics*: xvi)

However, de Man's distancing from Derrida, which is also being debated in literary criticism, requires a strong relativisation. My thesis is that the higher priority of the text, which de Man emphatically stresses, is based on a misinterpretation of Derrida's dialectic of *intention* and *gesture* because Derrida too works with text-inherent contradictions of argumentative and rhetorical/figurative discourse levels.<sup>1</sup>

A clear separation of these two concepts is, to a certain degree, only tenable if *self-deconstruction* is understood as the re-introduction of a textual subject, or of an auctorial text intention; then this *self* of deconstruction would be the author, not the text. Such an interpretation, however, would be in stark contrast to de Man's emphatic emphasis of textuality as a discourse which is *subjectless*, i.e. uncontrollable by the subject.<sup>2</sup> Yet it is true that de Man reverts more strongly to the text's guidelines than Derrida.

De Man's difference to Derrida is located rather in his concept of deconstruction's specifically linguistic and textual foundation. De Man combines poststructuralism and speech act theory in his concept of a *double structure* of language. He defines the text's self-deconstruction as a product of the difference between its stating and its performative dimension: "A perfectly clear syntactical paradigm [...] engenders a sentence that has at least two meanings, of which the one asserts and the other one denies its own illocutionary mode" (de Man, *Allegories of Reading*: 10). A clear decision in favour of either of the two semantic possibilities would, however, only be possible by reverting to an extra-linguistic context which, of course, does not exist in literary discourse.<sup>3</sup>

The text's double structure, its "blinded vision" (de Man, *Blindness and Insight*: 106), is thus not merely a self-contradiction in the sense of a logical discrepancy between two statements, but expresses itself in the undermining of the text's argumentative logic through the subversive character of its rhetorical structure (i.e. the performative dimension):<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Culler does not acknowledge this when he, following de Man, disputes Derrida by saying that a deconstructive reading is already presumed by the text itself (*On Deconstruction*: 173).

<sup>2</sup> About the question of authorial intention, see de Man (*Allegories of Reading*: 72).

<sup>3</sup> De Man demonstrates this with his Proust analysis of the metaphor "torrent d'activité" and its double semantic textual function as both 'heat' and 'cold' (*Allegories of Reading*: 65f).

<sup>4</sup> What is interesting about de Man's inclusion of speech act theory (which I will not explain in detail) is that the performative dimension of language already includes the aspect of self-reflexivity, cf. Gasché ("Setzung' and 'Übersetzung'").

[Self-deconstruction] happens [...] between, on the one hand, metalinguistic statements about the rhetorical nature of language and, on the other hand, a rhetorical praxis that puts these statements into a question. (de Man, *Allegories of Reading*: 98)

Going back to Nietzsche, de Man revives rhetoric from its secondary status as ornament or stylistic figure and re-introduces it to the text's semantics – it is only its performative dynamics that allows for the text's cognitive project (which Derrida, according to de Man, allocated only to the reception). "The figurative structure is not one linguistic mode among others but it characterizes language as such" (ibid.: 105). Figuralität—as the operation of the substitution of identity for difference—is declared as the mode of language in general (ibid.: 110f).<sup>1</sup>

In Rousseau's parable about the evolution of language, which introduces exactly this substituting operation, the traditional opposition of referential and metaphorical language exposes itself as an illusion: the metaphor precedes the proper noun.

[...] if all entities are the same, namely entities, to the extent that they differ from each other, then the substitution of sameness for difference that characterizes, for Rousseau, all conceptual language, is built into the very act of naming, the 'invention' of the proper noun. (ibid.: 148)

The metaphor's blindness, its *lie*, is not caused by the absence of reference but by the illusion of an object reference which is always already suspended (ibid.: 151). This discrepancy between referential and figurative text mode is explained by its grammar, i.e. the adherence to the code – Grammar is the condition for the possibility of meaning of a text. At the same time it suspends the dimension of referentiality: "But just as no text is conceivable without grammar, no grammar is conceivable without the suspension of referential meaning" (ibid.: 268f).<sup>2</sup> In an almost dialectical counter-movement, the text always includes a promise of referentiality. The ambivalent character of language produces its object reference as *telos* and simultaneously undermines it (without saying so, de Man follows here Derrida's notion of meaning and truth as being suspended). The illusion of reference is therefore not erroneous thinking on the recipient's part but is prefigured by the text itself.

For an interpretation practice this means that the illusion of reference, as a dimension of the text, cannot easily be disregarded: "It would be quite foolish to assume that one can lightly move away from the constraint of referential meaning" (ibid.: 201). De Man's theory is not to be conceived of as a negation of referentiality:

In a genuine semiology as well as in other linguistically oriented theories, the referential function of language is not being denied – far from it, what is in question is the authority as a model for natural or phenomenal cognition. (de Man, *The Resistance to Theory*: 11)

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<sup>1</sup> Ray calls de Man's poststructuralist combination of rhetoric and semantic "an act of suspension beyond binary choice" (*Literary Meaning*: 192).

<sup>2</sup> About de Man's argument, cf. 1.1.5. Iterability of the Sign and Grammar of the Text.

The aesthetic experience of undecidability instead of interpretation—called by Miller, following Gidé, *mise en abyme*—opposes all constitution of meaning. That which Gasché, following Derrida, defines as a distinguishing feature of *literature*, i.e. as the specific characteristic of modernism: meaninglessness as product of ruptures in the referential play of the text, is defined more globally by de Man as the *self-reflexive movement of all literary discourses*.

The text's inherent *unreadability* reflects its own ambiguous status: the non-referential play of reference completes, or reflects, its self-deconstruction. De Man calls this text-immanent metacommentary of the unresolvable self-contradiction *allegory*: "The allegory of reading narrates the impossibility of reading" (de Man, *Allegories of Reading*: 7). Miller, who argues in a similar vein, calls the moment at which the illusionism of the text is revealed as such, the *linguistic moment*. In it, the impasse, i.e. the incompatibility of text interpretations, is exposed. Thus, text is always also metatext:

Since any narrative is primarily the allegory of its reading, it is caught in a difficult double bind. As long as it treats a theme (the discourse of a subject, the vocation of a writer, the constitution of a consciousness), it will always lead to the confrontation of incompatible meanings between which it is necessary but impossible to decide in terms of truth and error. (ibid.: 76)

The mutually exclusive and in themselves contradictory receptions of a work—and here an explanation of the interpretative dilemma of traditional literary criticism in confrontation with (post)modern texts seems to be possible—often mirrors the alternative between two readings of one text. Analogous to the double structure of a text are the possibilities of a *naïve* and a *deconstructive* reading: the former would operate with the traditional categories of understanding that are based on the referential model and which consequently fall behind the text's complexity; the latter would comprehend and explicate the text's self-deconstructive moment. A final decision for either of the two alternatives, however, cannot ever be reached.

The self-deconstruction of the text, too, remains imprisoned by the boundaries of Derrida's *aporia* of its epistemological and methodological helplessness, namely to try and postulate non-reference in the mode of reference: "But this impossibility [of reading] necessarily extends to the word "reading" which is thus deprived of any referential meaning whatsoever" (ibid.: 77).<sup>1</sup>

In contrast to Derrida's conception of an infinite deconstruction, de Man situates his allegorical metacommentary outside the deconstructive reach. For him, the self-reflection of *unreadability* represents the non-transcendable limits of (self-)deconstruction. It is this irreducible performative moment which ultimately escapes the radical scepticism of deconstruction. Against Derrida's textual levels, radically playing themselves off against each other, and against his lev-

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<sup>1</sup> Even though Miller's definition of this *aporia* of the text ("impasse", "linguistic moment") is approximate to de Man's "unreadability", the status of literature that Miller deduces from this remains ambivalent: from the text's self-deconstruction he concludes the supremacy of primary literature while in his essay "The Critic as Host" he petitions secondary literature's liberation from its derivative status.

elling of the textual play of reference, de Man again reconstructs a logical hierarchy in the text structure whose top level—the allegory of unreadability as the performative dimension of the text—evades deconstruction:

What is at stake is the possibility of including the contradictions of reading in a narrative that would be able to contain them. Such a narrative would have the universal significance of an allegory of reading. As the report of the contradictory interference of truth and error in the process of understanding, the allegory would be no longer subject to the deconstructive power of this complication. To the extent that it is not itself demonstrably false, the allegory of the play of truth and falsehood would ground the stability of the text. (de Man, *Allegories of Reading*: 72)

De Man's differentiation from Derrida is generally located in his notion of self-deconstruction, in his thesis of its limitation<sup>1</sup> and in his even stronger recourse to an ahistorical concept of text.<sup>2</sup> Much more precise, however, seems to be Gasché's verdict that de Man is closest to Derrida when he does not refer to him, while his explicit recourse to the concept of deconstruction is incompatible with Derrida (Gasché, "'Setzung' and 'Übersetzung'": 43). To put it more bluntly: de Man's subversive reading strategy matches Derrida's deconstructive practice; his concept of text, however, cuts the French Philosopher one short of its quasitranscendental status in two points:

First, the figural dimension of language—the product of the incompatibility of grammar and referentiality (de Man, *Allegories of Reading*: 270) and thus non-phenomenological constituent of language in general—is understood by de Man as a phenomenon of the textual level, but as a rhetorical structure, its priority over metonymy is radically cancelled (cf. 1.2.4. The Aesthetic Code). Similarly, the notion of text itself is shifted to the real text level (in contrast to Derrida's non-ontological, non-phenomenal conception). However, a black-and-white opposition between *quasitranscendental* Derrida and *phenomenal* de Man, as implied by Gasché, is to a certain degree misleading: Derrida too operates with the ambivalence of his concepts when he equates quasitranscendental structures with stylistic phenomena on the textual level. This becomes more distinct, and problematic, as de Man hardly recurs to non-phenomenal structures in his argument. That de Man does not differentiate between *grammar* and the *grammatical dimension* is symptomatic: even though he introduces *figurality* as the condition for the possibility of signification processes, in his interpretative practice (de Man, *Allegories of Reading*) he treats it as a demonstrable linguistic structure, namely as a semantic state of uncertainty between the grammatical dimension and the rhetoric of the text (Gasché, "'Setzung' and 'Übersetzung'").

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Norris (*Deconstruction*) and Culler (*On Deconstruction*).

<sup>2</sup> This is, for example, Eagleton's critique (*Literary Theory*).

Second, concerning his conception of an *allegorical* metacommentary of the fictional status, this blending of levels prompts de Man to equate self-deconstruction with self-reflection.<sup>1</sup> However, a pre-deconstructionist model of self-reflexivity is, as Gasché argues conclusively, incompatible with Derrida's *différance*: no matter whether in relation to the identity of the subject or of the sign, the moment of temporality in self-referral via the Other withdraws the guarantee of identity. Subject and object of self-reference are (potentially) non-identical (Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror*: 275).

The infinite play of referral of the text, which functions independently from any object relation, at the same time paradoxically explodes all controlled self-reference with its *disseminated* semantic:

Though the text necessarily refers to itself, this movement never comes to completion. In addition, all self-referral, as shown in "The Double Session," is grafted on a structurally endless referral to other determinate texts, thus making all textual self-reflexivity *ultimately* impossible. (ibid.: 281)<sup>2</sup>

Self-reflection cannot be equated with the text's knowledge about its own status but is an effect of the underlying textual operations, i.e. of the process of *dissemination* and the movement of the *re-mark*:

The illusion of self-reflection of a text is witness only to the representational function of a text, not to its representation of something outside the text or its self-representation. It is the effect of the text's nature as a system of referral. The general text is generalized representation or [...] generalized reference. Within such a system, no self-reflection or self-representation can coincide with itself to constitute itself as presence, because as representation it is already inscribed in the space of repetition and splitting or doubling of the self. Thus, the structure that best characterizes the text, and at the same time accounts for the necessity and essential limits of a text's self-reflection, is the structure of the *re-mark*, in which all textual traces are not only elements of referral but are also overmarked by the space of their engenderment and inscription. The re-mark, by which the text is folded upon itself, is not, then, to be taken for a reflection. The angle of the re-mark by which the text as text is folded back upon itself excludes 'any possibility of its fitting back over or onto itself' [...]. (ibid.: 291)

With regard to de Man's problematic conception of self-deconstruction we will have to analyse in the following whether, and how, we can develop a concept of *literature* and which forms of a non-totalising, non-identity producing deconstructive self-reflexivity are hypothetically deducible from this.

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<sup>1</sup> Here I am adopting Gasché's contention ("Deconstruction as Criticism"; *The Tain of the Mirror*).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. also Gasché (*The Tain of the Mirror*: 290).

### 1.2.3. Literariness of Discourse

From the concept of textuality (as the common denominator of all Yale Critics) the levelling of the differences between literary and non-literary discourse is extended by a second context of reason. While Derrida operates in his argument with the rhetorical surplus of all discourses, which disproves the alleged control over its semantics, the Yale Critics define the (subversive) self-reflexivity, figurality, and the suspension of reference of the discourse much more narrowly than Derrida's *literariness*.<sup>1</sup> The binary opposition of literature as playful marginal note and the rational-analytical discourse of philosophy is dissolved: no discourse can deny its own figurality (philosophy would be a special form of a general literary discourse). Thus literary criticism, following its conception of itself, cannot claim a higher cognitive accomplishment in comparison to the literary text. Inversely, however, it conceives itself as freed from its traditional secondary status as (explicating) supplement to the text.

This release from the object relation—nothing else is figurality—is defined by deconstruction as the freedom of the text: "this leads to the feeling of liberation and weightlessness that characterizes the man freed from the constraints of referential truth" (de Man, *Allegories of Reading*: 114). In the moment of suspension of reference, literature—as paradigm for all discourses—becomes *play*.

The metaphor of play, which is taken up by deconstruction's notion of discourse, is to be understood as a counter-concept to the theory of mimesis which has dominated traditional literary criticism.<sup>2</sup> Instead of thinking of art in the sense of the representation of an *original*, of an idea or a social reality, *mimetic* relations are recognised as intertextual ones, as relations between linguistic units, not, however, as between pre-semiotic ideal and semiotic imitation.<sup>3</sup>

The text's signification process is constituted by its internal play of referral which, again, is in (diachronous and synchronous) intertextual relation<sup>4</sup> to other texts and which is therefore, in principle, open and infinite: "the text is not an autonomous or unified object, but a set of rela-

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<sup>1</sup> This is, according to Gasché, the Yale Critics' central misinterpretation of Derrida. Cf. also 1.2.1. Definitions.

<sup>2</sup> About the history of the notion of 'mimesis', see Blumenberg ("Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Möglichkeiten des Romans"). – All variations in the definition of the relation between art and world have the underlying basic pattern that art has always been defined and evaluated through a kind of world reference.

<sup>3</sup> Butler attempts to differentiate a traditional concept of literature that is based on the differentiation of text and non-linguistic world. He separates "co-text" (the context that the fictional text has to create for itself) and "context" (the text's situation in the world) (*Interpretation, Deconstruction, and Ideology*).

<sup>4</sup> Hempfer supplies an analysis of the (problematic) ambiguity of the concept of intertextuality: the concept is used on several levels that are to be systematically differentiated, namely with regard to the relation between a few individual texts or with regard the actualisation of transindividual, epochal codes (*Poststrukturelle Texttheorie*: 54).

tions with other texts. [...] The 'genealogy' of the text is necessarily an incomplete network of conscious and unconscious borrowings" (Leitch, *Deconstructive Criticism*: 59).

If one follows the deconstructionist postulation of a general literariness, the formalistic definition of the aesthetic code could be expanded to encompass all types of discourse. What Eco, following Roman Jakobson, defines as the specific characteristic of the aesthetic message, namely the features *ambiguity* and *self-focusing* (Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*: 262), would then be the definition of *all* discourses. Literariness—as general structural feature—would thus be constituted by the following attributes: first, the signifiers attain matching signifieds only from contextual relations; in the variable context, meaning and connotations constantly change (*ibid.*: 256ff). Second, the material sides of the signifiers appear not to be arbitrary concerning their meanings (*ibid.*: 163).

The postulation of the radical self-referentiality of the text, in which a categorical separation of literary text and interpretation is relinquished, leads the Yale Critics nonetheless to an explanation crisis that is only thinly veiled with notions like *intertextuality* and *play*: deconstructive literary criticism has not yet developed a new definition of its function. The justification through an intertextual continuation of discourses—as *supplement* of a deficiency (cf. Culler, *On Deconstruction*: 102ff)—remains untouchable as long as it not motivated by the experience of a deficiency. This, however, would require, as Hartman's and Bloom's positions show, the reintroduction of the subject.

The critique on the referential model of literature was not initiated by deconstruction at all, even though the argument sometimes produces exactly this impression. The suspension of meaning already occurs in non-postmodern, or non-poststructuralist, literary theory – fictitiousness is an approved mode of literary discourse.<sup>1</sup> The decisive postulation by deconstruction is thus not a special status of literature but precisely the expansion of the specific characterisation of literary discourse to embrace semiotic processes in general. On this point, deconstruction differs most obviously from other models of non-referentiality which, in their conception, keep up the differentiation of literature and philosophy.

The way out of the dilemma of an indefinite, general literary discourse seems at first to be a pragmatically oriented conception of literature. The question whether a discourse should be regarded as literature, or whether the anticipation of referentiality underlies the reception or not, would thus depend on the historically, situationally determined decision of the reader but would not be decidable with semiotic criteria. The problem of determining and confining the context

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<sup>1</sup> Habermas (*The Philosophical Discourse on Modernity*), Iser (*The Implied Reader; The Act of Reading*) and Lodge (*The Modes of Modern Writing*) all presume, even though with different conceptions and varying theoretical suppositions, that there is an intersubjective consensus about the suspension of reference in literature.

(which is required by this pragmatic approach) remains unsolved. With Derrida, not only a text linguistics, but also a pragmatics-based differentiation, is impossible.

Paradoxically, with his critique of the concept of mimesis, de Man re-introduces—albeit inconsistent with his global definition of literariness that encompasses all types of discourses—first, the differentiation between literary and non-literary constitution of meaning and, second, develops a theory of the characteristics of literature.

First, even if de Man's subversive—and compelling—analysis of Jauss' reception aesthetics demonstrates his closeness to Derrida, his categorical separation of aesthetic and phenomenological experiences differs from Derrida who works with a set of basic notions—*différance*, *trace*, *supplement*—which he applies to all areas of his theory. Derrida's *supplement* is not only a constituent of signification processes but also of psychological operations or of empirical experience. In contrast to this, de Man objects to Jauss' approach that processes of comprehension, or of experience, of the phenomenal world are not necessarily transferable to the aesthetic processes of understanding (de Man, *The Resistance to Theory*: 62). He interprets this Jaussian analogy as an indicator of the embodiment of the concept of aesthetics in the classical representational concept of literature – Jauss' understanding of literature is thus a mimetic one.

From his critique of mimetics, de Man also derives his preference of allegory over symbol. According to him, Cratylism—as aesthetic phenomenon—is the (futile) attempt to transcend the non-referentiality and the arbitrariness of language:

To the extent that Cratylism assumes a convergence of the phenomenal aspects of language, as sound, with its signifying function as referent, it is an aesthetically orientated conception; one could, in fact, without distortion, consider aesthetic theory [...] as the complete unfolding of the model of which the Cratylian conception of language is a version (ibid.: 9)

The perception of the conventional relation between signifier and signified, as realised in allegory, suspends, according to de Man, the aesthetic-mimetic function:

Allegory names the rhetorical process by which the literary text moves from a phenomenal, world-orientated to a grammatical, language-orientated direction. It thus also names the moment when aesthetic and poetic values part company. (ibid.: 68)

Second, although de Man declares a semiotic/linguistic substantiation of the specifically literary as invalid, he assigns the highest level to the deconstructive capacity of literary texts. He displaces the problem of the definition of literature to the extent of its being conscious of its own fictitiousness:

The self-reflecting mirror-effect by means of which a work of fiction asserts, by its very existence, its separation from empirical reality, its divergence, as a sign, from a meaning that depends for existence on the constitutive activity of this sign, characterizes the work of literature in its essence. (ibid.: 17)

Notwithstanding Derrida's contention against speech act theory (cf. 1.1.5. Iterability of the Sign and Grammar of the Text), de Man operates here to a certain degree with an argument that is similar to, for example, Searle and Habermas' who both argue that the suspension of literature's claim for truth, or reference generates the specific force of literature. Because of its own deconstructive potential, literature does not require a *demythification* by the recipient. All the while de Man does not discuss how this textual consciousness is to be understood without recourse to a subject (as either producer or as recipient). That the interpreter de Man, in view of a task which necessarily has to fall short of the aesthetic-cognitive force of a text, does not surrender in favour of a purely metacritical professional practice seems peculiar and has accordingly been commented upon by critics.<sup>1</sup> It seems justified to accuse de Man here of falling back upon an existentialist concept of literature.<sup>2</sup>

That which so far has not been critically discussed is the *immanent* contradictions of de Man's conception. He ascribes a specifically deconstructive force to the literary text which is motivated by its insight into its own non-reference. This manifests itself in the rupture between the rhetorical and the semantic level of the text, which means that although the self-deconstruction specific to literature is based in *pragmatics*, de Man demonstrates it in the text's *semantic structure*. His not quite clear concept of literature thus admits an unintentional 'legitimation' of a semiotic differentiation of discourses.

#### 1.2.4. The Aesthetic Code

On the basis of the theory of deconstruction, and especially on Paul de Man's text theory, we can develop a working thesis of a (specifically postmodern) deconstructive self-referentiality whose verification, however, will only be achieved through the analysis of the novels in the following part of this dissertation.

As demonstrated in the previous chapters, the American branch of deconstruction defines the literariness of all language through its figurality and its self-deconstructive moment. Here Gasché's idea—that the self-reflexive movement of self-deconstruction is to be reduced by the forces of unity and identity—has to be taken into consideration. In the following, I will therefore

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<sup>1</sup> Abrams, for example, asks the polemic question about the function of literary criticism in general ("The Deconstructive Angel": 434). – Bové contests de Man's definition of the relation between literature and literary criticism: "Poems and novels then are [according to de Man] implicitly misreadings, interpretations of other poems, novels and interpretations. In fact, one might extrapolate from this that poems are interpretations of other poems and subject, therefore, to the same structure of blindness and insight, of *différance*, which 'afflicts' critical discourse. Poetry exists in condition of truth and error" (*Deconstructive Poetics*: 47f).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Spanos ("Breaking the Circle": 423) and Bové (*Deconstructive Poetics*: 32, 291).

try to develop first, a new definition of literary figurality, and, second, some preliminary thoughts on an open, non-identical self-referential text. The aim of which cannot be to achieve a comprehensive structural/conceptual framework as this would be in stark contrast to the post-structuralist concept of text as decentred structure. As the codes are individual and inexhaustible, Barthes was prompted to consciously and artificially limit them within his (post)structuralist analytical technique (Barthes, *S/Z*). In this dissertation I will not, however, adopt Barthes' acknowledgement of the arbitrariness in the definition of structures, or of codes – it is not about the registration of codes as a reconstruction of the work but about the question *which specific forms of (self)deconstruction are possible in the aesthetic medium*. I also do not claim that my hypothesis, which is a deduction from the theoretical basics of deconstruction, concerning all possible forms of the self-deconstructive novel, is complete.

Recourse to de Man's critical investigation of the problem of figurality and to Derrida's exploding of the notion of genre is reasonable for a limitation of specifically literary forms of self-deconstruction.

The *lie* of the metaphor was defined by its ambivalence toward its own status: by attempting to conceal its non-referentiality by promising truth, i.e. reference, (cf. 1.2.2. Grammar and Rhetoric), it necessarily produces *metaphysical illusions*. Regarding the substitution on the paradigmatic axis, through which the metaphor constructs itself,<sup>1</sup> the dissimulation appears as the thinking of presence of the one through the other, which however is always already semiotically mediated.<sup>2</sup> Eco describes, in agreement with deconstruction, its semiotic function:

[...] 'similarity' no longer involves a suspected resemblance based on the thing itself [...]; a 'similarity' between semantic markers is simply a *semic identity*. On the other hand metonymy often seems to be a simple matter of overcoding: substitution by syntagmatic contiguity is based on the fact that, given a ready-made syntagm, established habits will permit one of its elements to be substituted by another. (Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*: 280)

As the equivalence is determined by approximations and relations within the code, i.e. by contiguity,<sup>3</sup> the metaphorical substitution is based on a metonymic practice (ibid.).

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<sup>1</sup> The structuralist definition of the concepts of *metaphor* and *metonymy* are adopted from Lodge (*The Modes of Modern Writing*: 75f) who in turn takes up Roman Jakobson's definitions.

<sup>2</sup> Butler too holds on to this traditional concept of metaphor, opposing deconstruction. Yet his words betray that a relation to world does not generate the possibility of recognising similarities: "The grounds of likeness in metaphors thus involve all sorts of conventions of reference to the real world [...]. Metaphor consists in the implication by likeness of a certain description of the world [...]" (*Interpretation, Deconstruction and Ideology*: 16). The likeness thus does *not* exist between objects but between *cultural units*, or the semantically transmitted unity of meaning. Therefore, the (aesthetic) experience of likeness is based on a *syntagmatic combination in the code*.

<sup>3</sup> Eco indicates—in the sense of a poststructuralist model—that the metaphor's dependence on contiguities in the code does not exclude the possibility of change, i.e. the creation of new relations.

De Man formulates a similar argument in favour of metonymy as substitution on the syntagmatic axis, which traditionally has been degraded as an "accidental" connection (Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs*: 191) in comparison with the "essential resemblance" of metaphors,<sup>1</sup> in the analysis of a passage by Proust in which he uncovers the contradiction between the metaliterarily explicated priority of the metaphor (as the expression of the notion of presence) on the one hand, and the metonymic linguistic practice of Proust's text on the other hand:

In a passage that abounds in successful and seductive metaphors and which, moreover, explicitly asserts the superior efficacy of metaphor over that of metonymy, persuasion is achieved by a figural play in which contingent figures of chance masquerade deceptively as figures of necessity. (de Man, *Allegories of Reading*: 67)

With its own rhetorical practice, the text therefore deconstructs its metaphorical *surface structure*. Correspondingly, in another passage of Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* de Man can demonstrate in a deconstructive reading commanded by the text itself, how the involuntary recollection as unity of subject and object, of thing and idea, collapses in the discrepancy between the non-tangible object and the individual's projections. De Man comments:

Banal when taken by itself, the observation acquires considerable negative power in context, when one notices that it occurs at the center of a passage whose thematic and rhetorical strategy it reduces to naught. For if the "proximity" between the thing and the idea of thing fails to pass the test of truth, then it fails to acquire the complementary and totalizing power of metaphor and remains reduced to "the chance of a mere association of ideas." (ibid.: 71)

In accordance with Eco's semiotic theory, the metaphor exposes itself here as metonymy. In contrast to Eco, de Man is more concerned with the metaphorical effectiveness of a metonymic passage and less with the metaphor's already remote semiotic-metonymic origin. A relation of simultaneity is shifted into a temporal succession.

De Man maintains an inversion of the opposition in favour of metonymy, but demonstrates the mutual play of the substitution modes which makes it difficult to differentiate them as rhetorical figures: metonymy, on its part, disguises itself as metaphor, as *figure of necessity*.<sup>2</sup>

The deconstruction of an opposition of a non-semiotic likeness and likeness as semiotic construct is also predominant in de Man's attack against conventional poetological preferences, such as the Romance theory of art's *organic* symbol, in comparison to which allegory was looked down upon as mechanic and arbitrary (i.e. as purely semiotic, artificial construct). The Romance notion of symbol, as de Man explains the *linguistic turn*, mystifies a semiotic relation

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<sup>1</sup> Lodge, too, detects a "bias toward metaphor" in both traditional and structuralist poetics (*The Modes of Modern Writing*: 92).

<sup>2</sup> In contrast, Lodge, in his outline of a new history of literature, seems to presume, in spite of his critique on the traditional oppositions, the possibility of a semiotic differentiation of metaphor and metonymy (*The Modes of Modern Writing*).

as a referential ("organic") one. Allegory, in contrast, reveals exactly the (arbitrary) contiguity and temporality. It refers to its non-presence and its being semiotic and is thus more authentic. The self-reflexive act of literature, which produces a relation between semiotic levels, is, according to de Man's terminology, therefore *allegorical* – the self-deconstruction of the text defines it as *allegory* (de Man, *The Resistance to Theory*; cf. 1.2.3. Literariness of Discourse).

Derrida's theory of text explicitly ascribes to all discourses—and therefore not only to (post)modern literature—a trace, marking its belonging to it. (This can, but not necessarily, be the author's intention.) According to Derrida, such a self-referential commentary about its own genre paradoxically disproves exactly the text's genre: the commentary itself is not part of the genre. The text-immanent self-classification 'unlocks' the text's limits and determines it, in principle, as open (Derrida, "The Law of Genre").<sup>1</sup> Derrida operates here with the paradox of a class that contains itself as an element. The boundary between genre and its classification is blurred by text-immanence as the text transcends its own class in the self-reflexive act of classification: "[...] this supplementary and distinctive trait, a mark of belonging or inclusion, does not properly pertain to any genre or class. The re-mark of belonging does not belong" (ibid.: 61). Derrida deduces from this paradox 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, yet such participation never amounts to belonging. And not because of an abundant overflowing of 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. (ibid.)

Derrida therefore postulates, against a theory of genre-classification, that the *law of the law*, i.e. the law of genre, is its transcendence: "the law of the law genre [...] is precisely a principle of contamination, a law of impurity, a parasitical economy" (ibid.: 55).

However, that which Derrida defines here as a moment of the self-reflexive force of text—which however can never control its dissemination—is not yet a characteristic specific to *literature*. He quotes Blanchot's text *La folie du jour* as a paradigm of such a deconstructive force:

It is thus impossible to decide whether an event, account, account of event, or event of accounting took place. Impossible to settle upon the simple borderlines of this corpus, of this ellipse unremittingly repealing itself with its own expansion. (ibid.: 67)

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<sup>1</sup> This definition of the "open text" has to be differentiated from the "open work of art", which—in the sense of a work in progress—is structurally incomplete, or which describes its own production and which invites the recipient to the act of closure or the filling up of the gaps. Eco names the post-Weberian poetics as an example (*The Role of the Reader*: 56). The *open* text, in contrast, is determined by its structural and semantic ambivalence which is based on the text-immanent *model reader* (or in Wolfgang Iser's terminology: the *implied reader*) as a strategic structural characteristic which allows for more than one possible reception (ibid.: 9ff).

Important is the *aesthetic-conscious* ambivalence of the text which makes the flow of its semantic, or its reception instruction, uncontrollable. The text's self-deconstruction produces this very state of uncertainty which promises neither identity nor non-identity, but which perpetually oscillates between these two poles. Elsewhere, Derrida speaks similarly about Mallarmé's text:

[...] the quasi-'meaning' of dissemination is the impossible return to the rejoined, readjusted unity of meaning, the impeded march of any such *reflection*. But is dissemination then the *loss* of that kind of truth, the *negative* prohibition of all access to such a signified? Far from presupposing that a virgin substance thus precedes or oversees it, dispersing or withholding itself in a negative second moment, dissemination *affirms* the always already divided generation of meaning. Dissemination—spills it in advance. (Derrida, *Dissemination*: 268)

The exploding of the semantic unity and the de-limitation of genre is, according to Derrida and de Man, a quality that is inherent to *all* texts. Thus *literature* would still be something else: it incorporates its semantic non-identity, the diacritic traces of presence and absence, into the meaning-generating textual structure. Derrida himself points out the correspondences on the semantic level. As I have already said (cf. 1.2.1. Definitions), Derrida finds Mallarmé's *blanche* as realised metaphor *and* empty space, semantic presence *and* diacritic absence between semantic units. The empty space brings out the thematic units, however, disappears again in the act of production again – *ad infinitum*. This—asymmetric—dialectic of presence and absence, of "Sagbarem" and "Unsagbarem"<sup>1</sup> (Frank, *Das Sagbare und das Unsagbare*) almost shines through the text. The 'unmentionable' produces a semantic remainder that cannot be achieved on the level of semantics (Derrida, *Dissemination*: 252). *Literature* attests its irreducibility to an extratextual origin or to a textual point of reference which could guarantee semantic stability. The self-deconstructive text resembles a hall of mirrors in which the spectators eventually lose themselves.

Hence, self-deconstruction is not to be understood simply as the negation of reference and meaning for, as deconstruction postulates in the aporia of its technique, the negation of meaningfulness too again creates meaning. From a formal point of view, this seems to imply non-thematised structures for the self-deconstructive novel which would place its semantics into a relation of reference that, in principle, cannot sway to either side, i.e. that produces ever-new semantic circles.

With this we can formulate a differentiation between, on the one hand, self-reflexivity as commentary on the assumed own textual identity and, on the other, self-deconstruction: *self-deconstruction would be a form of self-reference in which the subject and the object of the reflection diverge, and which, in contrast to self-reflection, makes this moment of non-identity apparent.*

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<sup>1</sup> The "mentionable" and the "unmentionable" [my translation].

Derrida's understanding of *literature* thus seems to match de Man's conceptual shift to the text's self-deconstruction; the former, however, implies a historic specification (Derrida quotes exclusively from modernist works) from which the latter abstains.

With its concept of *literature*, or *self-deconstruction*, the deconstructive text theory reaches a point of transformation, which at first seems to continue the de-limitation between theory/criticism and literary text. At the same time, however, it introduces a differentiation between text and self-deconstructive text, i.e. between literature that is to be deconstructed and *literature* with which the deconstructive text theory seems to deconstruct itself: deconstructive text theory describes texts which steer the process of reception toward *non-mimesis*, *originlessness*, etc. as themes; *self-deconstruction* would thus be a *structurally rooted* premise of text that is realised in the act of reception. Hence, the deconstructive dimension is transferred into the text by the self-contradiction of the theory. From this follows that deconstruction has to suffer all the problems of semiotic verifiability, at least in literary criticism, which it had wanted to skip with its levelling of discourse distinctions.

A tentative definition of self-deconstructive texts as *literature* cannot express anything about their content or their formal design. However, a preliminary limitation to a *genre* (including its self-classification), which in this dissertation is the novel, seems sensible in order to restrict, amongst others, problems of semantic and pragmatic conventions. The *knowledge* of the text, that the movement of the folding can never return to its origin, would thus be an effect in the play of its structure. Yet this would only be demonstrable by a momentary fixation of its structural composition – only then the correspondences concerning its deconstructive self-exploding on various levels could be reconstructed. Such an analytical model would be Eco's idiolect model (Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*: 270ff).

It is only against the background of a *conventional structure* of the literary text that the possibilities of its subversion can become visible as structures that in the moment of self-reflection suspend the meaning of the text. Bearing in mind the aporia of the deconstructive technique, we have to ask in turn whether the text can indeed produce meaninglessness: to what extent does the text not necessarily always (with a widening of semantic conventions, i.e. comprehensibility) generate a new understanding which in turn has to be surpassed?

My thesis is that there are specific forms of self-deconstruction in the aesthetic medium of the novel whose deconstructive forces concerning semiotics and aesthetics can be distinguished from non-narrative texts. The basis of my notion is not an essentialist conception of literature, of which de Man has been accused, but an understanding of literature (here: of the novel) in the sense of narrative (and thematic) discourse conventions. It is not irrelevant that the boundary to non-narrative and (intentionally) non-fictional discourse is indistinct: the formal conventions of narrativity operate with a layering of discourse levels which from an aesthetic point of view can produce a complex communication practice in the sense of doublings, multiple reflections and semantic distortions. Their characteristic is the production of irreconcilable paradoxes which,

according to the definition of self-deconstruction, let the text fluctuate in the ambivalence between affirmation and negation. The fusion of narrative levels—which, according to the traditional function, would have to be kept logically apart—or the suspension of the hierarchy of narrative levels, lends to a certain degree more radical and more consequent potentiality to a *deconstruction of meaning*, as it is *aesthetically consummated*, instead of being argumentatively-rhetorically postulated. The result would be a logical and pragmatic circle which cannot be solved by a distinction of class and element. What remains yet to be explained is to what extent this technique of the *self-deconstruction* of literary text can be seen as specifically modern or postmodern.

## 1.3. METAFICTION

### 1.3.1. Definitions

"Write as I will [...] – I shall never overtake myself" – with this statement the narrator in *Tristram Shandy* (Book 4, chap. 13) has already captured the problem of self-reflexivity in the novel (or, here more specifically for the narrator). At the same time, this quote indicates that the phenomenon *metafiction*—self-reflexive literature—is not really an invention of the twentieth century but that it can in fact be traced back to the very origin of the genre.

The doubling of Sterne's narrator in subject ("I") and object ("myself") reveals the central problematic of *metafiction*. The novel is, at least to a large extent, its own topic. It is for a reason that Tristram Shandy's choice of the verb 'overtake' leads to an association of Achilles and the tortoise.<sup>1</sup> The narrator's—or the novel's—reference to itself produces temporal and logical problems—paradoxes—which critical literature has tried to deal with by applying various theoretical approaches.<sup>2</sup> A cause for the multitude of new studies on this topic is the undeniable boom in the production of self-reflexive literature in the second half of this century.<sup>3</sup> Thus, metafictionality seems to be especially characteristic of (post)modern literature; the following thoughts do not, however, assume that the novel realises itself as a theme only in modernism.

In relation to the issues discussed in this dissertation, the fundamental methodological question here is to what extent—from the perspective of a deconstructive theory of text—the phenomenon *metafiction* can be circumscribed as a concept and be regarded as a (dominant) characteristic of a (literary) historical epoch. Relatively recent works on *metafiction* disregard this caution, even though they invariably cite deconstruction.<sup>4</sup>

The deconstructive reading as it is practised by the Yale Critics does indeed investigate the *autotextual* self-deconstructive movement of texts. In this, as the analysis of de Man's texts showed, they partly equate self-reflection with self-deconstruction (cf. 1.2.1. Definitions). Yet, this does not pay attention to the fact that Derrida does not understand the (self)deconstructive

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<sup>1</sup> In Hofstadter, the fictitious dialogues between Achilles and the tortoise go paradigmatically through the problems of self-referentiality (*Gödel, Escher, Bach*).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. de Man (*Allegories of Reading*). – Most works on self-referential literature however establish only a vague relation between new literary theories, without developing clear explanatory models.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. the bibliographies in Waugh (*Metafiction*: 155-169), Hutchinson (*Games Authors Play*: 124-128) and Hutcheon (*Narcissistic Narrative*: 118-135).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. the works of Waugh (*Metafiction*), Hutcheon (*Narcissistic Narrative; A Theory of Parody*) and McHale (*Postmodernist Fiction*). – especially McHale cites an almost incredible combination of literary theories.

movement of the text as self-reflexivity.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, he does not position the text's deconstructive movement on the discursive level (on which the narrator's self-reflection functions in *Tristram Shandy*), as it is rather the product of the play between the semantic and the rhetoric dimension. Furthermore, the fundamental difference between an approach which attempts to systematise metafiction as literary phenomenon and the text theory of deconstruction has completely been neglected. The theoretical works on the genre 'novel' differentiate, at least implicitly, between *self-referential* and *other*, namely mimetic, literature while deconstruction assumes that self-reflection is a characteristic of *all* texts and that consequently a systematic typology is impossible (cf. 1.2.4. The Aesthetic Code). Already formalism and structuralism generally defined *all* literary texts by the characteristic of their *autoreflexivity*.<sup>2</sup>

How can we now define *metafiction* against this background? For the time being we will exclude deconstruction's central objection against a differentiation of discourse types in order to demarcate the field within literary criticism.

*Metafiction*—as fictional text which thematises itself—breaks the categorical distinction of fictional and critical discourse.<sup>3</sup> At this point the critical investigations on the theory of the novel and deconstructive text theory are generally in agreement. In comparison to literary theory's understanding of the concept of *metalanguage*, the term *metafiction* seems to be much wider: it refers not only to a discursive reflection of semiotic aspects but to "the whole process of composition and reception of literary texts" (Rose, *Parody//Metafiction*: 65).

On the whole, however, a more precise understanding of the prefix 'meta-' is necessary, especially with regard to the alienation strategies which *metafiction* employs: *meta-* denotes an *intratextual* relation of various elements of the novel, whereas *parody* refers *intertextually* to other texts.<sup>4</sup> In the interpretation practice this differentiation cannot, however, be strictly maintained: metafictional parody, for example, is extremely intratextual in that it uses its own narrative as the target of its parody, rather than other texts or discourses. The term *metafictional parody* is indicative of the close relationship between self-reflexivity and parody in the novel: a novel can only demonstrate its roots in the historical tradition via the parodistic reception and distortion of pre-texts. *Metafictional parody* reveals tradition as an element of its own semantics before it can be transcended.

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<sup>1</sup> Flores neglects this completely when equating self-referential and self-deconstructive literature: "The quality of literariness in such texts, irrespective of their conventional genres, might be described as a certain fictiveness (events or identities neither present or absent) akin to the play of *différance* [...]. Texts marked by such literariness are those which are likely to seem already deconstructed or which anticipate the deconstructionist commentator, who is thus left with little to do" (*The Rhetoric of Doubtful Authority*: 11f).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Eco (*A Theory of Semiotics*: 261ff).

<sup>3</sup> See Boyd (*The Reflexive Novel*: 15).

<sup>4</sup> By equating *metafiction* and *parody*, Rose (*Parody//Metafiction*: 65) blurs exactly this difference between parody as intertextual relation on the one hand, and metafiction as combination of intertextual and intratextual relations on the other.

The relationship between text production and text reception in the text itself is hinted at by the emphasis on the narrative form. The textual structure does not only produce instructions for its reception itself but makes them (implicitly or explicitly) apparent as such (Scholes, "Language, Narrative, and Anti-Narrative": 207). This auto-production of the literary code, which then can become the inherent pre-text of a self-parody, motivates the *metafiction*-research's affinity to reception-aesthetic approaches.<sup>1</sup> At the same time they often neglect that Wolfgang Iser does not in any way want the textual structure of the *implied reader* be understood as characteristic of self-referential texts (see Iser, *The Implied Reader*).

Paradoxically, it is this very thematisation of the reading process in the novel which produces its *autonomy*: the text creates, apart from semiotic and narrative conventions on which it has to rely, the rules of its own *play*, cut loose from the world.

It has often been explained that the self-definition of *metafiction* as *play* is tied to a literary tradition. We have to emphasise, however, that the notion of *play* in metafiction is not bound to the context of a specific aesthetics but that, in fact, it shows many variations concerning its poetic function.<sup>2</sup> Important is the notion's affinity to the postmodern discourse theories of Derrida and Lyotard: *play* represents the *lack of origin* and the *non-reference of the discourse* (cf. 1.1.4. Dissemination).

In the critical literature on *metafiction*, both the terminology and its link to the literary tradition are handled, or interpreted, differently. Alter talks about the "self-conscious novel",<sup>3</sup> Scholes of "anti-narrative" ("Language, Narrative, and Anti-Narrative") and of "metafiction" which he distinguishes from "fabulation" (*Fabulation and Metafiction*), while Michael Boyd seems to prefer the term "reflexive novel" (*The Reflexive Novel*). However, the terminology *metafiction* is most common in Anglo-American criticism and seems to be at the same time the most unproblematic as it does not specify the level, or the kind, of self-reference (of the narrator or of the text, that is). It is unavoidable that a clear distinction between literature with self-referential elements and *metafiction* (as predominantly self-referential literature) cannot be maintained rigorously.

In his more historically oriented argument,<sup>4</sup> Robert Alter interprets the self-referential novel as a reaction to the fragmentation of the perception of reality. The novel therefore, according to

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<sup>1</sup> Strongly reception-aesthetically oriented works are Boyd (*The Reflexive Novel*), Hutcheon (*Narcissistic Narrative; A Theory of Parody*) and McHale (*Postmodernist Fiction*).

<sup>2</sup> Hutchinson produces in his work (*Games Authors Play*: 5ff) a historical overview of the notion of play in aesthetics.

<sup>3</sup> "A self-conscious novel, briefly, is a novel that systematically flaunts its own condition of artifice and that by so doing probes into the problematic relationship between real-seeming artifice and reality" (Alter, *Partial Magic*: x).

<sup>4</sup> Alter sketches the historical development of self-referential literature from the eighteenth to the twentieth century; in the nineteenth century, however, *Vanity Fair* is the only novel that follows this tradition (*Partial Magic*).

Alter, does not mirror social reality but rather the experience that a reference to this reality is no longer possible:

But when history seems to have become intractable to the imagination, there is a certain tendency for the writer [...] to turn back toward his own creative activities, to affirm the integrity of his work against a background of historical chaos by directing attention to the strategies of art through which the work has to come into being. (Alter, *Partial Magic*: 149)

Concurrent with the subjective perspective of the experience of reality is the consciousness of contingency, which, says Alter, finds its aesthetic expression in the admission of the arbitrariness and fictitiousness of the 'portrayed' (ibid.: 17f). Similarly, Waugh locates the relation of *metafiction* to reality in its negation, i.e. the thematisation of discontinuity of said relation. At the same time, however, she interprets the technique of *framing* as a structure which, as the condition for insight, determines the reception of fiction as well as the perception of social reality (Waugh, *Metafiction*: 9).

Hutcheon and Scholes attempt to rescue the mimetic quality of *metafiction* by claiming a "mimesis of process" as opposed to a traditional "mimesis of product" for the self-referential novel (Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative*: chap. 2), or, by promoting the act of reception itself to the object of mimetic representation.<sup>1</sup> This implies the replacement of a *naïve* understanding of reality as totality. Reality is, according to Hutcheon, construed solely in the perspectival composition of the perceiving subject. The subjective *semiotic* construction of reality is thematised or mirrored by self-referential literature and its representative capability is therefore *not* suspended: "autorepresentation is still representation" (ibid.: 6).

Michael Boyd, too, recognises in this questioning of a naïve notion of reality, or of mimesis, the driving force of *metafiction*. He defines self-reflexivity as a variant of an *anti-realism* that parodistically questions the epistemological innocence of the realist novel of the nineteenth century: "For the antirealist, reality is a protean, a mental construct bereft of the certitude given by the belief in any universal laws of the mind. Everyone is a novelist" (Boyd, *The Reflexive Novel*: 18). Even though the psychological novel and the symbolist novel turn against the realist novel, they retain—in modified form—a concept of *representation* (ibid.: 18ff).<sup>2</sup> The reflexive novel according to Boyd is, in contrast, antirealist *and* antimimetic:

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<sup>1</sup> Scholes calls such novels "anti-narrative": "[They] can quite properly be seen as attempts to frustrate our automatic application of these codes to all our event-texts. Such anti-narratives are in this sense metafictional because they ultimately force us to draw our attention away from the construction of a diegesis according to our habitual interpretive processes. By frustrating this sort of closure, they bring the codes themselves to the foreground of our critical attention, requiring us to see them *as* codes rather than as aspects of human nature or the world. The function of anti-narrative is to problematize the entire process of narration and interpretation for us" ("Language, Narrative, and Anti-Narrative": 207).

<sup>2</sup> Boyd differentiates the reflexive novel from other forms of the anti-realist novel, especially from the psychological, symbolist and from the non-fictional documentary novel (*The Reflexive Novel*: 19ff). They have an ambivalent attitude toward the problem of realism in common: on the one hand, they refer

Fiction that looked at itself, that was reflexive, would not be creating yet another fictional world that needed to be related to the 'real' world: it would take as its 'object' the *relationship* between 'real' world and fictional worlds. It would be a species of criticism in fictional form. Call it metafiction. Or call it the reflexive novel, the novel about the novel—onanistically or perhaps incestuously using its own imaginative energy to sustain itself [...] the reflexive novel focuses on the fiction-making process itself. (ibid.: 23)<sup>1</sup>

Although Michael Boyd comes to a conclusion that is directly opposed to Hutcheon—Boyd talks about "antimimetic literature" while Hutcheon speaks of a "mimesis of process"—they coincide in their understanding of the representative field of *metafiction*.

In her study, Hutcheon goes on to develop a typology of the various forms of self-referentiality. She distinguishes between 'linguistic' and 'diegetic' forms on the one hand, and open (thematized) and hidden methods (Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative*: 17ff) on the other. Thus, there are four discernible types:

	Overt	Covert
Diegetic	'plot allegory', parody, narrator commentary, etc.	Detective novel, fable, fantasy elements, games, erotic, etc.
Linguistic	Thematization of the possibilities and limits of language; thematization of fictitiousness	Riddle, joke, pun, anagram, etc.

Although I do not want to deny the significance of such a typology—it is a tool to describe a field of aesthetic phenomena—, the theoretical basis is to a certain degree unstable. The systematic differentiation between open and hidden forms would only <sup>be</sup> sensible if there were a higher authority (in the sense of text-, narrator- or author-consciousness) that could be acceded or denied a controlled *consciousness* of self-referentiality. However, with a pragmatically oriented concept of literature, which Hutcheon demands, the forms 'open' and 'hidden' are dependent on the reader's consciousness, and thus on the pragmatic context, and cannot therefore be systematically differentiated in this way. In fact, Hutcheon's later admission that there are always various forms of self-referentiality at play proves, or confirms, the deconstructive liquefaction of typologies.

Boyd's approach is more interesting insofar as he understands the genesis of self-referential literature in the twentieth century as a turning point for the realist novel (see 1.3.2. Metafiction and the Evolution of the Genre Novel). According to Boyd, the reflexive novel is marked by its

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to an extra-literary object, on the other, they criticise the conventional forms of the representation of reality.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. also Boyd (*The Reflexive Novel*: 36).

literary *alienation techniques*,<sup>1</sup> by the paradigm of linguicity, by its explicit *fictionalisation* of its characters as well as by its *performative character* (Boyd, *The Reflexive Novel*: 34). Boyd refrains, however, from attempting to differentiate types of discourse systematically. *Metafiction* is therefore rather to be seen as a (gradual) '*density*' of *self-reflexivity* of a literary text. This does not exclude the possibility that, in less radical forms of literary self-reflexivity, the mimetic relation to world is not entirely suspended.

### 1.3.2. Metafiction and the Evolution of the Genre 'Novel'

With regard to the discussion around the historical evolution of the genre 'novel' and its specifically (post-)modern form one has to ask whether *metafiction* can be considered as either a constant genre characteristic of the novel, or as a historical form that is developing only now.

There is general consensus that the novel is already born with traces<sup>2</sup> of self-reflexivity. The parody of the knight romance in Cervantes' *Don Quixote* and the extensive self-reflection of the narrative impossibility to capture life in writing in Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* are usually cited as evidence.

Equally agreed, however, is a historical development to almost exclusively self-referential forms of the novel in the twentieth century. Socio-historical and literature-immanent poetological reasons are asserted. Thus the necessity for the new form's legitimisation, or the novel's new claim to totality (namely, that it has to reflect the world's complexity in itself) are seen as the aesthetic motivation of self-referentiality for Fielding and Sterne.

Boyd's interpretation of the development of *metafiction* in the twentieth century seems to be the most interesting as it—in agreement with Hutcheon, Alter, Waugh, et al.—finds the responsibility for the novel's 'bending back' onto itself in the growing problematic of *reality as construct* on the one hand, but equally in the formal developments that are derived from *aesthetic problems of the question of representation*. Seen historically, it is exactly the mimetic refinement in the psychological novel which leads to a non-mimetic self-reflexivity. With the representation of processes in consciousness, the perspective gradually shifts to linguistic processes. Experiments with language slowly lead toward a thematisation of language as the novel's self-

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<sup>1</sup> Boyd, however, sees a, from my point of view untenable, analogy to Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* (*The Reflexive Novel*: 27f), a view which completely neglects Brecht's firm roots in realism as well as his didactic ambitions.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Alter (*Partial Magic*: 149; "Mimesis and the Motive for Fiction": 238); Boyd (*The Reflexive Novel*: 15); Waugh (*Metafiction*: 5) and Hutcheon (*A Theory of Parody*: 8).

reflection (Boyd, *The Reflexive Novel*: 20, 119ff).<sup>1</sup> Mimetic intention changes dialectically into its opposite:

It is only when the search for a new language in which to portray the life of the minds leads to an awareness of the artificiality of all invented languages that the various forms of psychological fiction prepare the way for a rejection of verisimilitude as a norm. (ibid.: 170).

With its reflection of linguisticity and fictitiousness of the experience of self and world, the novel can now become, says Boyd, the paradigm for the epistemological scepticism of modernism in general:

When language loses its transparency, its ability to represent things, then literature—that use of language which by its fictive nature, has always expressed a problematical relation to things—will be seen to offer itself as a kind of model in the process of questioning the representational qualities of language. (ibid.)

With the abandonment of representation, concludes Boyd in agreement with Foucault and against the transhistorical conception of non-referentiality of deconstruction, metafiction is located in the centre of modernism and identifies itself therefore as a historical *phenomenon* (ibid.: 171).

But if self-reflexivity—and in this I follow Michael Boyd's views—has, on the one hand, a special affinity to modernism and postmodernism, while on the other, it is a constant throughout the history of the novel, then it has to be asked to what extent specifically modern or postmodern forms of self-reflexivity can be determined. Literary criticism with its affirmation of an increase in self-reflexivity has, to my knowledge, not pursued a more precise answer to this question. In the following chapter, I will take up aspects of the debate around postmodernism in order to be able to develop theoretical historical boundaries of modern and postmodern forms of self-reflexivity.

### 1.3.3. Metafiction and Postmodernism

The deluge of publications that are primarily concerned with defining postmodernism clearly indicates that we cannot speak of *one* theory.<sup>2</sup> These essays are, most often quite misleadingly, based on equally unclear definitions of modernism: whether modernism begins with the Enlight-

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<sup>1</sup> Boyd names as the last mimetic chapter in *Ulysses* "Scylla and Charybdis", as first non-mimetic, i.e. exclusively self-reflexive passage, the "Wandering Rocks" episode (*The Reflexive Novel*: 123).

<sup>2</sup> We can distinguish socio-historical (Jameson, Newman), historio-cultural or historio-philosophical (Lyotard), and aesthetic theories (Hassan, Sontag) of postmodernism.

enment, with the Romantic period or with the aesthetic modernism of the turn of the century is usually kept vague.

Lyotard's argument confirms that the concepts of modernism and postmodernism cannot be thought of separately when he links philosophical postmodernism with the aesthetics of modernism and thus evades a systematic separation as well as a historical periodisation (Lyotard, "What is Postmodernism?"; *The Differend*). With this move, his aesthetics combines the emphatic autonomy conception of the art of classical modernism with the conceptually contrary claim of the mediation of art and world of the historical avant-garde movement. In aesthetic regard, Lyotard differentiates between "true" and "false" postmodernism – and the "true" postmodernism is declared the "real" one.

Equally surprising is that Lyotard defines the beginning of postmodernism with the becoming-reflexive of social discourses. That which in Habermas' conception is representative of modernism,<sup>1</sup> now becomes for Lyotard the characteristic of postmodernism. With this definition Lyotard reaches a point at which he does not have to differentiate between avant-garde and classical modernism and at which he can link postmodernism back to modernism (Lyotard, *The Differend*: 135). A conception of postmodernism as a (cultural) historical epoch which succeeds modernism becomes thus unnecessary, as he emphasises:

What, then, is postmodernism? [...] It is undoubtedly part of the modern [...] A work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at this end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant. (Lyotard, "What is Postmodernism?": 338-9)

In American criticism, the postmodernism discussion revolves around a programmatic aesthetics and around the periodisation and (normative) classification of aesthetic phenomena. If in the first phase Susan Sontag, Ihab Hassan and Leslie Fiedler demanded and celebrated a firmly anti-modernist, i.e. following historical avant-garde movements, fusion of art and world as a specifically postmodern phenomenon, then the 1970s and early 1980s with their superficial eclecticism displayed a rather affirmative tendency: the aesthetic self-conception does no longer critically orient itself with art's relation to social reality but is increasingly concerned with itself, thus implicitly rehabilitating the postulation of autonomy of both modernism and its critical pendant, the New Criticism. Here, *citation* takes up the position of a critical mediation with a tradition that strives for formal innovation.<sup>2</sup>

In a more speculative and descriptive definition of historical phenomena, Hassan differentiates within postmodernism two threads: *literature of silence* and Pop Art, or mass culture, as *literature of fullness* (Hassan, *The Right Promethean Fire*: 118ff). Thus, he merges the succes-

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Habermas (*The Philosophical Discourse on Modernity*).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Huyssen ("Postmoderne": 17ff) and 1.4. Deconstruction and Postmodernism.

sors of classical modernism with new avant-garde movements under the all-encompassing roof of postmodernism. This contradictory project shows symptomatically the difficulties of attempting to link historical with systematic definitions of postmodernism.

Notwithstanding the inherent contradictions in Hassan's work and the incompatibility of the various theoretical approaches, we can determine a common denominator in the definitions of philosophical and literary postmodernism. Indeed, it is the 'bankruptcy' of exactly those (already for modernism problematic) categories which deconstruction finds as its objects of criticism:

- the *loss of extra-discursive possibilities for the legitimisation of discourses* and consequently the admission of their self-referential production and movement.
- The *crisis of the representational, or referential, model of language* and therefore
- The *questioning of the category 'history'*.

The obliteration of the signified in the discourse in postmodernism—and nothing else is non-reference—deprives historiography of its function of representing history. (Hi)story is, as I have argued already with Whites metahistorical approach (cf. 1.1.6. History as Transformation of Structure), always already linguistically constructed *plot*. The knowledge of the fictitiousness of history deprives the narrator of the possibility to reproduce unrefracted 'events' or 'himself' as if there were a narratable history.

For the conventions in narrativity, this signifies that plot patterns whose stories are designed from the ending point of self-solution—only from which they then become narratable<sup>1</sup>—have to become citations, or pastiches. Their solution principle, which is supposed to demonstrate the possibility of epistemological insight into the world, is undermined. In the postmodern novel the plot becomes anti-plot and goes against solution.

If history can no longer be narrated without refraction, if language only refers to language, the 'I' itself can no longer be constituted: *subjectivity loses itself in a centre-less net of discourses*. Hence, the perspectival subjectivism of modernism becomes questionable.

With the loss of difference between life and writing, reality and its (fictional) representation, the distinction of author and narrator, too, is undermined: the author disappears in the narrator and the narrator in the author, as Nägele affirms ("Modernism and Postmodernism": 13).

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. the romance, the detective novel, etc.

The narrator's de-fictionalisation is, however, only the dialectical reversal of the fictionalisation of the author who himself becomes a product of his text.<sup>1</sup>

Based on this characterisation, metafiction—as self-referential, centre-less discourse that does not refer to any non-linguistic object—can be regarded as the *paradigm of postmodern literature*.<sup>2</sup> Self-reflexivity and the questioning of language are already inherent in modernism.<sup>3</sup>

Considering the controversy around the relation of modernism and postmodernism, we can come now to two possible conclusions:

First, postmodernism—here: postmodern metafiction—is not a break with modernism but, in Lyotard's sense, a *self-reflexive radicalisation* of what has always been inherent to modernism. An attempt of a general periodisation would therefore be of little value.

Second, a specifically postmodern variant of metafiction would not exclusively be deducible from self-referentiality and the abandonment of the representational model of language. In fact, it would have to be found in a specifically aesthetic realisation, or radicalisation, of self-reflexivity.<sup>4</sup> Deconstruction in its reading practice has demonstrated that texts have been undermining, or involuntarily contradicting, their allegedly referential status and the transparency of language long before modernism came about. Especially the discourses that are regarded as literature (or their recipients) have always assumed their fictitiousness – the poets have, as Plato says, always been lying (therefore the admission of fictitiousness should not upset the postmodern reader). Postmodern self-reflexivity can thus not yet be determined; the discourse of (post)modernism, however, can be circumscribed by its *self-reflexive density*.

It is only with recourse to de Man's conception of self-deconstruction (cf. 1.2.2. Grammar and Rhetoric and 1.2.4. The Aesthetic Code) that postmodernism's epistemological break with the tradition can be, to a certain degree, adequately captured. The theory of deconstruction as well as postmodern aesthetics can be explained along the connecting line between self-reflexivity and aesthetically conscious self-deconstruction.

That which can be called (and text-linguistically demonstrated) a characteristic of postmodern metafiction, is an *aesthetically reflected* folding-up of object- and metalanguage, of literary text and intratextual self-commentary, in which the function of the techniques of self-reflection are changed to *destabilising self-deconstruction*. The text's involuntary *self-exposure*, which deconstruction attempts to locate in between the factual and the rhetorical dimension, would be lo-

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<sup>1</sup> According to Nägele this dialectic of "self-realization and self-alienation" ("Modernism and Postmodernism": 13) is a result of a changed relation between art and society, but he does not substantiate this any further.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. the moderation of the notions *postmodernism* and *metafiction* in Hutcheon (*Narcissistic Narrative*: 2) and Waugh (*Metafiction*: 10ff).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. 1.3.2. Metafiction and the Evolution of the Genre Novel.

<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Rose (*Parody//Metafiction*) tries to determine specific forms of parody for the "modernist epistème" (under which she subsumes both modernism and postmodernism).

cated in the textual structure – for example in the narrative-strategic collapsing of narrative hierarchies.

The resulting paradoxes of the textual referential play cannot be obliterated with a simple shifting of the semantic level to a new unity – as, for example, in the sense of an analogy of complexity of text and complexity of world, as an interpretation of *Tristram Shandy* would have still allowed. The negation of meaning is no longer reinterpreted on a higher level as positive meaning.

In chapter 1.2.4. The Aesthetic Code, I developed possible structures, or strategies, for a self-deconstructive novel: the text's self-referentiality no longer pretends to produce identity, i.e. closed meaning. In the aesthetically realised act of self-deconstruction, subject and object of the mirroring never meet. The specifically postmodern variant of self-reflection can thus be determined as the no longer closing of a self-reflexive circle, which then *explodes* the identity of semantic projection in general.

## 1.4. DECONSTRUCTION AND POSTMODERNISM

Considering deconstruction's metatheoretical positioning, the contours of its problematic connection to postmodernism become more defined. Deconstruction's *aporia*—on the one hand, a *paracritical practice of writing*, and on the other, its subject and language critical epistemological interest—to be both still analytical *and* metalinguistic discourse on other discourses, raises the question whether deconstruction is not to be regarded as a theory of modernism rather than of postmodernism. It has to be recognised, though, that the confusion of aesthetic and philosophical modernism<sup>1</sup> certainly contributes to the ambivalence around a possible definition of deconstruction.

In his sketching of the phenomenon *postmodernism*, Andreas Huyssen attempts to determine more clearly the relationship between poststructuralism and postmodernism. Contrary to the common belief that the 'post-' indicates a close affinity, Huyssen formulates his hypothesis,

daß der Poststrukturalismus in Frankreich wie in Amerika dem Modernismus sehr viel näher steht, als es die Apologeten einer postmodernen Avantgarde wahrhaben wollen [und] daß sich ferner der Poststrukturalismus durchaus als eine, wenn auch neue Theorie der Moderne lesen läßt [...]. (Huyssen, "Postmoderne": 31)<sup>2</sup>

According to Huyssen, both the theory as well as its choice of objects for analysis support this hypothesis. He claims that deconstruction with its shifting of historical-political social analysis to a doctrine of universal textuality (cf. 1.1.8 Text and Textuality) exercises an aestheticistic practice that is hardly distinguishable from either modernism's aestheticism or from the practices of the historical avant-garde (Huyssen, "Postmoderne": 32).<sup>3</sup>

The principal examples for Derrida's conception of deconstructive literature (*literature*) are indeed, as Huyssen explains, the classic modernists: Mallarmé, Celan, etc. (cf. 1.2.1. Definitions). For his dialectical conception of literary tradition and modernity, de Man denies, even more explicitly than Derrida, any occupation with postmodern literature, or with the meaning of this notion in general.<sup>4</sup> With similar rigour, Lyotard takes the side of non-mimetic modernism

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<sup>1</sup> Lyotard ("What is Postmodernism?"), too, links the theory of modernism with the aesthetics of modernism, cf. 1.3.3. Metafiction and Postmodernism.

<sup>2</sup> "that in France as well as in America poststructuralism is very much closer to modernism than the apologists of a postmodern avant-garde want to admit [and] that, furthermore, poststructuralism, however new, can absolutely be read as a theory of modernism [...]. [my translation]"

<sup>3</sup> Leitch's judgement is similar: "The scholar's text, a production of a deconstructed subject [...] disseminates meaning beyond truth or totalization. It is the birth of a frolicsome 'science', a playful 'hermeneutics' of indeterminacy, reminiscent of Nietzsche's most visionary and aphoristic moments. Criticism catches up and surpasses avant-garde literature" (*Deconstructive Criticism*: 224).

<sup>4</sup> De Man criticises literary theories of postmodernism as "somewhat naively historical approach[es]," as they are based on a concept of history as a continuity in the sense of a radicalisation of modernism. From a psychological point of view, he interprets historical conceptions of postmodernism as

as the only 'true' form of postmodernism (in contrast to the 'false' new eclecticism).<sup>1</sup> In a way, in Lyotard's fixation of art to a progressing negation of meaning there is again a linear construction of progress in art as a whole. Neither for Lyotard nor for deconstruction is there a literary postmodernism without modernism – it is as if the conservatism of a literary canon of classic modernism, which is vehemently defended by Geoffrey Hartman (cf. 1.2.1. Definitions), re-introduces deconstruction's radicalism:

Anstatt uns eine Theorie der Postmoderne zu bieten und diese Theorie durch Analyse gegenwärtiger Kulturphänomene zu entwickeln und zu stützen, konzentriert sich der Poststrukturalismus meist auf eine Archäologie der Moderne und liefert eine Theorie des Modernismus im Stadium seiner Erschöpfung. Es ist, als seien die kreativen Impulse des Modernismus in die Theorie abgewandert, um im poststrukturalistischen Text zu vollem Selbstbewußtsein zu gelangen. (Huysen, "Postmoderne": 33)<sup>2</sup>

This placing of deconstruction would not necessarily have to be a negative critique: its claim for universal validity, however, is relegated to historical boundaries.

Thus the postmodern discourse of deconstruction presents itself as immanent transgression, or transcendence, of modernism as defined by Lyotard. The differentiation as historical periodisation, however, is not at all useful, although the prefix 'post-' might suggest so. Concerning literature, my considerations on the topic of metafiction resulted in the same conclusion.<sup>3</sup> That which Lyotard says about art matches the disseminating, in itself refracted, reflexivity which deconstruction ascribes especially to modern, (self-)deconstructive literature. Common to both theories is therefore the idea of a culmination of reflexivity in literary modernism. That which deconstruction tries to uncover is exactly the moment of self-critique of texts, i.e. the reflection of the breaking-up of their allegedly meaning-generating elements, which Huysen, following Lyotard, calls the characteristics of postmodernism as an inherent dimension of modernism. The *sublime*, at the core of Lyotard's aesthetic model of the work of art's autocritique, is equal to the *allegorical act* of (self-)deconstruction in revealing the text's *unreadability*: The *sublime* and allegory are poetical principles in which the signifier and the signified can refer to each other without having an 'air' of identity philosophy. Translated into the language of deconstruction, Lyotard's energetic (i.e. non-semiotic) moment (i.e. the aesthetic dimension of the *sublime*)

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compensatory attempts of theorists about creative authors – as the critic's efforts to keep up with contemporary writers (*Resistance to Theory*: 119f).

<sup>1</sup> Cf. 1.3.3. Metafiction and Postmodernism.

<sup>2</sup> "Instead of offering us a theory of postmodernism, and instead of developing and supporting this theory with an analysis of contemporary cultural phenomena, poststructuralism usually concentrates on an archaeology of modernism and presents a theory of modernism in the state of its exhaustion. It is as if the creative impulses of modernism have migrated into theory to achieve in the poststructuralist text full self-consciousness. [my translation]"

<sup>3</sup> Cf. 1.1.1. The Concept of Deconstruction.

functions as the generator of the text's *unreadability*, which deconstruction determines in the chasm between the text's stating and performative dimension.

On the other hand, deconstruction as a decentred discourse that does not assume any metalinguistic epistemological perspective, identifies itself openly as a *postmodern theory and writing practice: paracritical intertextuality* (parallel to Lyotard's *paralogy*) has taken up the place of logical metalanguage. Deconstruction's pre-text and discourse act like the heterogeneous discourses in Lyotard's *differend*, for whose moderation there is no universal rule of judgement (in relation to dissimilar kinds of discourse) (Lyotard, *The Differend*: 9ff). Therefore Hassan's topography of the postmodern discourse (which otherwise certainly cannot be equated with Lyotard's) also reads like a description of deconstruction's *practice*:

As an artistic and philosophical, erotic and social phenomenon, postmodernism veers toward open, playful, optative, disjunctive, displaced, or indeterminate forms, a discourse of fragments, an ideology of fracture, a will to unmaking, an invocation of silences – veers toward all these and yet implies their very opposites, their antithetic realities. (Hassan: *The Right Promethean Fire*: 125)

In agreement with Lyotard's combination of the two dimensions, the space of deconstruction incorporates both modernism and postmodernism. The specifically postmodern seems to lie rather in the *reflection* on the impossibility of a 'true' discourse than in the de-limited discursive practice. With the critical reflection on its own foundations, postmodern discourse at the same time is once again embodied by the principles of modernism.

## II.

# VLADIMIR NABOKOV

*Romantic poetry is a universal progressive poetry. Its task is [...] to reunite all distinct genres of poetics and to bring poetry back into intercourse with philosophy and rhetoric.[...] It alone, like the epic, can become a mirror of the whole world around it, and an image of the century. And yet it can also float, to a greater extent than anything else, between the subject and the object of representation, free of any real or ideal interest, holding the centre, on the wings of poetic reflexion: it can perpetually raise this reflexion to a higher power and multiply it as if in an infinite series of mirrors [...]. Romantic poetry is still developing; more than this, it is its very essence to be eternally developing, never finding its conclusion.*

—FRIEDRICH SCHLEGEL  
*Athenaeum* fragment 116

## 2.1. ŒUVRE AND RECEPTION HISTORY

The history of Nabokov's œuvre reflects the nomadic life of its author: it consists of novels in both the Russian and the English language, short stories, poetry, four (little known) plays, an autobiography, a biography of Nikolai Gogol, reviews, publications on chess problems, translations of his and other authors' works, posthumously published lectures on the masterpieces of European and Russian literature and, last but not least, several scientific publications in the field of entomology.<sup>1</sup>

The author's transition from his mother tongue to English marks a break that is, however, somewhat blurred by a complicated publication history of the Russian text which Nabokov did not translate sequentially.<sup>2</sup> In fact, the early texts, some of which the author revised extensively in his English translation, were mostly read only *after* the scandalous success of *Lolita* in Anglo-America.

The reception history of Nabokov's work has, even if considerably late, been well documented by American criticism.<sup>3</sup> I will therefore refrain from presenting an overview but will instead mention a few general tendencies and problems. Although Nabokov was praised relatively early for his formal brilliance,<sup>4</sup> it was equally early that the critique that a certain vacuity marred his writings was levelled.<sup>5</sup> This charge was later furthered (and still persists) by allegations that with the confusing self-referentiality of his text he ignored his readers' desire for substance and meaning.<sup>6</sup>

Clancy quite rightly notes that a large proportion of critics content themselves with the decoding of Nabokov's riddles, without questioning these for their aesthetic importance (Clancy, *the Novels of Vladimir Nabokov*: 11ff).<sup>7</sup> Especially Andrew Field, Nabokov's Eckermann,

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<sup>1</sup> See Field's bibliography (*Vladimir Nabokov: His Life in Art*). The *Vladimir Nabokov Research Letter* publishes an annual bibliography of new publications.

<sup>2</sup> On the publication history of Nabokov's Russian texts in English language, see Grayson (*Nabokov Translated*). Cf. also the outline in Page (*Nabokov: The Critical Heritage*: 4ff) and Clancy (*The Novels of Vladimir Nabokov*: 2ff).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. footnote one. An overview of the reception history of Nabokov's work can be found in Roth (*Critical Essays on Vladimir Nabokov*), for literary criticism up until 1975 see also in Grabes (*Fictitious Biographies*).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Khodasevich's article in *Vozrozhdenie* of 1937 (in Page, *Nabokov: The Critical Heritage*: 61-4).

<sup>5</sup> The most famous in this respect was written by Sartre in his review of *Despair* in the year 1938 (in Page, *Nabokov: The Critical Heritage*: 65-6).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. McDonald ("Eighteenth Century Optimism as Metafiction in Nabokov's *Pale Fire*") and Adams (*After Joyce: Studies in Fiction After 'Ulysses'*: 146).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. for example the single formal aspects in D.B. Johnson ("The Index of Refraction in Nabokov's *Pale Fire*", "Scrabble Games In *Ada* or Taking Nabokov Clitorally", "The Ambidextrous Universe in Nabokov's *Look at the Harlequins!*", *Worlds in Regression*).

adopts, to an at times almost embarrassing degree, the aesthetics and world-view of his idol – there is no lack of examples for such forms of literary personality cult.<sup>1</sup>

However, more recent interpretations of Nabokov's œuvre, especially the works of Paul Bruss (*Victims*), O'Donnell ("Watermark") and Packman (*Vladimir Nabokov: The Structure of Literary Desire*), can be cited as exceptions which abandon a thematic-mimetic oriented interpretation of Nabokov<sup>2</sup> in favour of a non-mimetic reading (in the sense of metafiction). Even though these works are at least implicitly anchored in a poststructuralist theory of text (and thus foreground problems of self-referentiality), they lack the reflection on the possibility, or form, of integrating Nabokov into this claimed theoretical context which is nowhere explicitly stated.<sup>3</sup>

Generally, we can distinguish two great phases in the development of Nabokov's work: the incisive moment is marked by Nabokov's transition from Russian to English with the novel *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* in 1938.<sup>4</sup> With regard to the literary-theoretical approach of this dissertation, I will concentrate my analyses on the later, i.e. English or American, novels and will refrain from presenting the philological details of Nabokov's Russian development.

However, it appears reasonable to distinguish Nabokov's, or Sirin's,<sup>5</sup> Russian phase regarding form and thematic from his later work at least in passing. Decisive for my thoughts on the phase model for Nabokov' œuvre is that, corresponding with Lyotard's definition of the double notion "modernism/postmodernism",<sup>6</sup> the phenomenon *self-reflexivity* cannot be attrib-

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<sup>1</sup> One example is Field's extraordinary identification in his defence of Nabokov's translation of *Eugene Onegin* against Edmund Wilson's critique (Field, *Vladimir Nabokov: His Life in Art*: 274f).

<sup>2</sup> This approach is represented by Stegner who reads Nabokov as an "impressionist novelist" (*Escape into Aesthetics*), as well as by Lee (*Vladimir Nabokov*), Pifer (*Nabokov and the Novel*), Walter Cohen ("The Making of Nabokov's Fiction"), Maddox (*Vladimir Nabokov's Novels in English*), Long (*Marvell, Nabokov*) and others. – Merrill differentiates the stated dualism of "staunch realism" on the one hand, and "fabulation" on the other, when he correctly accuses the metafiction theory, it neglected exactly that thematic dimension of Nabokov's texts which the possibility of the representation of reality becomes itself the theme of the novel: "Nabokov quarrelled with epistemological assumptions underlying literary realism fully as much as with the social and philosophical ideas of the great realists" ("Nabokov and Fictional Artifice": 442).

<sup>3</sup> Thus Paul Bruss (*Victims: Textual Strategies in Recent American Fiction*) uses repeatedly the usually only vaguely defined notion of "textual control" (which stems from the poststructuralist theory of text) without ever clarifying his understanding of this term.

<sup>4</sup> Apparently with the scheme of the *Bildungsroman* or of the *Künstlerroman* in mind, Field speaks of three phases: "immaturity" (until 1929), "apprenticeship" and "maturity" (beginning with the publication of *Lolita*). He indeed sees only the transitional phase, in which Nabokov begins to develop his 'later' themes, as an autonomous stage. – Green, in contrast, speaks of two main phases: the first (until the change of language) is marked by a stronger centralising on an artistic subject, i.e. style, auctorial manipulations and characters exemplified "the primacy of the subjective, creative, affirmative authorial imagination over all destructive opponents" ("Nabokov's Signs of Reference": 104). In the second phase, Nabokov transforms the novel's mode of meaning: the literary text no longer thematises the artistic production, but in fact embodies it: "The novel would not only be *about* artistic creation in relation to the structures of the world, it would itself *be* and example, a demonstration, of imaginative reordering that yet exists as a structure of the world" ( *ibid.*: 104).

<sup>5</sup> Vladimir Nabokov's pseudonym for his Russian publications.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. 1.3.3. Metafiction and Postmodernism.

uted exclusively to the postmodern side – the *modern* and the *postmodern* phase are distinguished rather by a specifically aesthetic arrangement and an increasing radicalisation of self-reflexivity than by self-reflexivity alone.

With the conjunction of the blending of reality and fiction with the characters' *subjective perception* (cf. 2.3.1. *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*) I want to distinguish the Russian variant of literary and linguistic self-referentiality<sup>1</sup> as a modernistic predecessor from the American novels. In this context, the early novels' *cinematographic analogy*, which is often already created in the character's imagination (cf. *King, Queen, Knave* and *The Enchanter*), represents the formal and thematic bracket. Similarly, Luzhin's fall into the supposedly total, real world of the chess board (cf. *Defense*) is a thematic variation of such pathologically distorted self-perception of characters who cannot distinguish between the real and fictitious world.<sup>2</sup>

It is significant that the characters of these early novels, in which there is not yet an all-encompassing narrative and textual self-reflexivity and which are instead narrated from an almost anonymous and coolly-distanced<sup>3</sup> restrictive personal perspective, are not autonomous literati or narrators with basic literary skills. Here they are chess-players,<sup>4</sup> businessmen,<sup>5</sup> and rather dubious and mediocre artists who are not, unlike their successors in the later writings, the authors of formally brilliant texts. The character dimension and the narrator dimension are not identical. Artistic production is not directly thematised: the clarity of the formal stylisation never lets the literary medium retreat from the events. Text immanently, Nabokov always lets the reality of textuality intrude into the world of his characters. Already in 1937, Khodasevich named this alienation technique as a characteristic of Nabokov's style:

[...] Sirin not only does not mask, does not hide his devices, as is most frequently done by others [...] but, on the contrary, because Sirin places them in full view like a magician who, having amazed his audience, reveals on the very spot the laboratory of his miracles. This, it seems to me, is the key to all of Sirin. (Khodasevich in Page, *Nabokov: The Critical Heritage*: 61)

It is exactly the technique described here which prompted the Russian exile critics to call Sirin's style unique and un-Russian<sup>6</sup> even though, at the same time, a wealth of literary influences on Sirin were discovered.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Hutcheon's typology of the forms of self-referentiality in 1.3.3. Metafiction and Postmodernism.

<sup>2</sup> Chess, or the analogising of chess and art, is a recurrent theme in Nabokov's novels. Nabokov himself was a dedicated chess player and has spoken about his fascination for the game (*Speak, Memory*: 216ff).

<sup>3</sup> Merrill names a Nabokovian characteristic "a distinct chilliness to his early works" ("Nabokov and Fictional Artifice": 446).

<sup>4</sup> See Nabokov (*Defense*).

<sup>5</sup> As Hermann (Nabokov, *Despair*), and Albinus (Nabokov, *Laughter in the Dark*).

<sup>6</sup> Struve called Nabokov untypical for Russian exile literature in two regards: his "predilection for original plots and unexpected climaxes" and his "peculiar care for construction" stood "in contrast with

The turn to the later, more 'open' form of self-referentiality can be detected in *The Gift*, in which the theme of the artistic problematic acquires thematic priority, and in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, in which the fictionalising of reality transcends the boundaries of subjective character consciousness for the first time. My thesis that Nabokov's poetic development can be demonstrated with this new, more radical form of self-referentiality is supported by a comparison of *The Enchanter* (written in 1939/40) with its later version, *Lolita*.<sup>1</sup> The cinematographic experience of an (intentionally) limited character perspective in *The Enchanter* is in *Lolita* transformed into the confessions of the nymphomane Humbert, which, enriched with literary allusions and jokes, are once again overtaken by the novel's transindividual textual self-referentiality (cf. 2.3.2. *Lolita*).<sup>2</sup> Nabokov himself noted that the reason for such a tendency toward textual self-referentiality might be found in the relinquishing of his mother-tongue Russian as literary medium, and in the higher degree of reflection that the use of a foreign language necessitates:

The English at my disposal is certainly thinner than my Russian; the difference being, in fact, that which exists between a semi-detached villa and a hereditary estate, between self-conscious comfort and hereditary luxury. I am not satisfied therefore with the results attained, but my studies disclosed several rules that other writers might follow with profit. (*Lectures on Russian Literature*: 320).<sup>3</sup>

Thus, in criticism the suspicion has been voiced that Nabokov's inclination toward extreme literariness in his American novels was in order to disguise linguistic insecurities.<sup>4</sup>

All these are, at most, speculations that can explain the formal innovations of the early American novels. The fact that Nabokov's self-referential literariness climaxes at the point at which he perfects his command of the English language—in *Ada, or Ardor*—cannot be made plausible without assuming a change in his aesthetic approach.

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the loose and formless structure of a typical Russian story" (in Page, *Nabokov: The Critical Heritage*: 48).

<sup>1</sup> Nabokov rejected the early story *The Enchanter* (which then was only posthumously published) and took up the theme only much later in his novel *Lolita*. Cf. the epilogue by his son, Dmitri Nabokov.

<sup>2</sup> Grayson's analysis of Nabokov's self-translation comes to the same conclusion. Nabokov's revisions, says Grayson, show a tendency toward an "increasing stylization, increasing deployment of artifice" (*Nabokov Translated*: 3f).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. a similar statement by Nabokov in his poem *The Softest of Tongues* (1959) in which he regrets the loss of his mother tongue.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Green ("Nabokov's Signs of Reference": 105). – The widening of his cultural circle might also have contributed to Nabokov's tendency toward intertextuality (see Field, *His Life in Art*: 3f), even though Nabokov has always categorically denied the direct influence of other authors (*Strong Opinions*: 116ff).

## 2.2. AESTHETICS

Nabokov has never developed his conception of art in a coherent theoretical text: his aesthetics can only be deduced from his essayistic and scholarly writings<sup>1</sup> and, as the analysis of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* will show, partly from the literary reflections in some of his novels.

His dominant critical themes, whether in immanent poetological reflections or apodictic statements on other authors, distinctly conjure up the image of an *individualistic* and *idealistic* understanding of art (imprinted by his upper middle-class family background) which clearly denounces any form of didactic intentions.<sup>2</sup>

In the beginning, Nabokov—and this needs to be stressed with respect to my thesis about a self-deconstructive movement in his texts—does not negate the mimetic task of literature. In fact, he attests to the artistic excellence of the great Realists of the nineteenth century, here especially Tolstoy. Equally, Nabokov admires classical modernism.<sup>3</sup>

By relativising and individualising his own conception of art (even more radically than Joyce), Nabokov saves the idea of realism for himself, yet without marking this displacement with a specific *formal design* of subjectivisation or relativisation of the perception of reality – in the sense of the interior monologue or the stream of consciousness. To the contrary, he distances himself from the personal narrative position (this, at least, is true for his later 'American' novels). *Objective, everyday* reality is the sum of uncountable subjective realities and exists—if at all, and this seems for Nabokov hardly conceivable—as *intersubjective consensus*. Artistic subjectivity has access to only one *individually authentic reality*. About Kafka, Nabokov says:

Indeed, this subjective life is so strong that it makes an empty and broken shell of the so-called objective existence. The only way back to objective reality is the following one: we can take several individual worlds, mix them thoroughly together, scoop up a drop of the mixture, and call it objective reality. (*Lectures on Literature*: 253)<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Nabokov's *Lectures on Literature*, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, the biography on Gogol and his monumental translation of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*. – Also interesting is the exchange of letters with Wilson (Karlinsky, *Vladimir Nabokov: Briefwechsel mit Edmund Wilson*) in which Nabokov repeatedly—in defense of his translation of Pushkin—expresses his literary preferences and convictions.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Nabokov about Gogol: "At this super-high level of art, literature is of course not concerned with pitying the underdog or cursing the upperdog. It appeals to that secret depth of the human soul where shadows or other worlds pass like the shadows of nameless and soundless ships" (*Nikolai Gogol*: 150). – In his interpretation of *Bleak House*, Nabokov similarly presents the thesis that it is only the relativization of satire's didactic intention toward the autonomy of art which makes Dickens' novel an expertly accomplished piece of work (*Lectures on Literature*: 64f).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Nabokov's lecture on Joyce (*Lectures on Literature*: 285-370).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. also with Nabokov (*Strong Opinions*: 11; 118).

The nineteenth century's realistic work of art, too, created its own reality, according to Nabokov. His fictional world is not merely a direct copy of the assumed objective, real world – the original subjectivity of the artist *draws up* an equally original fictitious world:

An original author always invents an original world, and if a character or an action fits into the pattern of that world, then we experience the pleasurable shock of artistic truth, no matter how unlikely the person or thing may seem if transferred into what reviewers, poor hacks, call 'real life'. (ibid.: 10)

The relation between art and reality is thus one of an (indirect) analogy: the *imagined world of fiction* reflects the *impenetrable 'real' world of subjective deceptions*. Life, like art, itself is "a most melancholy and meaningful picture – but meaning what, what?" (*Ada, or Ardor*: 284).

Both nature and art, according to Nabokov the lepidopterologist, follow a playful version of almost auto-reflexive mimesis, *mimicry*:

When a butterfly had to look like a leaf, not only were all the details of a leaf beautifully rendered but markings mimicking grub-bored holes were generously thrown in. [...] a productive device was carried to a point of mimetic subtlety, exuberance, and luxury far in excess of a predator's power of appreciation. I discovered in nature the non-utilitarian delights that I sought in art. Both were a form of magic, both were a game of intricate enchantment and deception. (*Speak, Memory*: 88)

Extra-literary experience, the sensual perception of the *real* world's intricate structure, is with this point of conversion conceivable, following Nabokov, as *aesthetic experience*.

The focal point of the aesthetic structure of *deception* and *enchantment* is the *subjective consciousness*; life and fiction collide in the artist's consciousness. The prioritisation of the artistic consciousness is derived from Nabokov's definition of the purpose of art, i.e. "to try to express one's position in regard to the universe embraced by consciousness" (ibid.: 156).

Nabokov describes the relation of auctorial artistic consciousness to the fictional world of characters ambivalently: with despotic power he reigns over his "galley slaves";<sup>1</sup> given life, on the other hand, these characters acquire for themselves a certain dynamic and independence from their creator. Nabokov is too close to the great nineteenth century Realists to not want to be the mastermind of a fictive universe – whose puppets, however, once animated, become autonomous dancers.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Thus Nabokov in an interview with Appel (in Dembo, *Nabokov: The Man and His Work*). – Cf. also Green ("Nabokov's Signs of Reference": 10).

<sup>2</sup> Nabokov comments on a scene in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*: "The brilliant eye of the great writer always noting what his puppets are up to after he has given them the power to live" (*Lectures on Literature*: 162).

Paradoxically, the act of artistic creation, according to Nabokov, is both *bound to inspiration* and *calculated-intentional*.<sup>1</sup> Nabokov's apotheosis of the autonomous artistic consciousness demands that the interpretation conscientiously follows the work's structural and thematic complexity;<sup>2</sup> generalisations and abstractions never do justice to a work of art. Just as little can a work of art be interpreted with biography<sup>3</sup> or the author's own explanations.<sup>4</sup> The fact that Nabokov sees himself as both highest artist and prime art critic stands in contrast with his theory of art, not, however, with his self-confidence.

The originality of artistic consciousness takes literature out of its historical and social integration. In Nabokov's work, history appears to be reduced to a history of the individual consciousness.<sup>5</sup> Like a magician, the author takes over time and space and transforms them into elements of his *unique* fictional world: "It is the enchanter in him that predominates and makes him a major writer" (*Lectures on Literature*: 5).

This individuality is realised in the uncompromising *originality of style* (*Strong Opinions*: 173)<sup>6</sup>—Nabokov and his narrator in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* agree on this—which Alter calls "logomania".

In the process of the *linguistic transformation of consciousness* in art, the realisation and transcendence of formal conventions is required:<sup>7</sup> alienation is the condition of the possibility to express the sensuality of aesthetic experience in the literary medium and to transport it into the process of reception. Especially the early Nabokov tends to double the text's self-reflexive moment thematically. The later Nabokov refrains from such a thematisation in favour of structural, i.e. formal, doublings. Writing in the foreign language, which, almost like a Derridean *delay*, never allows for instantaneity of consciousness and linguistic expression, is in itself already the fundamental moment of a first psychological alienation that is converted in the literary produc-

<sup>1</sup> Nabokov explained his work techniques in an interview with Appel (in Dembo, *Nabokov: The Man and His Work*). Cf. also his explications in *Lectures on Literature*: 376ff.

<sup>2</sup> Nabokov names abilities or skills a good reader is required to possess as "imagination," "memory," "dictionary" and "some artistic sense" (*Lectures on Literature*: 3). – Cf. Nabokov's introductory remarks to his lecture on Dickens: "We just surrender ourselves to Dickens' voice – that is all. I would like to devote the fifty minutes of every class meeting to mute meditation, concentration, and admiration of Dickens" (*ibid.*: 63f).

<sup>3</sup> Indeed, in his interpretations of literary texts (in *Lectures on Literature*, *Lectures on Russian Literature*) Nabokov never refers to the authors' biographies.

<sup>4</sup> Nabokov has always refused to interpret his own works. – He condemns Gogol's wish to counter criticism with self-interpretations: "[...] we have here the incredible fact of a writer totally misunderstanding and distorting the sense of his own work" (*Nikolai Gogol*: 224).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Nabokov (*Lectures on Literature*: 2).

<sup>6</sup> Non-original art—along with Goethe's *Faust*, almost all German literature belongs to this category (*Nikolai Gogol*: 68)—is, according to Nabokov's verdict, *poshlust*: its characteristics reach from triviality and imitation to the sin of "cultur locale" (*ibid.*: 36) to non-authenticity in general – "not only the obviously trashy but also the falsely important, the falsely beautiful, the falsely clever, the falsely attractive" (*ibid.*: 73).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. also Pifer (*Nabokov and the Novel*: chap. 6).

tion: with the use of English, Nabokov's texts become—both linguistically and thematically—increasingly self-referential.<sup>1</sup>

Nabokov's position on this becomes very clear in his commentaries on problems of translation.<sup>2</sup> Like his conception of artistic subjectivity, his thoughts here are governed by an *idealistic notion of language*, which at first implies the *ideality of pure meaning* and a *semantic control* over language. In his practice, however, he subordinates the alleged ideal meaning to the linguistic form: even though Nabokov, in his Pushkin translation, does without the translation of form in favour of semantic precision, his auto-translations (as well as the translation of Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* into Russian) demonstrate a clear shift toward the preferred translation of purely *linguistic effects* (Grayson, *Nabokov Translated*: 176), i.e. to a (retrospective) re-evaluation of the materiality of signifiers as opposed to the text's meaning. In fact, his revisions tend to increase the self-reflexivity of the literary works. Thus, Nabokov's translation practice is in contrast to his idealistic concept of language.<sup>3</sup>

Literary works that are indebted to both the *representation* and the (new) *production of subjective aesthetic experience* do not realise the important representation of general themes or ideas. Rather, in his lecture on *Anna Karenina*, Nabokov defined the "pattern of images", the "texture", as the highest organising principle: "The word, the expression, the image is the true function of literature. *Not ideas*" (*Lectures on Literature*: 166). Thus, his interpretation of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* certainly attains an almost paradigmatic status. According to Nabokov, the poetic is derived from a complex, partly contrapuntal world of metaphors and images from which the ideas (in the case of *Anna Karenina*, Levin's reflection on religion) completely retreat. In such a canvas of images, art and life blend into each other. In his autobiography, Nabokov formulates this principle of his conception of art:

The following of such thematic designs through one's life should be, I think, the true purpose of autobiography. (*Speak, Memory*: 23)<sup>4</sup>

By weaving the work of art into a poetic unity, this *imagery* transcends the banality of external chronology in the subject's consciousness,<sup>5</sup> which is why Nabokov's autobiography is not or-

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<sup>1</sup> Grayson describes this kind of foreign-language alienation as follows: "He sees the English language through different eyes. He sees patterns of sounds and potential meanings in words which the native speaker, his perception dulled through familiarity, would simply pass over" (*Nabokov Translated*: 216).

<sup>2</sup> See Nabokov's introduction and commentary in his translation of Pushkin (*Eugene Onegin*).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Nabokov's justification of his method (*Problems of Translation*). – A splendid analysis of Nabokov's translation theory and practice can be found in the work of Grayson (*Nabokov Translated*: 15f).

<sup>4</sup> It is telling that Nabokov frequently leaves it unclear, whether such patterns are inventions of the author. Cf. for example the episode that relates his visit to a former Cambridge tutor (*Speak, Memory*: 194ff).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. about this especially my analysis of *Ada, or Ardor* in 2.3.5. *Ada or Ardor*.

ganised chronologically but thematically.<sup>1</sup> Life, always already aestheticised, is suspended in art. Thus, the artistic subject inscribes itself into the text. His authorship, however, remains recognisable as a textual one. The *trace of I* is constantly evident, like a watermark, in the aesthetic structure of the literary work:

[...] the individual mystery remains to tantalize the memoirist. Neither in environment nor in heredity can I find the exact instrument that fashioned me, the anonymous roller that pressed upon my life a certain intricate watermark whose unique design becomes visible when the lamp of art is made to shine through life's foolscap. (ibid.: 15)

Determining the "I" as a sign in the text (i.e. as a sign among signs) indicates how Nabokov's apotheosis of artistic subjectivity can suddenly turn, uncalculated by the author, into its contrary: in an act of exemplary (self-)deconstruction, the seemingly omnipotent artistic "I" manoeuvres itself to the threshold to pure textuality.

I have developed here Nabokov's conception of art as a theoretic conception. This, in fact, is the attempt to consistently demonstrate and interpret his scattered, often not necessarily generalisable, statements on literature, which nevertheless help to inform us of Nabokov's thoughts on art.

Concluding, I have to emphasise that Nabokov does not represent a *l'art pour l'art* aesthetics, as Stegner implies (*Escape Into Aesthetics*). That which Stegner sees as an "intellectual game", is for Nabokov in fact linked to a subjectivist notion of reality and has thus an, even if abstract, mimetic function. The equation of reality and art via the conception of aesthetic experience of mimicry allows Nabokov to conceive of an *aesthetics of production and reception*. Because of his overly complex self-reflexive notion of reality, Nabokov oscillates between prioritising artistic subjectivity, as a source of a transparent meaning, on the one hand, and its textualisation on the other.

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<sup>1</sup> The exploding of chronological time also indicates that Nabokov can use an autobiographical theme several times. An example would be the "Tamara"-theme in *Speak-Memory*, *Maschenka* and *Ada, or Ardor*.

## 2.3. SELECTED NOVELS

### 2.3.1. *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*

The short novel *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, written in Paris of 1938 with a view to a publication in English, signifies Nabokov's turning point from his Russian to his English, or American, phase. It is not only the language but also the novel's formal and thematic design that are overshadowed by traces of an 'immature' transitional character – which in early reviews and literary critiques was regarded as the work's major defect.<sup>1</sup> While the linguistic insufficiencies are merely the author's problems with a foreign language, the formal inconsistency of the novel stems from Nabokov's radicalisation of his Russian topoi, which are achieved aesthetically only in his later novels. *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* is thus interesting in terms of Nabokov's later development and because of its explicit incorporation of reflections on aesthetics.

The theme of the fictitious biography *Sebastian Knight* is the narrator's—ominously known as the initial V.—search for the *real life* of his half-brother, the author Sebastian Knight. Right from the beginning the biographer's incompetence is demonstrated to the reader: V. confesses that in order to polish his very limited literary abilities he enrolled in a writing course (*The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*: 31). Even more telling is his hesitant disclosure that his half-brother, in spite of all his love for him, had always remained distant to him and that he consequently knows only little about Sebastian's life. It is this obviously unequal relationship—love and admiration on V.'s side; disregard on Sebastian's—which steadily steers the biography back to the condition and the process of its creation. V.'s version of the his half-brother's unfamiliar life is constantly relativised as narration: "I have endeavoured to form a coherent picture of what I saw of my half-brother in those childhood days of mine [...] but the task eludes me" (ibid.: 16).

However, the less than reliable perspective of this admittedly *unreliable author* is only the top-most layer. The perception of the *real* life of Sebastian Knight gets multi-perspectively refracted in further prisms: other people's accounts that are either of little importance or that are deliberately misleading, Sebastian's novels which V. uses as informational material for conclu-

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. especially the reviews in Page (*Nabokov. The Critical Heritage*: 7ff). – Prevailing tenor is the allegation that the novel is aesthetically inconsistent (cf. Maddox, *Vladimir Nabokov's Novels in English*; Morton, *Vladimir Nabokov*) and that it is tainted by the Nabokovian technical virtuosity without theme: "Mr. Nabokov has performed the extremely clever and extremely unsatisfying feat of writing a novel in which nearly all the problems that the novelist must solve have been evaded. His talent is obviously great; one joins with the publisher in hoping that he will put his other novels into English; but in the presence of this one, one can only feel cheated and aggrieved" (Walter Allen in Page, *Nabokov. The Critical Heritage*: 70). – Nabokov himself speaks later of the novel's "unbearable imperfections", according to Field (*Vladimir Nabokov: His Life in Art*: 26).

sions about the author's life. In this regard, Bader speaks of a "synthesized spirality" of the narrator's perspective (Bader, *Crystal Land*: 16): the Sebastian Knight of the biography is the incomplete mosaic of manifold reflections that are thrown together by the narrator V. to form a distorted image.

In contrast to his predecessor Hermann in *Despair* who never becomes aware of the distortions of his subjective experience, the narrator in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* oscillates in a peculiar ambivalence between blindness and ironic reflection on the limitations of his own perspective. On the one hand, V. repeats exactly the mistakes of other biographers whom he vehemently criticises—Goodman also infers from Sebastian Knight's novels the author's life—, on the other, he comments in interruptions ironically on the impossibility of his biographical task:

[...] don't be too certain of learning the past from the lips of the present. Beware of the most honest broker. Remember that what you are told is really threefold: shaped by the teller, re-shaped by the listener, concealed from both by the dead man of the tale. (*The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*: 47)

The narration of the search for history slowly wedges itself between the *narrator's* comments and the history of Sebastian Knight: the (fictitious) biography becomes, just like in *Despair*, a detective novel: the paradigm of the literary form of the quest, or rather, its parody. Nabokov's register ranges from the trivial exaggeration of the genre<sup>1</sup> to the application of typical plot patterns and their negation, e.g. the illusory voice which, if it existed, could shed light on the darkness of V.'s investigations: "'Sebastian Knight?'" said a sudden voice in the mist. 'Who is speaking of Sebastian Knight?'" (ibid.: 46). Genre-specifically raising the reader's suspense the chapter ends here. The reader expects a radical change— peripeteia—but his expectations are not fulfilled:

The stranger who uttered these words now approached – Oh, how I sometimes yearn for the easy swing of a well-oiled novel! How comfortable it would have been had the voice belonged to some cherry old don [...] And then and there he would have launched on that story. But alas, nothing of the kind really happened. (ibid.: 47)

In *Sebastian Knight*, the genre of the detective novel is only evoked to be immediately alienated. While in the genre the detective's investigations lead toward the enigma's solution, it here leads nowhere. According to the ambivalent position of the narrator, the parodistic adaptation of the literary scheme is achieved on two different levels: first, the narrator explicitly comments on the ruptured, or relativised plot pattern as such, e.g. in the search for Sebastian's mysterious last lover:

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. V.'s interview with Sebastian's former college tutor (*The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*: 40f)

I asked my informant whether he thought she was Russian. He said she was, 'A handsome dark woman?' I suggested, using an old Sherlock Holmes stratagem. 'Exactly,' he replied, rather putting me off (the right answer would have been: Oh, no, she is an ugly blonde) [...] (ibid.: 135)

Second, on the level of plot, the inversion of the detective scheme occurs as a pattern unknown to the bungling biographer: Nabokov plays with several scenic stereotypes—hotel receptions and their ledgers, the strange man in the train compartment—whose *literariness* induces an atmosphere of unreality. Even though V.'s research finally uncovers Madame Lecerf as Sebastian's elusive mistress (ibid.: 144f), he has nonetheless lost sight of his original endeavour. Madame Lecerf cloaks herself in secretive (or meaningless) silence and Sebastian's life remains undisclosed to him. The recapitulation of the detective's solution-finding method, as prescribed by the genre, therefore remains exclusive to the pure imagination of V., narrator and only protagonist of the novel. Thus, the works of Sebastian Knight continue to be the only, if deceptive, access to his brother's life which fades away in the sparkling proximity of his literary imagination (ibid.: 7). V.'s fictitious biography evolves, lacking a true life in reach, into a history of Sebastian's literary arrangements, of his fictions, which themselves, according to V.'s presentation, are parodies of the detective novel genre (ibid.: 76ff, 86, 88, 146ff). However, what is presented by the *suspense-thriller author* Sebastian Knight as a possible solution—in *The Prismatic Brezel* all hotel guests suspected of murder turn out to be related to each other (in a bizarre and circular way)—is in the case of his biographer merely assumption, or pure wish projection. That net knitted by V. has only loose and hopelessly entangled ends that cannot represent a complete picture.

The box-in-a-box construction, which on each level presents new parodistic inversions that in turn are in a relation of mutual mirroring, is broken by a single fissure that lets the staggered arrangement of levels penetrate each other and which simultaneously surpasses the limited point of narration: characters from the fictitious world in Sebastian's *The Doubtful Asphodel* intrude into V.'s 'real' world; the comical-amicable fellow-traveller and detective who aids V.'s search for the hotel register is the 'living' incarnation of Mr Silver in Sebastian's *The Back of the Moon*, this "meek little man waiting for a train who helped three miserable travellers in three miserable ways," is called by V. "the most alive of Sebastian's creatures" (ibid.: 91).<sup>1</sup>

With the dissolving of the clear differentiation between the logical levels, which is not achieved by narrative technique but at least indicated by the motive of the character's doubling, Nabokov radicalises the fusing of reality and fiction that can already be located in his earlier Russian novels in an essential way. While in his former works the inability to keep up this dif-

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. the analogous person's descriptions and the parallels of the situation (*The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*: 91, 111ff). Clancy lists the correspondences in detail (*The Novels of Vladimir Nabokov*: 89ff).

ferentiation could be interpreted as a psycho-pathological problem, the welding process is now no longer situated in the consciousness of a single narrator-subject but—transcending it—in the quasi 'subjectless' *narrative discourse*. Reflected formally, this widening of Nabokov's break with his typical Russian *mono-perspective* narrative—personal narrator and film metaphor—is in favour of broader structural analogies and the fusing of narrative levels.<sup>1</sup>

The formal structure of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* with its encapsulation of levels and motives, and its perspective thus produces a *narrative consciousness* of the fictitiousness of the narrated world which, at least partially, is shared by the ambivalent narrator-biographer V. That the novel *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* does still not make a distinct postulation about, for example, the fictitiousness of reality, is rooted in the narrator-character's loss of identity. The unilateral relationship of the two brothers turns increasingly into V.'s almost complete identification with his brother Sebastian. If at the beginning of the writing process the distance to Sebastian was foregrounded, now V.'s unreciprocated brotherly love and limitless adoration become the driving force for his identification with Sebastian's life and literary *œuvre* whose aesthetic premises become his own convictions. It is quite consistent that in the end Sebastian too was working on a fictitious biography (*ibid.*: 36). In conclusion we find—in the paralleling the narrative and the plot level—the *unification* of the two characters which, however, at least through the story's development, turns out to be fallacious: The terminally ill man whom V. pays a last visit is a complete stranger, not his brother (*ibid.*: 177ff); the deceptive impression of oneness at his brother's bed was a mere projection. The narrator's retreat into his brother's identity counteracts the macabre farce of the mistaken identity at the deathbed:

Whatever his secret was, I have learnt one secret, too, and namely: that the soul is but a manner of being—not a constant state—that any soul may be yours, if you find and follow its undulations [...]. Thus—I am Sebastian Knight. [...]—but the hero remains, for, try as I may, I cannot get out of my part: Sebastian's mask clings to my face, the likeness will not be washed off. I am Sebastian, or Sebastian is I, or perhaps we are both someone whom neither of us knows. (*ibid.*: 181)

Boyd identifies Sebastian Knight as the *real* narrator because of the fusion of characters. In reality, he says, the biography is Sebastian's camouflaged autobiography. In order to narrate a life, which has not reached its conclusion, in its entirety (this is the Sternian paradox) he had to invent V., an imaginary brother (Boyd, *The Reflexive Novel*: 154f). Significant for the semantic structure of the novel is, however, that an interpretation as suggested by Boyd is as imaginable as a reading which assumes a mere projection of an increasingly deranged narrator. The text's ambivalence does not prioritise any of the possible interpretations.

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<sup>1</sup> Good examples for Nabokov's Russian technique can be found in *The Enchanter*: 94f, and in *Laughter in the Dark*: 67. – cf. also the comparison with *Lolita* in 2.3.2. *Lolita*.

Boyd indeed neglects the function of the text immanent aesthetic reflection, which discursively foresees, or legitimises, the fusion of the narration's subject and object.

I have already said that V., in his immeasurable veneration of his brother turns himself into a mouthpiece for Sebastian's aesthetic views. Even though one has to reject Bader's equating V.'s, or Sebastian's, aesthetics with Nabokov's (cf. Bader, *Crystal Land*: 16ff), there are at least two captivating poetic principles in *Sebastian Knight* that Nabokov shares with both his creatures: the demand for a radical individuality of style and the ensuing importance of artistic innovation by means of *parody*. The point of departure of Nabokov's idealistic aesthetics, and the original motive of art, is the *individuality of the (artistic) subject* which stands in stark contradiction to Sebastian's biographer Goodman, who—breaking with Nabokov's defence of absolute individualism—classifies Sebastian Knight as a modernist (*The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*: 102). This individuality finds its adequate aesthetic expression in the *individuality of style* and the *complexity of the artistic imagination*. Language is a mere medium—V. speaks about "the abyss lying between expression and thought" (ibid.: 73)—and it only does justice to the absolute, pure, and unique expression of the artist in its original form: "He had no use for ready-made phrases because the things he wanted to say were of an exceptional build and he knew moreover that no real idea can be said to exist without the words made to measure" (ibid.: 73).

With this, the artistic subject transcends all historical relativity and ties specific to epochs:

Time and space were to him measures of the same eternity, so that the very idea of his reacting in any special 'modern' way to what Mr Goodman calls 'the atmosphere of post-war Europe' is utterly preposterous. [...] Whatever age Sebastian might have been born in, he would have been equally amused and unhappy [...] And the reason of his discomfort was not that he was moral in an immoral age, or immoral in a moral one [...]; it was simply his becoming aware that the rhythm of his inner being was so much richer than that of other souls. (ibid.: 59)

Aesthetic means for the expression of Sebastian's (and Nabokov's) non-conventional art is, as V. explains, parody as "a kind of springboard for leaping in the highest regions of serious emotion" (ibid.: 80). Parody liberates art from merely reproducing no longer alive speech and form (here the detective novel pattern): by foregrounding the literary convention through its parodistic repetition it can be de-automated and surpassed.

Thus, it is only against the background of the self-reflexive form as a theme that *aesthetic innovation* becomes possible. This, however, is not an end in itself but legitimate as it is only thus that the collective patterns of perception and thought can be alienated and transcended in favour of individual ones.

Simultaneously, the aesthetic alienation effect with its dialectic of redundancy and innovation (Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*: 269f) causes a feed-back with *extra-aesthetic forms of perception*: with the parodying of forms of perception, which presume a factual reality, on the plot level the reader is provoked to reflect on his own non-aesthetic patterns of perception. The

problem of reality and fiction becomes once more incorporated into the novel.<sup>1</sup> With its specific ability to break up traditional modes of perception, patterns of thought and language, art rises for Sebastian above the perception of reality. Nabokov's dictum of the priority of subjective human consciousness over the crude collective, historically determined experience of reality accesses *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* in the shape of an intrusion of the (fictitious) fictitious world into the (fictitious) real world: during the search for his brother's *real* life V. meets all the characters that populate in imaginary world of Sebastian's *The Doubtful Asphodel*. The specifically Nabokovian form of self-referentiality, his "inverse Platonism",<sup>2</sup> is doubled in the self-referential narrative mode which blurs the boundary between reality and fiction. Paradoxically, it is the very priority of aesthetic consciousness that questions V.'s ability to distinguish between reality and fiction, between self and the other. Although aesthetically legitimised, the blurring of this boundary effects for V. a loss of identity and authenticity which lets the aesthetic construct appear to be a figment of the narrator's imagination. Like his Russian predecessors, V. suffers at times from *referential mania*,<sup>3</sup> i.e. the psychopathic paranoia and addiction to symbols—like, for example, the misleading chess symbols that V. encounters everywhere<sup>4</sup>—that are ironically commented on by the novel, or more precisely, by the failing of V.'s assumptions.

However, these comments are hardly consistent with the narrator's obsession with identification. In fact, the discrepancy between the blindness toward his own narratorial position and the addiction to symbols<sup>5</sup> on the one hand, and his lucid self-reflections on the other, withdraws all consistency from the narrating character. This deficiency, which in the sense of deconstruction is not a real one, may also be based on the choice of a psycho-pathological narrator who at the same time also functions as a mouthpiece for Sebastian's, or V.'s, aesthetics. The posture of the narrating subject fluctuates between wandering in a hall of mirrors and artistic autocracy. Thus the novel lingers in the ambivalence between the subjective/pathological and the aes-

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<sup>1</sup> This is why Boyd in his interpretation of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* infers the exclusively self-referential mode of the Nabokov's later novels, when he says: "If writing does not reflect the world or mirror the self but only is what it is, then writing about writing seems to be all that is left. For Sebastian Knight, as for Vladimir Nabokov, such writing falls naturally into the category of parody [...]" (*The Reflexive Novel*: 157). Sebastian Knight (and Vladimir Nabokov at this point of time) does exactly not presume a non-mimetic literature: within the novel, the function of parody does not get legitimised beyond the exclusively self-referential character of art.

<sup>2</sup> Donald B. Johnson ("The Ambidextrous Universe") coined this term. With this technique, Nabokov follows the tradition of Russian Symbolism. In his Gogol biography he himself comments on a case of an imitation of life through art: "This vulgar imitation of artistic fiction on the part of life is somehow more pleasing than the opposite thing!" (*Nikolai Gogol*: 45).

<sup>3</sup> See Nabokov (*Signs and Symbols*). – cf. also 2.3.4. *Pale Fire*.

<sup>4</sup> Apart from the names 'Knight' and 'Bishop', Pahl Pahlich Rechnoy is holding a black chess knight in his hands at V.'s arrival (*The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*: 126) and thus prompts V. (and the reader) to mistakenly assume that the biographer is finally on the right track. Cf. V.'s own comments on this (*ibid.*: 82).

<sup>5</sup> Which makes V., with unintentional self-parody, claim that "[a]s a reader may have noticed, I have tried to put into this book as little of my own as possible" (*The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*: 125).

thetic/self-reflective demolition of the boundary between reality and aesthetic illusion which becomes increasingly structurally and thematically dominant in Nabokov's later prose.

### 2.3.2. *Lolita*

The novel's subject matter, an ageing European's love for a twelve-year old American girl, turned *Lolita* (first published in 1955) into one of the most scandalous and hotly debated<sup>1</sup> books in the history of American publishing. It was this initially unpublishable novel<sup>2</sup> which finally earned Nabokov international acclaim and financial independence, which, in turn, allowed him to give up his teaching position. *Lolita*, Nabokov's favourite own novel (*Strong Opinions*: 92), is also his most American novel: the influence of American culture and lifestyle lends it the parodistic, culture critical element which at first seems to make the interpretation of this bizarre love story as metafiction appear absurd.

Yet, especially the readings that stress the representative character of *Lolita* admit the '*literarisation*' and *deconventionalising* of the love theme but want this still to be understood as an alienation strategy of conventional referential literature. Trilling and Dupée presume that it was only through the deviation from the conventional patterns that made it possible for Nabokov to write a love story. The author, according to them, achieved this with the evocation of the courtly tradition of *passion love* and with the love motive's inversion into sexual perversion (Trilling in Page, *The Critical Heritage*: 92-101). To make an absolute form of love the subject of his novel, Nabokov had therefore to choose an unconventional, namely an incestuous/pederastic, relationship and an unorthodox plot (Dupée in *ibid.*: 84-90).<sup>3</sup> Within a certain frame, this explanation is plausible, but exactly this choice of theme and narrative form leads, via its intertextual links, to a '*literarisation*' and fictionalisation of the text which develops a self-referential momentum of its own. The narrative situation is the catalyst of this movement as a comparison with *Lolita's* predecessor, *The Enchanter*, shows.

The subject of the personal narrator's reflections is his passionate nymphomaniac love for the sixteen-year old schoolgirl Dolores Haze, alias Lolita. "This book is about Lolita" (*Lolita*: 251), as the otherwise stylistically versed Humbert asserts.

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<sup>1</sup> Among the first positive critics were Green and Trilling; Amis, in contrast, wrote a damning review: "thoroughly bad in both senses: bad as work of art, that is, and morally bad – though certainly not obscene or pornographic" (in Page, *The Critical Heritage*: 103). (The most important reviews are well documented in this volume.)

<sup>2</sup> About the history of reception of *Lolita* see Appel (*Nabokov: Criticism, Reminiscences, Translations and Tributes*: 17-40), Field (*Vladimir Nabokov: His Life in Art*: 335), Page (*The Critical Heritage*: 9ff) and Nabokov himself in his epilogue "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*" (*Lolita*: 309-315).

<sup>3</sup> The same would be valid for the themes of love and incest in *Ada, or Ardor*.

He motivates his paedophilic disposition both with biographical details—H. H. talks about his early-childhood infatuation with Annabell, a namesake of Edgar Allan Poe's creation—and with his literary precursors – he quotes Dante and Poe, hints less directly at Proust and Keats.

Humbert's predilection for nymphets signifies the absoluteness of love and at once the absence of the Other: the nymphet is the artistic, fictitious projection of a madman who in this love seeks to counter the ageing process, the temporality of being (cf. Gullette, "The Exile of Adulthood"). Art and the love of nymphets—here its literariness becomes evident—are both the aesthetic space of the experience of timelessness and of an absolute individuality (non-conventionality) that does not lose itself in the trivial common, *poshlust* (*Lolita*: 313).

Humbert's evocations of his nymphet invest her with artificial-photographic rather than physical-real qualities – Lolita is "a transcendental incarnation" (Albright, *Representation and the Imagination*: 205) of Humbert's artistic powers of imagination. The ideal of a nymphet's timelessness is expressed in *The Enchanter*:

[...] no matter what age she attained [...] her present age would always transpire through her metamorphoses, nourishing their translucent strata from its eternal fountainhead. (*The Enchanter*: 74)

In contrast to Beckett's characters who perceive the imagination of fictional characters as a coercion, as an error that deprives them of their original theme, i.e. of themselves, Humbert experiences the state of aesthetic ecstasy in which the truth of being reveals itself only through the medium of art.<sup>1</sup>

Again and again, however, the reality of the true Lolita intrudes into Humbert's imaginary world – Lolita, a vulgar, witty, prepubescent teenager, withdraws from Humbert's fictitious image: "Mentally, I found her to be a disgustingly conventional girl" (*Lolita*: 146).<sup>2</sup>

The timeless future that the nymphomane in *The Enchanter* hopes for turns out to be impossible in *Lolita*. For Humbert, *aesthetic bliss* (ibid.: 313) in the medium of art finally bears compensatory traces; the suspension of temporality can only be experienced in the aesthetic medium: "I am thinking of aurochs and angels, the secrets of durable pigments, prophetic sonnets, the refuge of art. And this is the only immortality you and I share, my Lolita" (ibid.: 307).

The transformation of literary conventions into the individuality of real art, as Nabokov demands in his aesthetics, takes here—in Humbert's resigned elegiac—its own legitimisation as its theme: "Oh my Lolita, I have only words to play with!" (ibid.: 32). The sensuality of the alliterations, the ironic ruptures, the stylistic mannerisms and the narrator's self-reflexivity and

<sup>1</sup> See about this Albright (*Representation and the Imagination*: 204).

<sup>2</sup> See also the following passage: "Oh, how she had changed! Her complexion was now that of any vulgar highschool girl who applies shared cosmetic with grubby fingers to an unwashed face [...]" (*Lolita*: 202)

his manifold literary allusions are employed for the individual artistic expression. Humbert's love affair with Lolita becomes self-reflection. In the medium of the novel, Humbert's love affair with Lolita becomes a reflection on art: "*Lolita*, if it is anything really, is the record of Mr Nabokov's love affair with the romantic novel, a today-unattainable literary object as short-lived of beauty as it is long of memory" (Hollander in Page, *The Critical Heritage*: 83).

Humbert is both prosecutor and defender of himself. His love in reflective recollection is therefore always ambivalent ("beautiful" and "beastly"). If it represents a state of aesthetic, orgasmic ecstasy which Nabokov himself describes as *aesthetic bliss* (*Lolita*: 313), it at the same time always bears, concealed in joke, a moment of incestuous guilt:

It had become gradually clear to my conventional Lolita during our singular and beastly cohabitation that even the most miserable of family lives was better than the parody of incest, which, in the long run was the best I could offer the waif. (ibid.: 286)

The antinomy of art, or beauty, and morals is the point of departure of interpretations that attempt to read *Lolita* psychologically (cf. Clancy, *The Novels of Vladimir Nabokov*: 107) or to interpret its moral theme (cf. Bader, *Crystal Land*: 59ff). This perspective is certainly supported both by the number of cage images that symbolise Humbert's entrapment in his own obsession,<sup>1</sup> and by Nabokov's hint at the inspiration for the novel (*Lolita*: 309).

In the overall context of the novel, it would be an illegitimate reduction to read the cage symbols (as an example that has been dealt with by literary criticism) exclusively as semantically unambiguous attributes to the hero's predicament. In fact, this novel's fundamental feature is that different semantic levels blend into each other as its elements—fable, metaphoric, etc.—are already polyvalently arranged. Thus, the image of the cage refers simultaneously to the novel's boundedness to the linguistic or literary form, to the narrator's solipsism as well as to the problem of perception in general.<sup>2</sup>

Sexual obsession and love as themes transform into a reflection on the possibility of perception and a self-reflection on the literary form. This occurs chiefly through the narrator's aestheticisation and fictionalisation of the characters of the novel.

The novel's constant associations of nymphomania with an obsessive misunderstanding of the other, or madness, as well as the demonstrative 'literarisation' of the subject matter through the many intertextual allusions hint at the problematic of perception and understanding as a problem of the blurring of the boundary between reality and fiction. The effect of the paralleling of sexual obsession and literariness—and in this I differ from Trilling's view—is not a semantic amplification of the theme but a *displacement to linguistic self-reflexivity* which contradicts a

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<sup>1</sup> See Bullock ("Humbert the Character, Humbert the Writer": 192).

<sup>2</sup> Lee speaks of the cage as a "dual metaphor of artistic form and human fate" (*Vladimir Nabokov*: 121); he does not realise though that language itself is thematised as the subject's prison.

prioritisation of a theme that is supported only by form: is it perhaps, inversely, Humbert's imprisonment in language, or the literary form, that produces the nymphomane's projection?

From the outset, the narrator repeatedly refers to his own unreliability—psychological instability and earlier nervous breakdowns are mentioned—; he himself diagnoses his own nymphomania, which he locates between increased aesthetic perceptiveness and madness. He himself knows about his inability to perceive of Lolita other than the projection of his desires. Humbert's narrative perspective, regarding his own obsession, is marked by a peculiar ambivalence of blindness and insight – uncontrollable, it is the subject of ironic narration and reflection and is transcended in an art that liberates love as aesthetic experience from the shackles of reality. It is therefore at no point clear whether the narration is (fictitious) reality or whether it has its origins in Humbert's artistic, maniac fantasy.<sup>1</sup> Humbert, the nymphomane and author of his defence paper, and Humbert, the artist, are identical.<sup>2</sup>

In the novel's second part, which narrates Humbert's trip across the US with Lolita and his later search for the runaway girl, the problematic of Humbert's individual distortion of perception shifts by transcending the personal narrator perspective into a *trans-individual*, i.e. an *epistemological* perspective. More specifically: the plot's quest structure and the thematic dominance of the *doppelgänger* and mirror imagery, question the insignificance of understanding. Structurally, this uncertainty is doubled by the shifting of the quest and *doppelgänger* theme from the plot into the narration level and then furthermore into the act of reception. Direct and indirect allusions to Quilty, the Haze family's dentist's cousin, author and producer of popular plays, adored by girls and Humbert's successor as Lolita's paedophilic lover, are scattered in the text. The strategy of Humbert's literary *doppelgänger* construction is characteristic for his wavering between blindness and insight, between the limitations of his personal narrator perspective and authorial sovereignty. On the one hand, he is stricken with blindness even toward his own *doppelgänger* – he never recognises him, in spite of clues from the people that they look alike; instead, he feels reminded of his Swiss uncle Gustave Trapp whom he is said to resemble. The reader indeed learns to understand Humbert's recollection of his uncle Trapp as indications of Quilty's presence. As Humbert, however, refers to Quilty (i.e. to Trapp's *doppel-*

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<sup>1</sup> The narrator's ambivalent position does therefore not allow for a temporal differentiation of the narration in reported reality and pure invention, as Tekiner suggests. According to her interpretation, everything that comes after the now married Lolita's letter is Humbert's pure fantasy who cannot cope with a reality without Lolita. This reading neglects, first, that the whole act of narration takes temporally place after the incisive act of Lolita's disappearance (Tekiner's version is not sound on its own psychological foundations), and, second, that the complete text stems from an unreliable author's pen.

<sup>2</sup> Bullock's conclusion is similar: "The question of the reality or non-reality of events in *Lolita* cannot be answered because, Humbert being an artist, it is irrelevant: the entire book, an artistic construct, is fantastic and realistic at once" ("Humbert the Character, Humbert the Writer": 201).

*gänger*) at one point when his significance for later happenings is still unknown,<sup>1</sup> this eludes the reader during a first reading.

Significant for this paper chase is that it is undecidable on both the plot level and the reception level whether the text produces these clues in anticipation of the subsequent plot or whether these are projections of the mad narrator or misled reader. It thus remains open whether Humbert shared a hotel with Quilty as often as he suggests.<sup>2</sup> Neither Humbert nor the reader can distinguish between mere similarities and identity, fiction and reality. Humbert and Lolita's silent pursuer might only be the maniacal hallucination—false double—of a paranoid Humbert: "I saw [...] a broad and thickish man of my age, somewhat resembling Gustave Trapp, a cousin of my father's in Switzerland" (*Lolita*: 216). It is only later that Humbert realises that "it was becoming abundantly clear that all those identical detectives in prismatically changing cars were figments of my persecution mania" (*ibid.*: 236).<sup>3</sup>

After the loss of Lolita this persecution mania changes into a paper chase whose reality outside Humbert's consciousness (does Quilty really leave hints for Humbert?) becomes doubtful (*cf. ibid.*: 246ff).

The supposed traces which the pursuer Humbert finds are of a rather literary quality. On the other hand, Quilty, being a man of letters himself, might be indeed the originator of this web of false traces:

The clues he left did not establish his identity but they reflected his personality, or at least a certain homogenous and striking personality; his genre, his type of humour—at its best at least—the tone of his brain, had affinities with my own. He mimed and mocked me. His allusions were definitely highbrow. He was well read. (*ibid.*: 247f)

At this point in my analysis it becomes understandable what Nabokov, in comparison with the modern predecessor *The Enchanter*, gains in *Lolita*: The self-irony of the personal narrator and the idiosyncratic exploding of the narrative form's logic could not have been realised in the medium of the personal narratorial perspective with its inherent perception limitations to the temporality and viewpoint of the acting character. An auctorial mode could devalue the penetration of the character level as pertaining to authorial omniscience. In *Lolita* the reader's uncertainty is generated exactly by the personal narration's traditional differentiation between past experience and the present narrative act (knowing the whole truth). Nabokov integrates this difference of perspectival blindness and the narrative act's sovereignty into the plot *and* keeps it at the same time in Humbert's narrative perspective. The narrative discourse and the narrated are separated by the same difference.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. the entry for 'Quilty' in the *Who Is Who in the Limelight* which Humbert looks up: 'Dolores' and 'Darkbloom' are among the titles of Quilty's plays (*Lolita*: 31).

<sup>2</sup> Already the first hotel scene contains Quilty allusions (*Lolita*: 117ff).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. also the scene on the tennis court (*Lolita*: 224f).

The principle of the novel's self-solution<sup>1</sup> falls prey to the logically inconsistent narrative perspective; its narrative paradigms—detective novel and crime-memories, confessions, love story, *Bildungsroman*, *Künstlerroman*<sup>2</sup> and autobiography—exist in *Lolita* merely as parodistic citations and confusing intertextual systems of reference. Indeed the various literary allusions function not as semantic emphasis but mislead the reader (like, for example, the *Carmen* citation which falsely suggests Humbert murdering Lolita). Chase, as well as narrative strategy, is, in fact, of such literary quality that the underlying story dissolves in the reception act. At the same time Humbert's quest is analogised through the literary and practical act of understanding:

The abundant labyrinths and doubles [...] suggest how in our reading of reality—in our quest for meaning—we seem, inevitably, to find ourselves (or our shadow selves). (Packman, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Structure of Literary Desire*: 18)

Through Humbert and Quilty's paper chase, incorporating Humbert's self-reflectively playful narrative attitude, *Lolita* becomes *metafiction*. The constitution of meaning points into nothingness, or in a Quixotic sense, only back to the questing subject itself.<sup>3</sup> The narrator searches for his last refuge in the self-determination of art.

### 2.3.3. *Pnin*

With its melancholic mood, the memories of a happy childhood in pre-Revolutionary Russia and the description of an isolated, homeless life in Western Europe and later in the New World, *Pnin* (first published in 1957) relates back to Nabokov's early Russian texts, especially to *Maschenka* (cf. Field, *Vladimir Nabokov: His Life in Art*: 140). Yet this novel with its autobiographically<sup>4</sup> coloured mixture of Russian and American experience, with its parodistic confron-

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. White ("The Value of Narrativity").

<sup>2</sup> Both German categories denote novels in which the protagonist undergoes a process of character development, the internal evolution often being mirrored by progress in, or recess from, the physical world and which usually ends with the protagonists' entry into the world. An example for the *Bildungsroman* would be Moritz's *Anton Reiser*, for the *Künstlerroman* Mann's *Tonio Kröger*.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Packman (*Vladimir Nabokov: The Structure of Literary Desire*: 42ff).

<sup>4</sup> The author's biography and that of his character is in central stations of life identical. Like Nabokov, *Pnin* represents the author's poetological position. Examples are *Pnin*'s love for Pushkin and his emphatic explications about *Anna Karenina* (*Pnin*: 122; 129f) which in both tenor and contents are remarkably similar to Nabokov's lectures on the novel (*Lectures on Russian Literature*: 141ff). *Pnin* and Nabokov's interest is in the details of the novel and in its temporal structure.

tation of both cultures is part of Nabokov's American phase.<sup>1</sup> Considering this dissertation's undertaking, the focus of interest will especially be on the construction of temporality.

Formally, the novel is, as literary critics unanimously stress, of peculiarly conventional design: the unity of narration is guaranteed by the embracing perspective of an ironic and distanced narrator. For the 'American' Nabokov an untypical lack of linguistic games and narrative self-reflexivity is most obvious, even if this narrator occasionally intrudes and interrupts the narrative flow.

Self-reflexivity of literature, in the sense of an immanent poetological reflection, which in *The Gift*, *Sebastian Knight* and *Lolita* take a central position, seems—in the tradition of the *Künstlerroman*—to be, in the shape of dialogues on literature, embedded in the novel's story line.

However, the *literariness*, i.e. the materiality of the signifiers, becomes in *Pnin* significant in another way as it flows, as a central construction instrument, into the creation of the fictitious world: the characters are evoked *metonymically* through their linguistic idiosyncrasies – language is their world; their individuality is that of their use of language. First of all, it is Pnin who fascinates with often imitated, but inimitable, ever wrong phonetics and grammar:

'Important lecture!' cried Pnin. 'What to do? It is a cata-stroph!' (*Pnin*: 17)

and

'My name is Timofey,' said Pnin, [...], 'Second syllable pronounced as 'muff', ahksent on the last syllable, 'ey' as in prey but a little more protracted [...]. (ibid.: 104)

Similar linguistic flaws ("I go now") also mark Professor Hagen, "who, though a lesser addict of the present tense than Pnin, also held it in favour" (ibid.: 170). Pnin's landlady Joan Clement generally appears with her apparently favourite word 'pathetic' in the novel. Lesser characters become visible as characters only insofar as they are linguistically present:

Desdemona, the old coloured charwoman, who came on Fridays and with whom at one time God had gossiped daily ("Desdemona,' the Lord would say to me, 'that man George is no good.'"), happened to glimpse Pnin [...]. (ibid.: 40)

and

Dr Eric Wind, a completely humourless pedant who believed that his English (acquired in a German high school) was impeccably pure [...] saying 'the pond' for the ocean [...]. (ibid.: 87)

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<sup>1</sup> Hazel Cohen therefore calls *Pnin* "a representative Nabokovian novel. Its geographical and emotional setting partakes of the dual experience of Russia and America, the experience of exile from the land of birth, and alienation in the country of adoption" ("Nabokov's *Pnin*: A Character in Flight From His Author": 57)

The strongest ties between the areas *individuality* and *language* can be found in the protagonist of the novel, Timofey Pnin.

Pnin has often been described as Nabokov's most endearing creation. Indeed, his helplessness and eccentricity are the continual source of the comic aspect of the novel. At the same time, the character is filled through and through with melancholy and sadness that at times trespasses on the borders of sentimentality:<sup>1</sup> for lonely, homeless Pnin<sup>2</sup> luck and happiness in life is unattainable. His failed marriage with the brashly impertinent Liza (a Nabokovian personification of *poshlust*-satire), episodically revealed, symbolises Pnin's fate to be used and then left by others (cf. *ibid.*: chap. II). Liza's visit in Waindell, which ultimately is merely about the financial support for Liza's son from her second marriage, condenses in one scene the motive for Pnin's solitude and his pain, but also the preservation of his integrity.<sup>3</sup> That exile is the basic condition of his existence is hinted at by the recollections of his childhood, woven into the narrative, in which happiness is always already imbued with loneliness (*ibid.*: 132). The loss of his mother tongue—a fate that Pnin shares with his creator—supports this symbolic field. Pnin is really only in his element in Russian surroundings, as the "The Pines" episode shows: in congenial society Pnin shines with his erudition on the temporal structure of *Anna Karenina* (*ibid.*: 129f).

This connection is furthered by Victor's daydreaming about a fictitious father as an 'exiled king' – *solus rex* (*ibid.*: 84f, 76),<sup>4</sup> which in turn has a semantic relation to Pnin being Victor's metaphorical 'water father' (*ibid.*: 55). (It is telling that the genius<sup>of</sup> the novel, Victor,<sup>5</sup> seems to be the only one who accepts and adores his father's personality.)

For Pnin life in the American exile is a continuous confrontation with strange 'natives' (*ibid.*: 87) and technical dangers – heaters, washing machines, cars (*ibid.*: 39f, 113). This present state gains immediacy of perceptible-concrete experience only in moments of sudden childhood memories, when past and present merge in the Pninian variant of a *memoire involuntaire*. This momentary suspension of irreversible, linear time in the subjective consciousness is the symptom of a heart condition, a feeling of life standing still at the threshold to death.

The illusion of temporal simultaneity (matching the metaphorical translucency of two semantic levels in the text)—Pnin's 'heart attacks' occur in the *twilight* of the setting sun—stems from a metonymic-textual relation between past and present, from a connecting piece (here the

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<sup>1</sup> Clancy considers the character and the novel as a whole "appallingly trite and sentimental in conception" (*The Novels of Vladimir Nabokov*: 17).

<sup>2</sup> See the account of his constant house moving (*Pnin*: 62ff).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. the account of his emotions during his ex-wife's visit (*Pnin*: 53ff).

<sup>4</sup> This, of course, anticipates *Pale Fire's* central theme.

<sup>5</sup> Victor with his intellectual superiority is in a way an underdeveloped predecessor to the protagonist of Nabokov's *Ada, or Ardor*, Van Veen.

location), which suddenly lets Pnin's subconscious glide into the dimension of the immediate past:

Pnin told Madame Shpolyanski he would follow her in a minute, and after she had gone he continued to sit in the first dusk of the arbor, his hands clasped on the croquet mallet he still held. Two kerosene lamps cosily illuminated the porch of the country house. Dr Pavel Antonovich Pnin, Timofey's father, an eye specialist, and Dr Yakov Grigorievich Belochkin, Mira's father, a paediatrician, could not be torn away from their chess game in a corner of the veranda [...] (ibid.: 132)<sup>1</sup>

The cited passage demonstrates the almost Proustian quality of Pnin's heart condition.<sup>2</sup> If Nabokov develops the simultaneity of past and present as an essentially ecstatic experience—the experience of the dissolving of the individual's boundaries—the thematisation of death catches up with this illusion: the past irrevocably gone, cut off from the present through death – Mira's death (his first love who was later murdered in a German concentration camp). In the beginning, the narrator comments ironically on this ambivalence of Pninian *memoire involuntaire*, the *de-limitation* of human existence: "It may be wonderful to mix with the landscape, but to do so is the end of the tender ego" (ibid.: 20).

In art, however, Pnin reflects during a conversation with a colleague that precedes his weakness in "The Pines", the linearity of time is suspended in favour of *poetic truth*; for Pnin, the temporal structure in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* is "the best example of relativity in literature" (ibid.: 130).

As in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* and in *Lolita*, Nabokov amplifies the central thematic aspect—in this case the suspension of linear time—with the narrative technique of encapsulation. In truth, however, this seeming *doubling* produces a *displacement* that banishes the Proustian-Nabokovian perception of time from the *real* experience to the realm of art – its sole residence. However, in a second step of deconstructive self-reference, *Pnin* with its ending undermines the idea of the poetic truth of art.

To substantiate my thesis, an analysis of the strategy, how Nabokov develops his notion of autonomous individuality—with the theme of suffering (linked through the psycho-pathological aspect of the *memoire involuntaire* with the aspect of time – the synchronicity of past and present)—is required. Solitude and suffering (in a tension between recollected fulfilled past and unhappy present) as a basic condition of being in exile makes Pnin a paradigmatic character of modernity – Nabokov's variant replaces the ever-homeless, wandering Jew of classical European modernity with an exiled Russian. At the same time, however, Pnin's condition is also the guarantee for an unconditional, absurdly heightened individuality.

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<sup>1</sup> For analogous incidents in the texts, see Nabokov (*Pnin*: 27; 68).

<sup>2</sup> Both Field (*Vladimir Nabokov: His Life in Art*: 38) and Maddox (*Vladimir Nabokov's Novels in English*: 114) refer to the relationship between Pnin's heart condition and Proust's *memoire involuntaire*.

In addition, Nabokov always regards solitude as the condition for the subject's *freedom* and *autonomy*: Pnin in fact resembles the small island in the middle of the enormous ocean on an advertising leaflet:

'Impossible,' said Pnin. 'So small island, moreover with palm, cannot exist in such big sea.'  
[...] 'Impossible isolation' (ibid.: 60)

The comparison of Pnin with the island is—like a Russian doll—in itself doubled again: the image shows an isolated palm-tree, a cast-away on the island, and the equally stranded ship's cat. Every detail represents symbolically in itself, once again, the whole, *mise en abyme*: unconditional solitude.

In *Pnin*, suffering seems indeed to be the last refuge of individuality. Therefore Pnin has to be (at least in Nabokov's universe) an anti-Communist,<sup>1</sup> therefore he also has to withdraw from the apparent erasure of individuality through the theory and practice of psychoanalysis<sup>2</sup> (as embodied by Liza and her second husband).

[...] 'it is nothing but a kind of microcosms of communism – all that is psychiatry,' rumbled Pnin [...]. 'Why not leave their private sorrows to people? Is sorrow not, one asks, the only thing in the world people really possess?' (ibid.: 52)

For Nabokov, as well as for his protagonist, psychoanalysis, derided with merciless parody and satire in all his novels, represents the disrespect for human individuality and creativity – incidentally, all the qualities that distinguish Pnin and his son Victor (ibid.: 84ff).

The ending of the novel condenses the close association of exile, suffering and individuality and turns it into the motive for both plot and, retrospectively, the narrative structure in that, at the end, only an escape into a new exile can guarantee Pnin's further autonomous existence.

Pnin's linguistic and behaviourist peculiarities are for his colleagues popular themes of parodistic imitations. These, however, do not do him justice. If his double existence as a campus legend is always hinted at—he is, for example, already known to the Clements before he becomes their tenant—, the novel ends almost with a confrontation between narrator, the parodied and the real Pnin. The narrator, a guest in the Cockerell's house and Pnin's successor at Waindell, experiences one <sup>of</sup> his host's imitations:

[...] Jack Cockerell impersonated Pnin to perfection. He went on for at least two hours, showing me everything – Pnin teaching, Pnin eating [...]. Finally the whole thing grew to be such a bore that I fell wondering if by some poetical vengeance this Pnin business had not become with Cockerell the kind of fatal obsession which substitutes its own victim for that of the initial ridicule. (ibid.: 187ff)

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Nabokov on the Soviet Union (*Strong Opinions*: 48, 50, 149).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Nabokov on psychoanalysis (*Strong Opinions*: 23f, 47).

This intrusive parody must leave a bad taste in the mouth, as it cannot do justice to Pnin's *inimitable* individuality. The plot-immanent parody lacks the sympathy which the narrator extends to Pnin. Notwithstanding the problematic narrative perspective (see below), Pnin evades, on the plot level, this ultimately violent definition – he escapes from the imitation and monopolisation by others. The, in this sense symbolic, ending of the novel—Pnin flees from a meeting with his pursuers Cockerell and the narrator—corresponds with strewn-in details which indicate the *false fictitiousness of imitation*: one part of Cockerell's parody is Pnin's tendency to lexical twists. Cockerell speaks about Pnin confusing 'shot' with 'fired' (ibid.: 188) when he talked about the loss of his position at Waindell. Indeed, this episode is narrated at an earlier stage in the text: "'So they have fired me,' said Pnin, clasping his hands and nodding his head" (ibid.: 170). The reiterative account of a scene from two perspectives indicates that the *true* (as far as we can trust the narrator) and the *imitated* Pnin do not correspond.

If the thematisation of the differences between character and its imitation on the plot level eventually works for the reconstruction of individuality that is opposed to the centrifugal forces of the world, then the novel's narrative structure reveals a counter-movement which demolishes exactly this construction. Plot and the explicitly unfolding thematic run counter to the novel's arrangement. This movement repeats, on another level, the *displacement*, the destabilisation of the textual semantic that was initiated by the *Chinese-box* encapsulation technique.

Even though narrative characteristics and artfulness are at the heart of most of literary criticism's concern with this novel, this *intratextual deconstructive function* has (as far as I know) not yet been properly worked out.<sup>1</sup>

The beginning of *Pnin* relegates the text's authorship to the traditional *unreliable narrator*. He remains—at first from an auctorial perspective—at an ironic and witty distance to the plot: "Now a secret must be imparted. Professor Pnin was on the wrong train. He was unaware of it [...]" (ibid.: 8). It follows a short, anecdote-like account of Pnin's academic surroundings and lecturing style, then another narrator's comment:

All of which does not alter the fact that Pnin was on the wrong train. How should we diagnose this sad case? Pnin, it should be particularly stressed, was anything but the type of that good-natured German platitude of the last century, *der zerstreute Professor*. (ibid.: 13)

Simultaneously, the narrator reveals himself, through allusions, as part of the novel's set of characters: he is an exile Russian and an academic, like Pnin, and he lives in the United States (ibid.: 11, 16). His academic-literary circle of friends, partly American, partly Russian, obviously overlaps with Pnin's (ibid.: 125). Everything indicates that the narrator is identical with

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<sup>1</sup> One possible exception is Richter's analysis of the contradictions in the narrative perspective ("Narrative Entrapment in *Pnin* and 'Signs and Symbols'": 424f).

Liza's unhappy love before her marriage with Pnin. Later, the narrator admits this explicitly (ibid.: 180ff).

At that moment in the final chapter in which the narrator is revealed as Pnin's successor at Waindell, i.e. when he appears as a simultaneously acting character in Pnin's life, the narrative level is eventually wholly incorporated into the plot level. It is only retrospectively that the narrator elucidates his identity:

My first recollection of Timofey Pnin is connected with a speck of coal dust that entered my left eye on a spring Sunday in 1911. It was one of those rough, gusty, and lustrous mornings in St. Petersburg [...] (ibid.: 174)

Nabokov's narrative twist is, as it were, a macro-structural *metalepsis*.<sup>1</sup> In review, the auctorial narrative perspective is 'depreciated' by the last chapter and unmasked as a pure *pose* of narrative omniscience and distance.<sup>2</sup> The criticism usually attempts to solve the narrative paradox—the contradictory narrative mode demonstrates the absurdity of the narrated, and *vice versa*—by assuming the existence of a further narrator who is situated higher up in the discourse hierarchy, or by differentiating between narrator and *implied author*:

The relationship between character and narrator is crucial in this novel, and is associated with the problems of identity and freedom. [...] Nabokov affords the author-narrator of *Pnin* these omniscient powers, only to expose him to an ironic reversal; for the narrator is as much a fiction of Nabokov's imagination as Pnin, he too is a "galley slave" who is at the mercy of the capricious literary games of his master, just as Nabokov himself has been at the mercy of the cruel tricks of fate. (Hazel Cohen, "Nabokov's *Pnin*: A Character in Flight": 62f).<sup>3</sup>

What is common to both approaches is that they attempt to rescue the *truth* of the narrated—in the sense of secured textual semantics—: in an inadmissible reversal the enhancement of Pnin's status as a stable centre of the text (as a direct representation of an implicit author, or second narrator) results from the devaluation of the pseudo-auctorial narrator ("dreadful inventor").<sup>4</sup> However, the logical problem of the narrator paradox remains unsolved: the alternating between two narrative voices cannot be detected precisely in the textual structure; passages that can be read as third party anecdotes on Pnin cannot be distinguished from other passages that render

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<sup>1</sup> Genette subsumes under the notion *metalepsis* all forms of transgressions of boundaries of narrative discourse levels. Among these is also the blurring of a framing narrative (*Narrative Discourse*: 234ff).

<sup>2</sup> From the point of view of narrative technique, the assumed *extradiegetic narrator* exposes himself as *intradiegetic*. Cf. Rimmon's presentation of narratological problems theoretical approaches to this problem ("Problems of Voice in Vladimir Nabokov's *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*": 103).

<sup>3</sup> Grabes speaks of "a blatant shifting in point of view between the restricted angle of vision imposed upon a dramatized narrator and the unlimited powers at the disposal of the omniscient narrator" (*Fictitious Biography*: 49).

<sup>4</sup> I agree with Maddox's argument (*Vladimir Nabokov's Novels in English*: 102).

tively, his homosexuality<sup>1</sup> which Nabokov's in semantics is a clear indication of mental pathology. At first, only few sentences suggest that Kinbote's self-assessment and other people's judgement differ widely. The air of his (trivial) clichéd self-presentation generally weakens the credibility of his statements: "My free and simple demeanor set everybody at ease" (ibid.: 19).

The reader may now expect an unorthodox relation between poem and commentary. What follows, however, is a megalomaniac's cryptic projection, going against all established rules of text exegesis, without any plausible relation to the poem – a theme that, so far, should be unique for the genre 'novel'.<sup>2</sup>

Kinbote expected from his neighbour, the poet Shade, a literary rendition of his own alleged fate: his abdication as king of Zembla following a Bolshevik revolution. Jealous and homosexual Kinbote then ascribes the fact that Shade never used his autobiographical details in his poem to the interventions of Shade's wife.

Kinbote's perception of the other—the startling strangeness of Shade's poem—is now deeply ambiguous: disappointed he realises in the moment of a first reading after Shade's violent death that not a single word is concerned with him; some of the variants, which allegedly represent the poem's original Zembla version before the female censorship, he admits to have written himself (ibid.: 62, 83f). In his commentary, on the other hand, he forces this connection to Zembla as the poem's object of reference.

The linking to the 'wrong' referent—Kinbote alias King Charles and his kingdom Zembla—eventually leads to questions regarding the editor's mental health. In a way, the design of the text forces the reader into a hermeneutic circle of understanding in that it requires the knowledge of the three parts—introduction, poem and commentary<sup>3</sup>—before the interpretation offered by Kinbote can be revised retrospectively, for which a second reading of the novel is necessary. From this, we can gather a layering of different, gradually coded levels of meaning: Kinbote is

- an exiled Zemblan and indeed the editor of Shade's poem,
- the exiled Zemblan king Charles the Beloved who has taken up a disguising identity,
- the mad exiled Botkin.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The commentary, whose subject is Kinbote's life, is full of allusions and indirect admissions of his homosexual inclination.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. the first reactions to *Pale Fire* in Page (*Nabokov: The Critical Heritage*).

<sup>3</sup> About the function of the index, see Donald B. Johnson ("The Index of Refraction in Nabokov's *Pale Fire*")

<sup>4</sup> On a fourth level, Donald B. Johnson locates Botkin as the author of Kinbote's as well as Shade's texts ("The Index of Refraction in Nabokov's *Pale Fire*": 46f). With this he neglects the multiple authorship that is textually (i.e. not by a higher level) given.

In the first case, the interpretation matches the superficial self-installation of Kinbote, in the second the 'true' meaning indicated by Kinbote himself. The third level of meaning decodes the two 'guidelines' given by Kinbote as products of the megalomaniac exile Russian Botkin, member of Wordsmith College, colleague and neighbour of John Shade the poet. This layering of possible realities is derived from the stacked-upon semantic levels of Kinbote's discourse. For now, my reading is thus not at all one which confronts Shade's poem with Kinbote's commentary rather, it follows the guidance offered by the text of Kinbote who, with other levels of meaning shining through, undermines himself, or who suggest simultaneously several semantic keys. Mary McCarthy explains this in her famous review rather vividly:

*Pale Fire* is not a detective story, though it includes one. Each plane or level in its shadow box proves to be a fake bottom; there is an infinite perspective digression, for the book is a book of mirrors. (McCarthy in Page, *Nabokov: The Critical Heritage*: 127)

The aesthetic strategy of the semantic self-dismantling therefore functions within Kinbote's commentary, i.e. within a single discourse, and not with a metonymic counter-point in the sequence of text passages, but with the *paradigmatically* arranged simultaneity of *literal* (conforming with the narrator) and *metaphorical* (interpreting the narrator) meanings:

At times I thought that only by self-destruction could I hope to cheat the relentlessly advancing assassins who were in me, in my eardrums, in my pulse, in my skull, rather than on that constant highway looping up over me and around my heart [...]. (*Pale Fire*: 79f)

Elsewhere Kinbote gives the account of a talk he had with Shade. According to this account, he had said to Shade "that all bearded Zemblans resembled one another – and that, in fact, the name Zembla is a corruption not of the Russian *zemlya*, but of Semblerland, a land of reflections, of 'resemblers' [...]" (ibid.: 208).

In the first passage the exiled king's peril through revolutionaries is blurred with the lunatic Botkin's paranoia: both semantic levels are evenly matched (the 'Kinbote equals Kinbote' interpretation is thus excluded). In the second passage the dominant semantic level of 'Kinbote equals Charles' is dismantled by the shade and mirror imagery and refers to the 'Kinbote equals Botkin' solution. Kinbote's last allusion finally prioritises, involuntarily, Kinbote's identification as Botkin:<sup>1</sup>

I may [...] cook up a stage play, an old-fashioned melodrama with three principles: a lunatic who intends to kill an imaginary king, another lunatic who imagines himself to be that king, and a distinguished old poet who stumbles by chance into the line of fire, and perishes in the clash between the two figments. (ibid.: 236)

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<sup>1</sup> The account of another meeting with Shade during which Kinbote suffers from a nervous breakdown, demonstrates Kinbote's mental condition (*Pale Fire*: 204).

Botkin's *Solus-Rex* fantasy is, according to McCarthy's on this level convincing interpretation, nothing but "a transliteration of a pederast's persecution complex, complicated by the 'normal' conspiracy-mania of a faculty room" (McCarthy in Page, *Nabokov: The Critical Heritage*: 127). Self-description and self-fiction mark the paradigmatic/symbolic space of Kinbote's discourse.

Projected onto the syntagmatic axis (i.e. the metonymic relation), the problem of self-misconception, which Kinbote's prose leaves to undecidability (in the sense of a semantic prioritisation), appears in the motif of the *false doppelgänger* which characterises both the relation between poem and commentary, and Kinbote and Shade. Both have in common the veiling of the metonymic relation, their contingency, which functions through the false assumption of similarity, or semantic equivalence. The ambiguity of the similarity between Kinbote, Botkin and Charles—"Resemblances are the shadows of differences" (*Pale Fire*: 207)—is repeated in the, by Kinbote merely imagined, congeniality with Shade.<sup>1</sup> His narration unintentionally reveals how little Shade sought a friendship with his neighbour and colleague. In fact, Shade and Kinbote are, and this shines—against his will—through Kinbote's words, perfectly *complementary characters*: Shade is realistic, agnostic, heterosexual, happily married, well-liked, stationary, English speaking, non-vegetarian; Kinbote is mad, (Zemblan) orthodox Christian, homosexual, pederast, solitary, exiled, Zemblan-speaking and vegetarian. The mirroring of the characters is kept up to the smallest details: Shade is right-handed whereas Kinbote is left-handed. This mirror-relationship is most obviously realised in Nabokov's chess motif, in which the enemies' draws stand inversely to each other. Simultaneously it also creates a connotative link to the *Solus-Rex* motif,<sup>2</sup> as McCarthy has demonstrated (McCarthy in Page, *Nabokov: His Critical Heritage*: 129f).

In the dimension of art, this principle of inversion corresponds with the completely disparate methods of *aesthetic imagination* (the authors only share the tendency toward autobiographical narcissism): the "imaginative sceptic" Shade is contrasted by the "quixotic self-mythographer" (Seidel, "Pale Fire and the Art of the Narrative Supplement": 844). Modesty in the autobiographical thematic and strict, neo-classicist form stand against the egocentric fabulation and the free form of Kinbote's fiction: "Shade is the master of restricted form, the heroic couplet, while the phantasmagoria of Kinbote requires the amplitude of prose" (Albright, *Representation and the Imagination*: 84).

Kinbote's relationship to Shade is similar to a sublimation of the *doppelgänger* constellation in *Despair*. That which Hermann's distorted perception assumes to be physical likeness, Kinbote believes to detect in a spiritual like-mindedness. Both characters share the fact that their *doppelgängers* are mere projections of their madness. The universe of both Hermann and Kin-

<sup>1</sup> Both were born on July 5 – a symbolic hint of fate, Kinbote believes.

<sup>2</sup> About the relation between *Pale Fire* and the precursor *Solus Rex*, see Field (*Vladimir Nabokov: His Life in Art*: 292)

bote is full of *doppelgängers* and mirror-characters.<sup>1</sup> Kinbote's substitution of differences with projected similarities determines his perception of the world in general. The false *doppelgänger* represents the imprisonment of the Nabokovian individual which in the act of perception is constantly thrown back onto the projections of its self. Kinbote's solipsism, comparable to V.'s addiction to symbols in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, is simply another form of the pathological *reference mania* that is the theme of Nabokov's cryptic narrative *Signs and Symbols*.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Kinbote resembles the lunatic in Nabokov's Gogol biography,

who constantly felt that all the parts of the landscape and movements of inanimate objects were a complex code of allusion to his own being, so that the whole universe seemed to him to be conversing about him by means of signs. (*Nikolai Gogol*: 64)

The idiosyncratic reading of Shade's poem is an expression of the editor's reference mania. His procedure in the commentary, to force the account of his alleged fate onto the text, is obviously absurd: not content related references but arbitrary associations, triggered by homophony or by an, in the original context, utterly irrelevant word is Kinbote's point of departure for his supplement.

If Shade's text, for example, reads:

A picture window flanked with fancy chairs. // TV's huge paperclip now shines instead // Of the stiff vane so often visited // By the naïve, the gauzy mockingbird [...] (*Pale Fire*: 30)

then Kinbote comments:

Line 62: often // Often, almost nightly, throughout the spring of 1959, I had feared for my life. (ibid.: 78)

Repeatedly, Kinbote takes Shade's autobiographical details as excuses to return to his own (imagined) biography in the commentary:

Line 130: I never bounced a ball or swung a bat // Frankly I too never excelled in soccer and cricket [...]. (ibid.: 96)

On a stylistic level, the net of reflected doublings, or doubled reflections,<sup>3</sup> correlates with the form of the (not complete) anagram (Botkin-Kinbote), the word-golf game<sup>4</sup> and the density of

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. McCarthy's detailed analysis (in Page, *Nabokov: The Critical Heritage*: 127).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. 2.3.1. The Real Life of Sebastian Knight.

<sup>3</sup> With regard to Shade, see lines 1 (*Pale Fire*: 29) and 183ff (ibid.: 34). In the case of Kinbote the reflections are too numerous to be indicated here.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Field (*Vladimir Nabokov: His Life in Art*: 313) and McCarthy (in Page, *Nabokov: The Critical Heritage*: 131).

mirror and crystal imagery<sup>1</sup>—the *leitmotif* of the *refracted shadow* and, last but not least, the hidden quote from Shakespeare ("Pale Fire")—, which link Kinbote's prose with Shade's poem by way of motive. The reflections' semantic polyvalence in the complete text exemplifies Kinbote's Zembla: as a land of shadows and reflections it embodies, with its reference to Pope,<sup>2</sup> the mode of (inter)textuality *and* interweaves the disparate semantics of the novel's two large textual units, i.e. de-limits them.

The fact that the characters in Kinbote's world seem psychologically implausible and unreal—Gradus embodies this fictional, textual character in its most extreme, most parodistic form<sup>3</sup>—results from their functionalisation for Nabokov's deconstructive scenario of a world of reflections whose *ur-image* (not only) Kinbote cannot determine. Textuality is a symptom of the impossibility of secured knowledge of the world, an expression of an origin-less world of images. The wealth of literary allusions<sup>4</sup> underlines this. The effect of a semantic exploding is not at all created by the logical paradoxes set up by the narrative strategy, but by the *surplus of symbolic meanings* which no longer dissolve in a semantic totality of signification.<sup>5</sup> Shade's poetic self-sufficiency forms, concerning the complete text, an only seemingly stable semantic counter pole.<sup>6</sup>

Even though an immanent idea of order (in the sense of a Christian teleology), aesthetically reflected by Shade's "metaphysical style" (Morton, *Vladimir Nabokov*: 105) and the references to Pope and Wordsworth, is subjectively relativised, Shade holds on to the idea of a post-Christian subjectivity comfortably at home in the cosmos. Intertextual references and reflection symbolism here take up—in opposition to Kinbote's prose—a *stabilising function* which ultimately is to confirm the self-consciousness of the I<sup>7</sup> (cf. *Pale Fire*, canto I, line 1; canto III, lines 806-829). This certainty of the self is preceded by the almost *Pninian* experience of a cosmic meaning at the moment of the threshold of death: Shade's vision of the "white fountain", symbol of his experience of a pre-existent cosmic meaning, which he feels he has to share with others – the similarity, however, is ironically revealed to be a typological mistake: the supposed

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<sup>1</sup> Gradus, for example, used to work in the glass industry.

<sup>2</sup> McCarthy was the first to point out the reference to Pope's *Essay on Man*, epistle 2 (in Page, *Nabokov: The Critical Heritage*: 128f).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. the description of Gradus (*Pale Fire*: 216). As Stegner interprets the psychopathic characters as merely an aesthetic tool which circumvents the trap of literary conventionality, she fails to realise the radical dimension of self-referentiality (*Escape Into Aesthetics*: 43) and thus fails to understand that it is exactly the unreal rendition of the characters which underlines their textual quality.

<sup>4</sup> Clancy counts intertextual references to not less than fifty authors (*The Novels of Vladimir Nabokov*: 126)!

<sup>5</sup> Cf., for example, Field's analysis of the symbolism around the name 'Gradus' (*Vladimir Nabokov: His Life in Art*: 302f).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. especially Albright (*Representation and the Imagination*: 82).

<sup>7</sup> Literary allusions as well as symbolic names, for Kinbote elements of semantic surplus, attempt to stress here the continuity with the literary tradition and the act of subjective signification. – About the significance of name, cf. Fields (*Vladimir Nabokov: His Life in Art*: 312).

"white fountain" about which the newspaper article was about was in this case in fact a "white mountain". For Shade this falsity of similarity—Shade's variant of a false *doppelgänger*—does not destroy his experience, he just defiantly converts it through the medium of art into a subjective autoproduction of meaning as a net of correlations. As the experience of world and artistic creation are identical through their relational net, Shade feels that his closely mimetic, autobiographical poetry is immediately legitimised.<sup>1</sup> And yet the two different forms of art of Kinbote and Shade are nothing else but the expressions of opposing interpretations of the experience of false similarity.

However, in the context of the novel, i.e. in the confrontation with Kinbote's texts, Shade's optimism is revealed as illusive. His certainty, "that I / Shall wake at six tomorrow [...]" (ibid.: 58), is with dramatic irony negated by his death: on the same day Shade becomes the innocent victim of a murderer who had actually wanted to kill Shade's absent neighbour, and Kinbote's landlord, Judge Goldsworth. (Kinbote, of course, believes that this is a failed attempt on his life by a Zemblan revolutionary assassin.)

The seemingly so mimetically calculated, unambiguous sentences escape in the confrontation with Kinbote's prose the meaning intended by the author Shade and explode the semantic world he designed. Shade's text is barely a *pure* text anymore considering that a false, parasitic commentary is wearing it out for the commentator's narcissistic excesses. The metonymic principle of contiguity—the commentary follows the text, and Gradus' intrusion into Shade's world leads to Kinbote—opens up the semantic peripheries of Shade's and Kinbote's worlds. The blending of the poem's and the commentary's motives matches the decomposition of Shade's meaning-construction by the plot. Thus a verse that stands out from its context links the two texts: "*Man's life as commentary to abstruse / Unfinished poem*" (ibid.: 57).

Another example of such a transgression of textual units of meaning is the technique of *synchronising*, which both Kinbote and Shade employ. Shade bestows his belief in an immanent, coded order of the universe with a lyrical expression in the *temporal analogising* of different strings of events—the parents' waiting at home in front of the television set and the daughter's suicide at the lake<sup>2</sup>—, sequences of events which in the perception, or in the meaning-generating act of the subject, are referred to the totality of *one* meaning. Temporal simultaneity is interpreted as an unit of meaning in the sense of the paradigmatic layering of literal and figural significance. The polyvalence of possible semantic levels of meaning, as they are extracted from the Kinbote-tale, are also on this lower discourse level the aesthetic principle.

Paradoxically, it is exactly Kinbote who does not find pleasure in Shade's forced rhetorical technique:

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<sup>1</sup> I am referring here to Albright's analysis of imaginary power (*Representation and the Imagination*: 82ff).

<sup>2</sup> See the verses 403ff in Shade's poem (*Pale Fire*: 41f).

Line 403-404: it's eight fifteen (And here time forked) // From here to line 474 two themes alternate in a synchronous arrangement [...]. The whole thing strikes me as too labored and long, especially since the synchronization device has been already worked to death by Flaubert and Joyce. (ibid.: 156).

Kinbote himself makes use of the same analogising technique, not, however, as an intentionally employed stylistic tool that is to express a specific outlook on life, but as a *compulsive* projection of two unconnected worlds. The absurdity of his endeavour to synchronise Gradus' (fictitious) *gradual* approaching with the genesis of Shade's poem—until the clash in the moment of the murder (cf. ibid.: 117; 183; 214)<sup>1</sup>— indicates the futility of his attempt.

Like the mirror symbolism, the temporal synchronisation too indicates the difference between Shade and Kinbote's aesthetic imagination. With Shade, it is anchored in the reality of autobiographic experience and recollection; in the case of <sup>the</sup> latter, reality is skipped and transformed into a fictional image of the subject's wishes and desires.

The novel's text as a totality of these two discourses now reflects the uncertainty of referentiality in both cases: the insight into Kinbote's questionable mimetic foundations always questions the seemingly centred-ness of meaning and referentiality in Shade's art. In Shade's case, too, the reader merely has access to the level of linguistic expression – there is nothing that guarantees this level's reference to an extra-linguistic truth. Just as Kinbote strives to force a meaningful whole by synchronising the (writing) movements of murderer and victim, the parallel passages in Shade's work might be a retrospective aesthetic stylisation. For the poet Shade, too, art is a means to surpass an un-artistic reality. The inviolate authorship of Shade is dubious anyway: Kinbote admits to have manipulated the variants according to his intentions (ibid.: 180); the present poem might very well be a victim of Kinbote's editorial filter.

The immanent reflection on two modes of literary creation does thus not allow for a prioritisation of Shade's mimetic art. For an interpretation of the entire text with its self-reflexive and non-mimetic imagination, it is decisive which status and which artistic quality is attributed to Shade's poem.<sup>2</sup> While the self-relativisation from its philosophical position is laid bare, i.e. is at the surface of the counter-point semantics, the current critical hypothesis about a deliberately bad or mediocre poem<sup>3</sup> does not do justice to its strange ambivalence. Shade is only to a limited degree a voice of Nabokov's aesthetic position.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, formally and concerning the aestheticisation of the mundane, Shade's text bears a resemblance to Nabokov's 'own' poetry.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In the commentary to canto IV it finally says: "Gradus is now much nearer to us in space and time than he was in the preceding cantos" (*Pale Fire*: 218).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Pearce's argument ("Nabokov's Black (Hole) Humor": 80f).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Stegner (*Escape Into Aesthetics*: 133).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Nabokov's careful avoidance of undisclosed autobiographical references.

<sup>5</sup> As an example, we can cite the fourth and fifth line of Nabokov's poem *A Discovery* (the lyrical 'I' describes the examination of a butterfly), which shows formal (the rhyming scheme) and thematic (aestheticisation of the worldly) parallels to Shade's poetry:

The hypothesis that Nabokov obviously takes the side of Kinbote's intertext, of his world-inventing art (Nabokov's following novel *Ada, or Ardor* might be seen to indicate such speculations), would include the assumption that Nabokov indirectly criticises his own poetic creations. It seems to be more plausible—and here I follow Ellen Pifer's argument (*Nabokov and the Novel*: 110f, 117)—to refrain from hypothesising about the author's intention in this regard.<sup>1</sup> The immanent poetological reflection on art forms in *Pale Fire* remains indeed ambivalent insofar as both texts are given subjective authenticity, yet not mimetic truth (if we disregard the possibility of a forging by the editor). The meaning-exploding movement of the Kinbote-tale and Shade's 'centric' fabrication of a meaning of life form the pendulum's movement of artistic self-reflection.

Ultimately, Shade's citation of the "pale fire" (*Pale Fire*: 57)<sup>2</sup> becomes only meaningful in the mutual reflection of poem and commentary. It serves as an image of non-mimetic art slipping away from the auctorial mimetic will (of both Shade and Kinbote). Simultaneously, it marks the disseminating force of the intertextual relation of the texts. Shade's poem remains, given over to the violating sudden death of the author as well as to the pen of a lunatic editor, (according to Kinbote undeliberately) a fragment, possibly tampered with; compared with Kinbote's wild prose it does indeed seem, with its modesty in both form and theme, boring – and *pale*: it is not Shade's work but Kinbote's frantic fable which absorbs the reader into a world of shadows and mirrors and even though we do not believe a word of it as his autobiography, Kinbote's novelistic narrative wins a willing suspension of disbelief.<sup>3</sup> If Shade, to remain with Shakespeare's imagery, grants the sun's light (reality), the pale fire (the reflection) of Kinbote's commentary unveils a light—the colour of Zembla—that overpowers the original source. No

"My needles have teased out its sculptured sex;  
corroded tissues could no longer hide  
that priceless mote now dimpling the convex  
and limpid teardrop of a lighted slide.

Smoothly a screw is turned; out of the mist  
two ambered hooks symmetrically slope,  
or scales like battledores of amethyst  
cross the charmed circle of the microscope" (*Poems and Problems*: 155).

<sup>1</sup> Many interpretations have given in to the pressure to have to decide in favour of *one* text: Stegner (*Escape Into Aesthetics*: 61f) and Pearce ("Nabokov's Black (Hole) Humor": 81), for example, assume the existence of an overarching narrative voice, while Bader (*Crystal Land*: 35) and Elisabeth Bruss (*Beautiful Theories: The Spectacle of Discourse in Contemporary Criticism*) determine Shade as the author of the whole text.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Shakespeare (*Timon of Athens*: IV, iii, 435-36).

<sup>3</sup> Couturier argues similarly: "the parallel is doubly relevant: Kinbote's writing shines with the glow borrowed from Shade's poetry [...]; besides, Kinbote lives in a world apart, like Timon in his cave" ("Nabokov's Performative Writing": 168).

supplement in the sense of an interpreting doubling of Kinbote's text, but *supplement as reflection*: a manifold mirroring which creates a distortion, a new image:

The poem, rather than a perfect mirror reflecting his Zemblan past, becomes for Kinbote a *deflection*, a scattering of signs and clues to be regathered in the commentary's autobiography. (O'Donnell, "Watermark": 389)

The novel *Pale Fire* plays with a disseminating inversion (a distorted mirror image) of the hierarchic opposition of the original literary work and its parasitic commentary. Origin and imitation, reality and reflection are inverted and eventually suspended as opposition:

The Shakespearean metaphor of 'Pale Fire' suggests that there is no 'authoritative' text in *Pale Fire*, no ultimate front or source of significance just as in nature there is no beginning to the cycle that transfers power from sun to moon to sea and back again. [...] So as Shade and Kinbote are sun and moon to each other, every text in *Pale Fire*—Foreword, Poem, Commentary, and Index—is supplementary to the others, a corruption and thieflike translation. (ibid.: 391)

The disseminating 'meaning' is created only in the *difference* between the novel's four parts, i.e. between foreword, poem, commentary and index.

In *Pale Fire*, the reflection on the representational power of art produces a self-reflexive text that constitutes the rules of its immanent significance for itself *out of itself*. The index in *Pale Fire*, as the paradigm of such an *autonomous play*, retraces in itself the non-referentiality of discourses:<sup>1</sup> several entries do not have a point of reference in the actual text, neither in the poem nor in the commentary, but refer exclusively to other entries;<sup>2</sup> the cross-references remind of a game Shade and Kinbote often play – word golf.<sup>3</sup> A mystery of the Kinbote-tale—the hiding place of the crown jewels—remains, if one follows the indications of the—literally non-referential—index, unsolved; according to hints made by Nabokov elsewhere (*Strong Opinions*: 92) it is their absence in the text that marks the place of their presence. The keyword "Kobaltana" appears explicitly only in the index, not in the text (*Pale Fire*: 243), and creates the gap in the chain "crown jewels"-"hiding place"-"Potamyk"-"Taynik" in the index.

The text semantics' state of uncertainty between absence and presence brings the reception act, i.e. the process of the constitution of meaning, to the surface of the text.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, it is here where the impossibility of the constitution of a final meaning is located: the synchro-

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<sup>1</sup> I am referring here to Donald B. Johnson's analysis of the function of the index ("The Index of Refraction in Nabokov's *Pale Fire*"). Cf. also Packman (*Vladimir Nabokov: The Structure of Literary Desire*: 89).

<sup>2</sup> Characters that are named in the text, but who are missing or contradictory (Botkin) in the index, or conversely, those who only exist in the index, support the suspicion that Kinbote is identical with Botkin. Botkin's presence is brought about by his 'conspicuous absence'.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. the entry 'word golf' in the index (*Pale Fire*: 248).

<sup>4</sup> I am referring here to Iser's reception aesthetics (*The Implied Reader; The Act of Reading*).

nous plurality of offered meanings on the syntagmatic level, the ruptures between the separate discourses and the layering of possible levels of reality in the paradigmatic dimension equal an infinite oscillation between a meaning and its negation in the moment of the realisation of another potential.

In the act of reading, the synchronicity of meanings is accomplished as the sequence of mutually conditioning *suspensions* of meanings, i.e. as a sequence of annulled and new constitutions of meanings.

The self-deflection of the meaning-generating act, which in *Pale Fire* appears merely as the negation of reference *and* of signification dimension, is further doubled by its thematisation in the text, namely by Kinbote's inability to actualise readily presented meanings in Shade's poem. *Pale Fire* shares this complete dismantling of the quest scheme—even the process of understanding becomes its victim—with many (post)modern texts. The scheme of the detective novel, paradigm of rationality and comprehensibility of the world, is brought up only to be entirely sabotaged.

The semantic labyrinth of interconnectedness reproduces, on a higher level, the "correlation theme" developed by John Shade, not, however, without subjecting it to a *displacement of meaning*.

The totality of meaning, which resembles the weaving pattern of a cosmic order, is opposed by the complete text's overly complex construction of cross-references and meaning exploding which cannot be conquered by an attempt at order-endowment of a Shadeian manner.

Indeed, the correlation model has been designed as the artist's last mimetic refuge. It is the vision of man's life as based on a network of inherent correlations: a systematic emphasis on the interrelatedness between diverse points in time, or a belief in the essential comprehensibility of human existence through its latent patterns.

Nabokov himself has described the aesthetic-mimetic quality of his autobiography similarly:

[...] the autonomous roller that pressed upon my life a certain intricate watermark whose unique design becomes visible when the lamp of art is made to shine through life's foolscap.  
(*Speak, Memory*: 15)

However, the extraordinary over-complexity of the novel's internal referential play, the multi-layeredness of the reflections which thematise the relationship of art and imagination, start a process of metafictionalisation which runs counter to the originally mimetic intention to imitate the world's complexity. The act of reading dictates the experience of the *non-constitutability of a consistent meaning*. Both Shade and Nabokov's perception of the correlation of single experiences and their focusing in the centre of subjective consciousness melt away in the plurality of voices and signifieds of the literary discourse (cf. Couturier, "Nabokov's Performative Writ-

ing": 177), whose "correlated patterns" eventually turn into pure *metafiction*.<sup>1</sup> The artistic subject, centre of Nabokov's aesthetics, dissolves itself in the act of the invention of an own world into textuality<sup>2</sup> – the text becomes de-subjectivised. Nabokov's *Pale Fire* is the paradigm of a novel that deconstructs its own aesthetic premises.

### 2.3.5. *Ada, or Ardor: A Family Chronicle*

Toward the end of his monumental (family) chronicle and document of the incestuous love affair of the siblings Ada and Van Veen, *Ada, or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* (first published in 1969), Nabokov lets his extraordinary protagonist Van say:

My purpose in writing my Texture of Time [...] is to purify my own notion of time. I wish to examine the essence of time, not its lapse [...]. I delight sensually in Time, in its stuff and spread, in the fall of its folds, [...]. I wish to do something about it; to indulge in a simulacrum of possession. (*Ada, or Ardour*: 536)

In Van Veen's essay on "The Texture of Time", we can find the essence of Nabokov's poetics compressed; it is determined by the apotheosis of *subjectivity* and *temporality*.

The novel *Ada, or Ardor* does indeed once again focus on Nabokov's central themes and motives: objective, pure reality on the one hand, and the subject's auctorial will to reign linguistically over an unattainable on the other. Other constituent themes, already known from his earlier fiction, link up to these; the idea of the (writing) subject's power of disposal over its past is central. The novel's numerous refracted self-reference has to be understood, however—and this poetic legitimisation is thematised more precisely here than in *Pale Fire*—as an approximation to the essence of time via the *multilinearity of visual recollection* and imagination in the subjective consciousness. The following interpretation will proceed exactly inversely to the novel's structure insofar as it takes its point of departure in the central theme—temporality—which in the novel gets only thematised at the very end. The analysis of the conception of time will help us to determine the status of subject and language.

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<sup>1</sup> This is why this, then, for Couturier is the paradigm of self-reflexive *performative writing*: "Nabokov's writing [...] is truly performative: since it does not claim to create a real world connected with, or similar to, our own 'real' one, but rather a completely imaginary world which exists only in the novel, the process of writing is the same one that produces the imaginary world, and the writing itself is the very flesh and blood of the fictitious characters" ("Nabokov's Performative Writing": 179). – Cf. also 2.3.5. *Ada, or Ardor*.

<sup>2</sup> With an analysis of traditional 'reality-producing' aspects, Couturier has demonstrated that categories of realism such as consistent space-time co-ordinates are relinquished ("Nabokov's Performative Writing": 167f).

Van Veen's novel-immanent discourse about temporality does not double with a discursive *mise en abyme* level of reality or of narration, but with the thematisation of the underlying poetics itself. Hence, "The Texture of Time" has to be seen as a reading instruction as well as an illustration of the novel itself. In the act of reading, however, this insight occurs relatively late – after 400 pages of semantic confusion.

"My aim was to compose a kind of novella in the form of a treatise on the Texture of Time [...], with illustrative metaphors gradually increasing, very gradually building up a logical love story, going from past to present, blossoming as a concrete story, and just as gradually reversing analogies and disintegrating again into bland abstraction." (ibid.: 562f)

In *Ada, or Ardor*, the epic, or more precisely the paradigm of the epic: the family chronicle (which it then is not) becomes the theme of the novel itself – the chronicle of the family history is simultaneously the chronicle of the history of the novel.<sup>1</sup>

Temporality—the genre's central point of reference since *Tristram Shandy*—becomes itself a theme. The novel "echoes the preoccupations and interrogations which accompanied the rise and growth of modern fiction" (Couturier, "Nabokov's Performative Writing": 196). Van's conception of time is discursively explicated in his essay, and at the same time it is the determining narrative means of design and thematic motif of his chronicle: the character's lineage of descent—the pedigree that no family chronicle can do without—is the translation of temporality (temporal succession) into an ideal semantic context of family-related identity. In the novel's genealogical dimension the motifs of the *doppelgänger* and of incest therefore acquire a temporal dimension in a negative, i.e. deconstructive, sense: incest connotes the negation of fatherhood, the suspension (or denial) of temporality in favour of an atemporal synchronicity. While traditional temporal priority is transformed into a metaphysical one—this would be the semantic basis of the patriarchy which deducts from a temporal (fatherhood) relation a hierarchic one<sup>2</sup>—, this principle of the "genealogical principle" survives in *Ada, or Ardor* only "in parodic disgrace", "as a family tree riddled with incestuous scandal" (Tobin, *Time and the Novel*: 133).

Van Veen's complete text is indeed, in spite of all nostalgia that acknowledges the past's ir-retrievability (cf. Tobin, *Time and the Novel*: 161ff), an attempt to create an artificial space of atemporality in the apotheosis of *love* and *life* – the Ardis of Ada and Van symbolises the deathlessness which Van throughout his life tries to keep up in the *negation of future* as temporal category. Therefore the death of the loving siblings Ada and Van at the end of the novel is only conceivable as a textual death: "One can even surmise that if our time-racked, flat-lying

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<sup>1</sup> Maddox calls *Ada, or Ardor* "a kind of burlesque history of the evolution of the form [of the novel]" (*Vladimir Nabokov's Novels in English*: 120).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Tobin (*Time and the Novel*: 10ff).

couple ever intended to die they would die, as it were, into the finished book [...]" (*Ada, or Ardor*: 587).<sup>1</sup>

Absolute, pure (i.e. distinguished or abstracted from the category of space, according to Van) experience of time is only possible as a difference between two successive states of consciousness, as *difference between the no-longer and the not-yet*. In an almost Derridean manner, Van utilises "gap" or "span" between two instants for his description of time: "Maybe the only thing that hints at a sense of Time is rhythm; not the recurrent beats of the rhythm but the gap between two such beats [...]: the Tender Interval" (ibid.: 538).<sup>2</sup>

Van deconstructs the understanding of a continuous flow of objective moments of presence; the past exists exclusively as an *accumulation of visual images* in the subjective consciousness. It is only in the form of the novel, which allows the exploding of 'false' temporal linearity, that temporality can be represented. The seeming chronology of the narrated story transforms into a non-linear dimension of the epic dimension; retrospectively, the assumption of objective chronology is deconstructed in favour of the 'true' subjective recollections of Van and Ada. What Van seeks to do is reveal *story time*, as opposed to *discourse time*, as ultimately false:

The Past, then, is a constant accumulation of images. It can be easily contemplated and listened to, tested and tasted at random, so that it ceases to mean the orderly alternation of linked events that it does in the large theoretical sense. (ibid.: 545)

With this, Nabokov's narrator Van invalidates the separation of narrative and story time that is fundamental to narrative theory.<sup>3</sup>

Temporality disappears in the *metaphysical* narrator subject Van Veen. Ironically, the epic structure which he utilises attains the character of a quote. While being the carrier of obsolete conceptions of the possibility of linear narration of time, it is already marked by the moment of its own exploding; especially in turning away from a mimetic poetics, the epic is for Nabokov the paradigm of a narrating subject, encompassing past and present, which controls the world through its narrative act. It is, according to Van Veen, exactly the possibility of temporal and spatial juxtaposition of the disparate, or of the non-chronological, which elevates the novel over other art forms (ibid.: 425).

Against the background of his poetics (as already developed in the preceding two chapters) which oscillates between the poles of deconstructive, non-mimetic textuality and unconditional

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Tobin (*Time and the Novel*: 135f). – Elsewhere Tobin criticises that by doing so, Nabokov is cutting off synchronicity from the erotic and death (ibid.: 162f).

<sup>2</sup> In the *Enchanter*, Nabokov uses an even stronger metaphor: "the hiatus of a syncope" (*The Enchanter*: 92), which then reminds of Cincinnatus' dilemma of expressing himself: "the pause, the hiatus, when the heart is like a feather..." (*Invitation to a Beheading*: 47).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Rimmon-Kenan's discussion of various narrative approaches (*Narrative Fiction*: 42ff).

subjective certainty of reality and truth, Nabokov does not start his family chronicle with an *original, authentic* beginning, but with a parody of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*:

'All happy families are more or less dissimilar; all unhappy ones are more or less alike,' says a great Russian writer in the beginning of a famous novel (*Anna Arkadievitich Karenina*, transfigured into English by [...]). (ibid.: 3)

The narrator hastens to add misleadingly that that which will follow does not relate to the preceding 'quote'. The chronicle of the family Veen not only increasingly focuses on predominantly one generation (Ada, Van and Lucette) but is also overshadowed by ambiguities and literary allusions. Right from the beginning, the narrative situation dismantles its own logical foundation: the observance of chronological succession. Equally distorted is the story's geography: Ada's and Van's fantastic home is a crossbreeding of America and pre-Revolutionary Russia.<sup>1</sup> Its inhabitants and personalities, such as "Dr. Froid" (ibid.: 27) and "Dr. Sig Heiler" (ibid.: 28)<sup>2</sup> are *doppelgänger* of real persons. Antiterra's time is temporally displaced: in 1884 there are already cars on Antiterra (cf. ibid.: 21). What the narrator of the *unreal story* links up here are images, recollections, recollections of recollections, and other people's recollections of recollections, etc, of different times.<sup>3</sup> "'Stupidly exaggerated,'" comments Van on a passage of the narrative. "'Also, I suppose, artificially recolored in the lamplight of later events as revealed still later'" (ibid.: 112).

*Ada, or Ardor* is not a faithful chronicle of events but, in the sense of Van's conception of temporality, of superimposed states of consciousness. What belong together are the elements which are consciously perceived of as a unity. *Simultaneity*, objectively immeasurable, is a *state of consciousness*: "Perceived events can be regarded as simultaneous when they belong to the same span of attention" (ibid.: 543).

Thus the actual past is controlled by the writing subject, and in this *Ada, or Ardor* can be distinguished from Proust's *A la recherche de temps perdu*, to which Nabokov's novel constantly recurs as an intertextual point of reference. It consists, however, of fragments of various temporal levels which conceal the originary event:

When, in the middle of the twentieth century, Van started to reconstruct his deepest past, he soon noticed that such details of his infancy as really mattered (for the special purpose the reconstruction pursued) could best be treated, could not seldom be *only* treated, when reappear-

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<sup>1</sup> See about this Nabokov (*Ada, or Ardor*: 222). – On Antiterra, 'Russia' and 'Estoty' are American provinces. The 'British Commonwealth' roughly equals the Great Britain of Terra, and 'Tertiary' resembles Terra's Africa. Antiterra's names of places are often slightly disfigured: there is, for example, 'Cannady'.

<sup>2</sup> About the semantic decoding of proper names and book titles, cf. Clancy (*The Novels of Vladimir Nabokov*: 149f).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. the account of present documents and recollection aids (*Ada, or Ardor*: 109).

ing at various later stages of his boyhood and youth, as sudden juxtapositions that revived the part while vivifying the whole. (ibid.: 31)

Literature's claim for truth or realism of the representation of the temporal experience is not relinquished, as in *Pale Fire*, and central focus of these temporal superpositions is the gifted narrator's quasi-metaphysical consciousness.<sup>1</sup> The novel's macro-structure now faithfully mirrors the altered perception of time in Van's life: as for Van and Ada in old age time seems to be 'flowing' faster, the textual structure imitates this 'speeding-up' process. While Van's first summer with Ada (1884) takes up approximately a quarter of the novel, the following four years until 1888 (in which Van does not see Ada until the last three months) another quarter, the remaining years up to Van's 97th birthday increase, in the dimension of narrative time,<sup>2</sup> their speed. Temporal and narrative structure are linked by the narrator's 'superhuman'<sup>3</sup> consciousness. Just as the past is always only the recollection of a shadow, never of the original image, the narrator's discourse is not centred but follows various tracks: Van appears as a personal as well as a hidden auctorial narrator<sup>4</sup> and, at times, the narrator's identity cannot be determined at all.<sup>5</sup> Tone and style change between poetic accounts of an Edenic state (of love),<sup>6</sup> and the narrator's patronising in the best eighteenth century manner<sup>7</sup> and his unwanted wittiness and stylisation<sup>8</sup> to pure literariness, does not allow the reader to draw conclusions about the 'real' events on the story level.

It is in contrast to Van's scientific and literary genius that he has to be regarded as an *unreliable author*. The story underlying the plot is not only concealed by the superimposition of various levels of recollection, but also by Van's weaknesses in memory and his confusion of art with reality. His analogising of a *real event* with a painting—his uncle's death is associated with a Hieronymus Bosch painting (ibid.: 343)<sup>9</sup>—places the discourse in the grey zone between description and unfathomable fabulation. Equally, the frequent literary allusions open up semantic

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<sup>1</sup> Van Veen is first described as a "prodigy child", later as a "genius".

<sup>2</sup> When Couturier claims that the novel *Ada, or Ardor* is marked by the fact that no story time underlies the narrative time, then he neglects exactly this speeding-up effect in the novel's macro-structure ("Nabokov's Performative Writing").

<sup>3</sup> Pifer speaks of a mythological "divine" of Van and Ada (*Nabokov and the Novel*: 136).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. especially the following passage: "Van, kneeling at the picture window, watched the inflamed eye of the cigar recede and vanish. The multiple departure... Take over // That multiple departure really presented a marvellous sight against the pale star-dusted firmament of practically subtropical Ardis [...]" (*Ada, or Ardor*: 116).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. the following passage: "[...] She [Ada] turned to him and the next moment he [Van] was kissing her bare shoulder, and pushing against her like that soldier behind in the queue. // First time I hear about him. I thought Old Mr Nymphobotomos had been my only predecessor. // Last Spring. Trip to town. French theatre matinée. Mademoiselle had mislaid the tickets [...]" (*Ada, or Ardor*: 117).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Van's description of Ada (*Ada, or Ardor*: 199).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. for example "our lovers" (*Ada, or Ardor*: 161).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Nabokov (*Ada, or Ardor*: 220).

<sup>9</sup> Bader compares the whole novel with a Bosch scene (*Crystal Land*: 147).

fields which, as the narrator knows, distort the picture of the actual events. Van challenges the reader's already strained memory by incorporating mistakes into the narrative logic that signal his disinterest in portraying the true happenings. Details of the events are irrelevant in comparison with the intensity of recollected visual images. Indeed, that which is only truly present is the narrator's consciousness (and that of his commentator Ada) which almost shifts the siblings' story into the background:

The status of both narrators and characters in *Ada* is somewhat reminiscent of that of Marcel and his characters in *Remembrance of things past*. Van and Ada are not dummies; they may be the only true people we have met in Nabokov's novels, if by 'true' we mean truly present in our imagination. Still, we never know for sure which Van (and which Ada) is actually present in any given page of the novel; young Van who seduced, or was seduced by, Ada, or the old man who is writing his memoirs with the help of nonagenarian Ada, and embellishing the past in the process? (Couturier, "Nabokov's Performative Writing": 166)

But the story itself does not slip from Van's hands as much as language might elude him. Concerning his self-perception, Van loosens his grip over his discourse only insofar as the ruptures and implausibilities remain products of his 'genius' creativity. It is not for nothing that he, like Nabokov, prefers the novel to the drama as it is only the written word that completely retains the author's intention,<sup>1</sup> and like his author Van suffers from insomnia and fear of loss of consciousness that would rob him of his control over the events.<sup>2</sup>

The shifting of plot and fable, of objective and subjective time into a grey zone with indistinct boundaries corresponds with the dual geography of the novel's world: time and geography of Antiterra, Ada's and Van's planet, is a 'shadow' of the planet of the lunatics, Terra.<sup>3</sup> Van displays an interest in his mad patients' pathological problem of consciousness who talk about the planet Terra. Terra refers to a reflected and distorted image of Antiterra, which then again, due to its name's semantics, defines itself as an Other—*Antiterra*—to the other planet. For the reader who uses his own planet's conventions of time and geography, Antiterra appears more unreal than the planet of the lunatics, i.e. his own Terra. As the seemingly real, the world of *Ada, or Ardor* dismantles itself. In this connection, Albright speaks of "a kind of shock of disillusion, the sabotage on which Auden dotes, [which] can be made up by piling two self-canceling illusions on each other" (*Representation and the Imagination*: 75).

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<sup>1</sup> About this it says: "For him the written word existed only in its abstract purity, in its unrepeatable appeal to an equally ideal mind. It belonged solely to its creator and could not be spoken or enacted by mime (as Ada insisted) without letting the deadly stab of another's mind destroy the artist in the very lair of his art. A written play was intrinsically superior to the best performance of it, even if directed by the author himself" (*Ada, or Ardor*: 425).

<sup>2</sup> Ross reads Nabokov's "insomnia and fear of loss of consciousness entailed by sleep" as symptom of his "preoccupation with control" (in special Nabokov issue of *Modern Fiction Studies*: 46f).

<sup>3</sup> cf. description of Terra (*Ada, or Ardor*: 17f).

The destruction of realistic time-space co-ordinates, enabled by this doubling, is repeated in the incestuous relationship of Ada and Van Veen which represents the culmination of Nabokov's series of *doppelgänger*. (*Ada, or Ardor* is indeed populated with a whole colony of *doppelgänger*.<sup>1</sup>)

The supposed cousins, both gifted with fantastic intelligence, literary talent and near-immortality, are in reality brother and sister.<sup>2</sup> With their congenial personalities, they closely resemble each other. But as siblings, they are not *identical*, but mirror images of each other: their incestuous love is the metafictional expression of the mutual attraction of both the identical *and* the other:

Doubling, in other words, need not be considered as a psychological process but may be viewed as a literary technique that serves to foreground the ontological separation of self and other. (Boyd, *The Reflexive Novel*: 153)

The text parallels this dialectic of difference and identity, the naïve unity of lovers and the knowledge of incest-taboo, with the biblical Exodus: Ardis in the year 1884 is for Ada and Van the Garden of Eden. Their expulsion from the paradise begins with the violation of the incest-taboo, which is explicitly compared with the children eating from the 'forbidden tree' (*Ada, or Ardor*: 94ff).

In the siblings' erotic paradise there is neither death nor moral; Lucette, Ada and Van's half-sister, whose love Van can never return even though—and because—she is Ada's double,<sup>3</sup> is the victim of this  $\neq$  unconditionality. More colourful than her sister (*ibid.*: 478ff) and yet fading next to her,<sup>4</sup> she does not find space in this deathless space. Eventually it is the lovers' thoughtlessness in repeatedly rejecting Lucette that drives her then to find solace only in death.<sup>5</sup>

To the expulsion from paradise belongs that only through the confrontation with Lucette's death, the atemporal, amoral condition of the 'aesthetic bliss' is finally caught by moral reflection and guilt. The return to a second Eden, Ada and Van's unification in old age, becomes only possible against the background of their reflections, in which ageing and the loss of beauty (*ibid.*: 567ff)—the irreversibility of objective time—are brought back from exile. The progression of time proves Van's idealistic conception of time as untenable.

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. Demon and Daniel Veen, Marina and Aqua, Demon and Dan with their identical birthday, Lucette and Aqua both succumb to madness, commit suicide and wear the same clothes. The *doppelgänger* motif is continued in the sequence of Ada's real or imaginary lovers who Van can distinguish.

<sup>2</sup> In both literal as well as metaphorical meaning, Van calls Ada his "pale fatal sister".

<sup>3</sup> The short erotic scene between Ada, Van and Lucette (*Ada, or Ardor*: 418) lives off the play of its multiple doublings. Cf. also Couturier's interpretation of the intertextual dimension of this scene ("Nabokov's Performative Writing": 171f).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Van's visual description of Lucette's physical charms and the sudden disruption in his perception when he watches a film together with Lucette – in which Ada features as the worst actress (*Ada, or Ardor*: 478ff).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. the threesome scene (*Ada, or Ardor*: 420).

The visual recollection of an originary paradise—"Ada, our arbor and ardors"—remains not as such but is literarised with the help of literary quotes<sup>1</sup> and is self-reflexively refracted and freed from its uniqueness. It is a symptom of this reflexive mediacy that Van's (and Nabokov's) descriptive narrations repeatedly take up their images from the outer form of language itself. Like their author, the characters have the ability of synaesthetic perception, like that of the "colored hearing" and the visual imagination of letters, etc.<sup>2</sup>

It is no coincidence that Ada excels in Scrabble (cf. *ibid.*: 174ff, 298ff)<sup>3</sup> and other word games such as word golf—her anagrammatic combinations consist of Nabokovian motives such as "Insect-Incest" (*ibid.*: 85)—as well as invented shadow games, in which for the children shadows are autonomous figures; physical laws are suspended for these games. If the shadow game is the spatial variant of the *doppelgänger* motif, then it simultaneously anticipates Van's later developed theory of subjectivity transcending time and space:

[Their shadow game] prefigures Van's concept of the composite self moving freely and multidirectionally through time as opposed to the conventional image of the self moving through linear, one-way time (Domerque, "Vladimir Nabokov: Mixed Doubles": 286)

The thematic link of incest and language games forms the meeting point of Ada's paralleling of sexuality and art, or of textual self-referentiality;<sup>4</sup> with its wealth of parodies and (true or false) literary allusions,<sup>5</sup> especially to the motif of incest in the literary tradition,<sup>6</sup> the novel contains itself in itself again as the history of the genre. *Ada, or Ardor*, as much as its characters, is at the same time also a double, a shadow, of the novel: here we find united the subgenera of the family chronicle, the 'novel of love and marriage', the pornographic novel, the utopian novel and the *Künstlerroman* with references to Nabokov's earlier novels, and, last but not least, a misleading synopsis of the novel in the blurb. Nabokov lets Lucette's governess, Mlle Larivière, write a narrative of supreme triviality which is then incorporated into the novel (*Ada, or Ardor*: 83f).

<sup>1</sup> In Van's poem that would be quotes from Chateaubriand (*Ada, or Ardor*: 138f).

<sup>2</sup> E.g. the following images: "She lay curved away from him, with nothing beyond the opened parenthesis" (*Ada, or Ardor*: 416), and "her special V monogrammed silver spoon" (*ibid.*: 47). – for a more detailed analysis of the letter motif, see Donald B. Johnson ("The Index of Refraction").

<sup>3</sup> According to Donald B. Johnson, the Scrabble motif works as "a physical playing field for the expression of Lucette's sexual obsession with Van" ("Scrabble Games in *Ada*": 293).

<sup>4</sup> McHale demonstrates that the paralleling of art and sexuality is a typical phenomenon of the post-modern. As further example he names Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and *Mantissa* (McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*: 222).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. the following passages (*Ada, or Ardor*: 350, 61).

<sup>6</sup> Donald B. Johnson names as references Pushkin (*Eugene Onegin*: XIV), Chateaubriand and Byron (*Manfred and Cain*) (*Worlds in Regression*: 132ff).

Intertextual references, only partly decoded in the fictitious commentary of Vivian Darkbloom,<sup>1</sup> parodies of literary traditions and clichés all superimpose the 'actual' elements of the narrative discourse, which in itself is already staggered, and fray it to disappearance. The following passages will prove this as exemplary demonstrations:

They found a convenient clearing, and the principals, pistols in hand, faced each other at a distance of some thirty paces, in the kind of single combat described by most Russian novelists and by practically all Russian novelists of gentle birth. (ibid.: 310)

And:

[...] but for yet another immortal moment they stood embraced in the hushed avenue, enjoying, as they had never enjoyed before, the 'happy-forever' feeling at the end of never-ending fairy tales // That's a beautiful passage, Van. I shall cry all night (late interpolations). // At last a sunbeam struck, Ada, her mouth and chin shone drenched with his poor futile kisses [...]. (ibid.: 287)

Thus the text's lack of origin is thematised by the text's character's lack of origin through their reflections on their recollections, and is built thematically into the discourse and is then once more caught up in the novel's self-reflexive structure. However, the blending of art and life is not at all only to be found on the level of characters and events, as Stegner wrongly suggests (*Escape Into Aesthetics*: 133).

The superimposition and incongruity of most diverse multilingual and fragmentary textual elements produces a *plurality of narrative voices* which show neither an original plot nor a coherent self-reflexive discourse. This exploding of auctorial control exceeds Ada's 'marginal notes' on Van's manuscript, the instructions for the secretary, annotations by the editor and Darkbloom's most dubious commentary/index. Parody and intertextuality turn this novel almost into the centre of its genre: i.e. of all texts of the literary tradition that have found entrance as quotes into the novel:

All these micro-*récits* hold their share of truth, but no simple one can claim to be the real one, except perhaps the hypothetical *récit* that would combine all the imaginable micro-*récits*. There being not end to the process, we can safely conclude that the final *récit* will never be written and therefore does not exist; all we can do is to enjoy the fragmentary or fictitious one at our disposal: it is the only reliable fact in the here and now of the book. (Couturier, "Nabokov's Performative Writing": 177)

The fact that the plurality of discourses in *Ada, or Ardor* is not ordered, or staggered, destabilises the text's referential semantics:

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<sup>1</sup> Detailed analyses of the literary references can be found, among others, in Bader (*Crystal Land*: chap. 7).

We are forced to admit that everything in the novel, whether it be reported speech, an interior monologue, a dialogue, a description, or an authorial note, is on the same level of writing, and that the question of authority, of spoken vs. written scenes, of showing vs. telling, of *haplè diègèsis* versus *mimesis*, is irrelevant in the context of Nabokov's novels. (ibid.: 177)

Couturier's interpretation of the non-hierarchic textual structure lays bare two aspects: first, the plurality of *récits*, i.e. narrative discourse elements, makes a distinction between story and narrative level impossible. Second, the over-complexity of the (inter)textual game erases the paradigm of epic realism, i.e. that the plot is the skeleton of the story, and leads the text to a level of multiple narrative discourses of a general artificiality and fictitiousness. Equally, the coordinates of time and space, which in *Ada, or Ardor* exist only as imaginary constructs, cannot constitute a realistic, 'objective' reality (ibid.: 160).<sup>1</sup> The dissolving of the 'plot' vs. 'story' differentiation projects the abandonment of mimetic language in the formal dimension of the novel. Language in *Ada, or Ardor* does not represent a world, but *is* this world: *Ada, or Ardor*, a positively non-mimetic text, materialises what Couturier, following the terminology of speech act theory, calls *performative writing* (ibid.: 157), i.e. a text that produces its own reality but which does without a 'worldly' logic for the narrated story (ibid.: 171).

Nabokov's doctrine of a realism "within its own terms",<sup>2</sup> the truth of art whose complex referential play imitates the indiscernibility of objective reality, creates in *Ada, or Ardor* a new, fully aestheticised, multilingual world which can only be a shadow or distorted mirror image—*simulacrum*—of the real one.<sup>3</sup> Simultaneously, the immanently intertextual *play* of the discourses, the multitude of references, motives and themes, but also the images, achieves a degree of complexity that can no longer be controlled by the reader (and by the author to whom the authorship of the complete text cannot be attributed), i.e. it becomes semantically impossible to decode the text. The novel resembles the complicated code of Ada and Van's love letters which, in the end, they themselves can no longer read.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, the degree of intertextual literariness can barely be surpassed: *Ada, or Ardor* is the end of a poetic development that leads to *unreadability*, to pure disseminating self-reflexivity. With this, the novel has attained the controversial attribute of either an intelligent slip or a masterpiece. The former is a judgement that fails to realise the inevitability of this poetic evolution. The complete aestheticisation of the novel world is the end of Nabokov's conception of realism that finally deconstructs itself.

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<sup>1</sup> An exception is Nabokov's handling of the 'speeding-up' effect mentioned above.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Nabokov's essay on Anna Karenina (in *Lectures on Russian Literature*: 142, 163).

<sup>3</sup> Inversely, Maddox believes that the function of the visual in Nabokov's language is the clear distinction of reality and art (*Vladimir Nabokov's Novels in English*: 114). She is forced to neglect Nabokov's aestheticisation of 'world' in her interpretation, though.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Nabokov (*Ada, or Ardor*: 160ff).

### III.

## CONCLUSION

*For it is precisely that original ground of all harmony of the subjective and the objective, which in its original form could only be presented by the intellektuelle Anschauung, that is completely removed from the subjective by the work of art and becomes quite objective.*

—FRIEDRICH SCHLEGEL  
*Werke* III, p. 628.

### 3.1. DECONSTRUCTION IN THE NOVEL

My main hypothesis was that there are *specifically literary forms of (self)deconstruction* in texts, and it is my belief that this claim can only be substantiated with an extensive confrontation of deconstructive theory with the aesthetics and novels of, in this dissertation, Nabokov. I am aware that the presentation of the theoretical side might produce "loose ends" which I was not able to connect to Nabokov's aesthetic practice, but it seems to be the price for a fully developed background. To me, this appears to be the only possible way to exceed some academics' rather vague and abstract analogies that imply, but never really attempt to explain, the difficult relation between the theory of deconstruction and self-deconstructive literary texts.

Now the confrontation of theory and literary practice, which is indeed aimed at the *differentiality of the aesthetic*, is in the sense of deconstruction already a methodological contradiction, as deconstruction denies the possibility of distinguishing types of discourses, hence also of theoretical/analytical and literary discourse. In the critical representation of its argument I could, however, demonstrate that deconstruction itself cannot maintain the levelling of the differences of discourse types: de Man attributes to literature a special, self-deconstructive, allegorical reflection on its *unreadability*; Derrida contemplates specific poetological aspects of Mallarmé's modern *literature*.<sup>1</sup> Thus 'above' the basic assumption that a systematic discourse typology is not legitimate, deconstruction operates with a heuristic *unstable quasi-differentiation*. Similarly, my interpretation of Nabokov's novels did not have to recur to a pre-deconstructive, essentialist conception of literature, but assumed the existence of specific narrative conventions that are inherent to the diegetic. These are by no means constant but subject to the semantic flow's *displacement* in the intertextual space. Without having to refer to a fixed narratological model, these narrative conventions were detectable insofar as the texts explicitly established their pre-texts (which deconstruction requires for its operation<sup>2</sup>). The 'presencing' of the pre-text in the novel serves to displace the convention; the parody produces a (partially) identical duplicate of the model, or to speak in an Derridean manner, a *minimal remainder* which guarantees identification in order to immediately pass it on to the process of semantic displacement.

The analysis' perspective on self-reflexivity and its narrative realisation in the novels resulted from the discussion with deconstruction. Against the background of my methodological considerations about the possibility of its transferral to literary theory, I tentatively drew the silhouette of a self-deconstructive novel (cf. 1.2.4. The Aesthetic Code):

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<sup>1</sup> I noted in the margins that the other Yale Critics work anyway with a considerably more conventional model of literature. Indeed, they lack the methodological rigidity that is required for the reflection on the possibility of deconstruction's transferral to the theory of literature.

<sup>2</sup> Derrida's (and de Man's) texts are always readings of other texts.

- The theoretically claimed levelling of discourse types—i.e. the differentiation of analytical and literary discourse as well as of object language and metalanguage—can be created deconstructively with the utilisation of narrative structures.
- The result of such a dismantling is the exploding of meaning, as it becomes impossible to distinguish plot and story, narrator and events, reflection and narration, etc.
- The self-deconstruction of meaning, which is not equal to the revealing of the discourse's fictitiousness (cf. 1.3.3. Metafiction and Postmodernism), can be reflexively caught up with again on the semantic surface, and can thus be thematised. Derrida, too, seeks a representation of his quasi-transcendental structures in the semantic dimension of the text (cf. 1.1.8. Text and Textuality and 1.2.1. Definitions).

As Nabokov holds on to the autonomy of an intentionally writing subject, he cannot discursively thematise the dissemination of meaning, of language that slips away from his narrators' control. It is only in *Pale Fire*, his most self-deconstructive novel, that the writing subject's authoritative power is questioned.

The reading of the self-presentation of the writing subject in Nabokov's autobiography (*Speak, Memory*) and of his protagonist Van Veen (*Ada, or Ardor*) marks the contradictory space of the non-referential play: Nabokov's texts read like an aesthetic affirmation of the deconstructive postulation that the freedom of the speaking subject is revealed in non-referentiality (cf. 1.1.5. Iterability of the Sign and Grammar of the Text and 1.2.3. Literariness of Discourse). This means that Nabokov seeks, in spite of—or because of—his high language-philosophic level of reflection, the authenticity of the self within language.

Nabokov's discursively formulated ideas do not reach the subversive structures of his own text and are eventually deconstructed by them. Paradoxically, it is Nabokov's incompetent narrators who lead to a discourse about writing: the question 'who speaks language' could not be answered, in spite of the author's self-conception, more clearly than by Nabokov's texts. Thus, Boyd's formulation of the central question of the self-reflexive novel is affirmed:

Perhaps the great theme of the reflexive novel is provided by the question 'Who is writing?' As efforts at self-definition, such novels provide a commentary on *all* writing. (Boyd, *The Reflexive Novel*: 39)

Nabokov's texts constitute the literary model of a semantically uncontrollable text deconstructively overtaking its own author; the plurality of voices that do not have access to their texts' meaning in *Pale Fire* and *Ada, or Ardor* represent an extreme novelistic form of self-deconstructive literature. For Nabokov, language and the discourse's fictitiousness seem to be

the guarantors for an omnipotent, autonomous author (or narrator) subject. That this presumably text-controlling subject is eventually lost in the textuality of its discourses is not the product of the thematisation of the language problematic, but rather the effect of the (semantically overly complex) textual structure's inherent dynamism.<sup>1</sup> Nabokov's reflection on the non-referentiality of discourse draws increasingly nearer to the deconstructive notion of language; he appropriates the meaninglessness of language as a creative force for textual worlds. For him, the non-referentiality of the aesthetic game is the ultimate attestation of authentic individuality. The deconstructive other side of the coin of his linguistic world of reflections, whose foundations are lost in the complexity of its fabulation, is that subjectivity finally reveals itself as a textual effect. With the last, highest confirmation of its self, Nabokov's narrator subject throws itself into the abyss of textuality, as the analysis of his late novels has demonstrated.

Thus Vladimir Nabokov cannot be clearly situated *either* on the side of the idealistic thinking of presence *or* beyond the deconstructive threshold. What is so appealing about his novels is their inherent battle of the contradiction between the affirmation of non-reference as guarantor of autonomous subjectivity and the exploding of the text-immanent subject. This effect is based in the *structure* of his narrative strategy – which brings about the dissemination of meaning.

To a certain degree, Nabokov's novels repudiate a general description, or condensation, as—and in this lies deconstruction's critique of structuralism and narratology—the narrative strategy is always an individual one. Therefore, in the interpretative part of this dissertation I gave preference to a thematic perspective over specific analyses of singular texts: it was only thus that I could pay respect to the structural idiosyncrasies. Moreover, it was only thus that the novels' *immanent logic of development* could be retraced.

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<sup>1</sup> Packman's interpretation of the textual effects is similar: "The text is dislodged from the individual author and located in relation to an intertextual network" (*Vladimir Nabokov: The Structure of Literary Desire*: 15). Packman fails to realise, however, that Nabokov's emphatic insistence on the artistic subject's autonomy as the centre of the text is in stark contrast to his textual practice.

### 3.2. SELF-DECONSTRUCTION AS POSTMODERNISM IN LITERATURE?

The critical investigation of deconstructive theory discloses the methodological problem: to what extent the deconstructive postulation of a constant, epoch-transgressing self-reflexivity of all texts is in contrast to the novel-theoretical differentiations with regard to historical genre types and the distinction of self-reflexive and other forms. Hypothetically, it was argued that although a systematic, formal, all-embracing typology of forms is impossible, we can still attest a modern-postmodern increase of self-reflexivity/metafiction.

I am referring here to my—even if somewhat vague—sketching of postmodern codes (cf. 1.3.3. Metafiction and Postmodernism). As points of convergence of the disparate theories of postmodernism, we named the following: the loss of the extra-discursive possibility of a discourse's legitimisation, the abandonment of the representational model of language and the critical questioning of the category *history*. Applied to literature, the first two aspects appear to be *becoming autonomous* (which in itself would not be postmodern) and *becoming problematic* of the literary discourse and of language in general. With such scepticism toward language and the writing subject, the mimetic literature converts necessarily to *self-reflexivity*.

Characteristic of postmodern metafiction must be the *structural* (and semantic) *reflection* of the texts that their self-reflexive movement does not produce a semantic totality. In postmodernism, the circle cannot be closed anymore (cf. 1.3.3. Metafiction and Postmodernism). The specifically *postmodern* is thus the question of being conscious of the fact that the traditional conventions and semantic directions no longer adequately apply as such. Such a *self-reflexive* de-centring, or dismantling, is contained within the notion of *self-deconstruction*; Nabokov's novels are examples of such a strategy. Structural characteristics of their exploding of textual identity are, as the analysis of the texts revealed, the *distorted reflections* and the image of the *spiral*.

The strategic techniques serving the texts' self-deconstruction were already summarised; with the deconstruction of subjectivity and meaning, Nabokov therefore displays his affinity to (post)modern thinking. In his works, exactly those categories which, according to the theory of postmodernism and deconstruction, have become problematic prove to be no longer legitimate. Simultaneously, with this ascription to a historical and theoretical (or language philosophical) frame, a metacritical dimensions opens up. The utility value of the notion *aesthetic postmodernism* as a historical one is insufficient: even though Nabokov can be read as an advocate of postmodernism, his late work is equally deeply rooted in modernism. It is this fundamental predicament in the differentiation of postmodernism and modernism which makes, for example, Samuel Beckett for Hassan a purely postmodern author, while inversely for Adorno, the very same author is a prime example for modernism.

In contrast to Beckett, though, Nabokov, whose deconstructive development is probably less stringent and radical, celebrates exactly the postmodern freedom brought about by the loss of centre and origin about which Beckett complains. Nabokov's historical situation thus would seem at first easy. The model of phases in his work that was briefly sketched in the beginning of this dissertation is plausible; the intensely modern affirmation of the subject, inflated to a genius, however, ruptures this image.

In itself, Nabokov's work carries elements of modernism as well as of postmodernism and from a historical point of view, he would have to be regarded as an author on the threshold. This ambivalence is apparent in his development which, although it displays a radicalisation of deconstructive theories and increases its postmodern aspects, will always remain indistinct in this respect. The testing of the notion *postmodernism* with a paradigmatic example of Nabokov's texts thus confirms the doubts which the criticism's lack of coherence in the adoption of the notion already implied (cf. 1.3.3. Metafiction and Postmodernism). Modernism and postmodernism cannot be separated from each other; however, they gain a heuristic value insofar as they offer a way of describing the rift of texts, their dialectic of affirmation and negation, or of self-transcendence. Such a dialectic pairing resembles Lyotard's aesthetics<sup>1</sup> but is rather outdated as a literary-historical phase model: *postmodernism is modernism in the phase of self-criticism and self-transcendence*. The notion is not autonomous, because it cannot be thought of without the notion of modernism; it characterises identity and difference: "Postmodernism is an extension of Modernism. Extending something, however, can mean crossing its boundaries, changing its identity" (Nägele, "Modernism and Postmodernism": 7).

This view does not deny that specifically postmodern elements can be detected in Nabokov's texts. For the *becoming-problematic*, or the loss of legitimisation of history, which places Nabokov on this side of the threshold to postmodernism, he is an example that can determine a possible field of self-reflexive self-dismantling. Two dimensions of his critique, resulting from the textual analysis, have to be attested: first, the all-encompassing fictionalisation; second, the exploding of history.

History appears, like a novelistic affirmation of its textualisation in deconstruction, only as façade of plot. With this, Nabokov follows (or, maybe, initiates) the predominant theme of literary postmodernism: one should remember the formerly less radical thematisation of history's fictitiousness; its displacement into the metalinguistic-discursive domain in the dialogues and scenes of the so-called *campus novel*; the emphasis of the virtuality and contingency of history in the contemporary British novel;<sup>2</sup> the hidden thematisation of fictitiousness' functioning through the analogisation with other semantic fields; the calculated displacement of the text into

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. 1.3.3. Metafiction and Postmodernism.

<sup>2</sup> E.g. in Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*.

a mythical/unreal time or world that breaks with the understanding of a real time.<sup>1</sup> Nabokov links the fictionalisation—in the widest sense—of history with a problematisation of temporality as a worldly and narrative category. *Ada, or Ardor*, for example, displays a timeless space of a purely narrative temporality through the blending of the temporal differentiation into the plurality of narrative discourses, which allows only for the narrator discourses' own temporal dimension.<sup>2</sup> The elimination of *story time* marks the transition to pure metafiction.

Nabokov dismantles aesthetically the principle of the self-explaining history which formerly was the centre of a post-Hegelian modernism: almost all his texts utilise the scheme of the detective novel, or of the quest, in a parodistic-deconstructionist sense. If one differentiates the different types of the 'anti-detective-novel',<sup>3</sup> then Nabokov works with *deconstructive* (e.g. in *Pale Fire*) but even more so with *metafictional* types in which the solution is suspended. To put it differently: Nabokov parallels the narrative structure with the reception act (*Pale Fire* and *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*). The thematic and narrative motif of the research, of the *paper chase*, is projected onto the author-text-reader relationship in an act of an all-encompassing textualisation (*Lolita*).<sup>4</sup> In the latter novel, the doubling techniques that explode the semantic identity are particularly deconstructively virulent.<sup>5</sup> In fact, it seems that Nabokov defines a semantic field of the literary postmodernism with his parodistic variations of exactly that literary pattern that represents the possibility of explanation, i.e. of a *decoding*, of a story.<sup>6</sup>

The place of deconstruction is the narrator's consciousness. In Nabokov, the dissolving of the meaning-generating principle of story does not appear as a reflexive dissolving but as a *play* with the difference of narrated past and narrative present – the Russian novel *Despair* would be the last, probably most telling example of a Nabokovian text that still (playfully-parodistically) confirms the principle of self-explanation: it is only in the moment in which narrative present and narrated story become one that the key to understanding the story is revealed to the reader (the flaw in the perfect crime). Artistic inspiration to the conclusion of the story, the choice of the novel's title *Despair* and the narrator's self-explanation of the happenings all become identical in the temporal analogisation. In *Lolita*, the personal narrator holds sway over his story only under deconstructive conditions: without the narrator developing his story truly open toward the future, its conclusion is reflected upon only as a disseminating factor, as a semantic gap; the

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Pynchon's *Gravity Rainbow*.

<sup>2</sup> The aspect of temporality is a typical example for Nabokov's idealistic-deconstructionist ambivalence. Turned (by Van Veen) as a category of consciousness into the last affirmation of subjectivity, the temporal dissemination eventually ruptures the discourse's unity.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. 1.3.3. Metafiction and Postmodernism.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. a similar analogising technique of story and reception act in Calvino (*If a Traveller on a Winter's Night*).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. especially the *doppelgänger* constellation in *Despair* and, even more pronounced, the Humbert-Quilty constellation in *Lolita*.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. also Eco's narrative strategy (*The Name of The Rose*).

possibly mad narrator displaces, as the analysis of the narrative strategy revealed, openness into the reception act by consciously keeping the reader in the dark, or by misleading him.

It is thus no coincidence that Nabokov can generally forego techniques of 'presentic' representations of consciousness, especially that of the personal narrator perspective, in favour of perspectives, or situations, in which the intrusion of reflection is revealed (auctorial and personal perspectives that are subsequently *de-limited* offer this opportunity – in Nabokov's work that would be the textualisation of the narrative consciousness (cf. 2.3.4. *Pale Fire* and 2.3.5. *Ada, or Ardor*).

Regarding temporality, the moment of reflection requires the differentiation and the subsequent levelling of *story* and *plot time*, but not their mimetic concealment in synchronicity. This aesthetic option's significance (and calculation) can be found in Nabokov's reworking of the novella *The Enchanter*, whose personal narrative perspective hinders all narrative self-reflection, to the narratively complex *Lolita* with its highly self-reflective narrator Humbert. The reflection on language, too, becomes only aesthetically credible as Nabokov transcends subject-bound world experience and narrative perspective.

It appears that Nabokov's self-dismantling, working with structural doublings and displacements, finds its conclusion in the aesthetic dilemma of the necessity to infinitely increase complexity. In the sense of real radicalisation and innovation, *Ada, or Ardor* can hardly be surpassed in radical textuality (not regarding *Finnegan's Wake*, which was already written). In fact, Nabokov himself obviously realised himself that *Ada, or Ardor* could not be exceeded stylistically: the narrative strategy's complexity of his last two texts, *Transparent Things* and *Look at the Harlequins!* is, in comparison, radically reduced; the multitude of metafictional elements, i.e. the play of imagination, is relinquished for a simple deletion of the real world. Once more, the subjective consciousness attempts, in an inversion of the conventional mimetic world-relations, to become *transparent* in an "inverse Platonism", the centre of the totality of meaning. In *Look at the Harlequins!* the intertextual references to the author's own previous works seem less autobiographical than self-plagiarism. The abstract simplicity of metafictional narration in Nabokov's last two texts does not reduce the impression that he had little new to say after *Ada, or Ardor*. In this sense, Nabokov's work reaches a logical, but fatal end in its own self-deconstruction.

### 3.3. DECONSTRUCTION AS INTERPRETATION THEORY

I read Nabokov's texts as examples of self-deconstructive literature—or Derridean *literature*. The perspective toward language critique, subject critique and text critique in the self-reflection of the novels was only to a certain degree determined by the theoretical frame of deconstruction. The thematic structures were supplied by the texts and put into relation to the theory. Simultaneously, my interpretative practice showed the impossibility<sup>of</sup> refraining from using phenomenal structures in the demonstration of *literature*, as demanded by Gasché: deconstruction of meaning functions, at least this is the result of my reading, only through an *interplay* of structures before any thematisation.

The interpretative part of this dissertation was also devised as a reflection on the theory, or the testing of its applicability in literary criticism. A problem was that here the exploding of the identity of meaning was only anchored in the text; especially the double exploding of unity, or identity, of meaning in the text *and* in the perceiving subject cannot be represented in the written form of the first reception act and in the subsequent reflected textual analysis – how then could the texts' dissemination and the perceiving subject's instability be demonstrated? Derrida attempts to achieve this with a highly subjective and 'leaping' reading practice that operates with multiple associations – and which then becomes almost unreadable. In this work, I refrained from such a deconstructive style as *simulacrum* of the disseminating literary pre-text in favour of clarity in my argument – at the cost that, first, I had to generally neglect the pragmatic dimension because otherwise the de-limitation of the problem of non-identity of the perceiving subject would have been untenable, and, second, that I indirectly presumed a stable perspective for the textual analysis. This was unavoidable for my endeavour, and I am aware of it. The paradox of self-deconstructive literature is indeed that it can, or has to be, demonstrated *non-deconstructivistically*. The theory has to remain reciprocal to the literary text and only as long as the poetic text (or its author) remains indebted to an intentional (polyvalent) totality of meaning, can he be read *against the grain*. However, a deconstructive reading loses its critical function and becomes superfluous where the text itself is deconstructing meaning. More precisely: every assumption of a *text's self-deconstruction* is a hermeneutic presumption of *meaning* (and this is, paradoxically also its negation) which the analysis of the novel then demonstrates *non-deconstructivistically*. If the interpretation pays attention to the impossibility of an attainable meaning, then this occurs within the frame of a discursive-coherent, critical argument. It is only from a stable perspective that deconstruction can be located *within* texts themselves. (On another metalevel, this would then prompt the question, whether it is still correct to be talking about *deconstructive* literature.) If literary texts accomplish in themselves a deconstruction—and this was my hypothesis for Nabokov's novels—then deconstruction cannot aid as a theory for interpretation but as language philosophical and subject philosophical theory horizon to which the literature-immanent deconstructive strategy can refer.

To what extent can we now make *general* statements about the possible utility value of deconstruction as an interpretation theory?

In his discussion of the specifically German problems (due to hermeneutics) with the reception of deconstruction, Gumbrecht suggests to adopt the American theory of pragmatism and to utilise deconstruction only when necessary (with regard to my dissertation, that would be especially for the interpretation of (post)modern texts). If one sees literary criticism's task as both to initiate extra-critical readings and to legitimise literature critically, then deconstruction could be useful for literary criticism in aiding to perform these assignments (Gumbrecht, "Who is Afraid of Deconstruction?": 110). A second supporting role, according to Gumbrecht, could be the insight into the impossibility of scientific truth which can be used so that "der besondere Stellenwert von 'Kunst' und 'Literatur' als Kommunikationsraum genutzt wird, innerhalb dessen Erfahrungen eben *nicht* hinterfragbar sind" (ibid.: 112).<sup>1</sup> Thus, he does not try to legitimise deconstruction as a theory but rather attempts to deal with it as an unavoidable phenomenon by incorporating it pragmatically.

However, it seems to me that with this suggestion Gumbrecht does not deal sufficiently with deconstruction. A deconstructive argument for bringing reading in line with interpretation has little credibility if one does not accept the theory's premises (and this seems to be the case for most hermeneuticists); to use literature as a subjectivist 'deconstructive special space' is itself based on a thinking (the differentiation of discourse types) which deconstruction attacks.

The fact that Gumbrecht's option for a pluralistic-pragmatic appropriation of deconstruction (following the Anglo-American model) has little utility value indicates to a certain degree, however, the impossibility of successfully applying the theory in literary criticism: to restrict deconstruction to a few special fields of literary criticism contradicts its claim of universality.

The interpretative part of my dissertation makes use of deconstruction's mode of thinking in this way. Retrospectively, the results and the theoretical, or metacritical, perspective justified such an approach. I had to bear in mind, though, that by doing so I had left the ground of deconstruction. What is required is the distinction of deconstruction as an interpretation technique and deconstruction as a literary theory; this is what is missing in Frank and Gumbrecht's works. The confrontation of the theory of deconstruction with Nabokov's self-deconstructive novels revealed that the application of a deconstructive reading is especially problematic for (post)modern texts. It is my assumption that it is more conducive for non-deconstructive texts to be read against the grain with a deconstructive interpretation technique, i.e. against the intended meaning. (A realist novel of the nineteenth century could therefore be read deconstructively as its semantics attempt to be 'stable'.) The literature of modernism and postmodernism, in con-

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<sup>1</sup> "the special status of 'art' and 'literature' is utilised as a communicative space within which experiences simply *cannot* be questioned. [my translation]"

him *mimetically correct*.<sup>1</sup> Fundamentally, we have to expand—in contrast to prevailing interpretations—the doubt about the truthfulness of the narrated to include the whole character of Pnin, or the complete plot: the truth of his experience in the fusion of past and present is—at least the reader has to consider this possibility as well—a fictional construct, a pure invention of the author. In a spiralling self-reference, the circular structure of the novel re-interprets the seemingly conventionally narrated into the *narrative of many narratives*. The last word is not given to the narrator but to Cockerell who refers back to the first scene of the novel:

'And now,' he said, 'I am going to tell you the story of Pnin rising to address the Cremona Woman's Club and discovering he had brought the wrong lecture.' (*Pnin*: 191)

For the reader, it is impossible to determine the source of this knowledge on Pnin's inner life. Even though Pnin, on the plot level, escapes from the narrator's auctorial tyranny (he refuses to work under him in the department and departs without having met the narrator), his *autonomy* is finally eclipsed by the novel's narrative structure: the individual's freedom in suffering is an invention of the narrator-author whose mimetic truthfulness is questionable.

In Nabokov's *Pnin* the *structural ambivalence* of the text produces the deconstruction of exactly that thematic complex which the text seeks to positively develop. The indeterminacy of the *source of deconstructive consciousness* interdicts the conclusion of an author-intended self-deconstruction. Indeed, Nabokov's autobiographical writings and aesthetic texts, in which the autocratic pose of individualism is postulated as the prime principle of artistic creation, suggest rather the opposite: in *Pnin*, Nabokov's epitome of artistic individuality for the first time becomes the victim of its own creativity.

#### 2.3.4. *Pale Fire*

The deconstruction of a consistent perspective, as demonstrated by the narrative situation in *Pnin*, determines as aesthetic principle the macro-structure of the novel *Pale Fire*. Here the meaning-exploding—disseminating—moment exceeds the narrator's unreliability or its perspectival limitations. The separation into two narrative voices in *Pnin* re-appears in *Pale Fire* much more radically as a madman's discourse<sup>2</sup> and as multiple, *transindividual authorship* to which recourse as a source of intentional speaking and intended meaning is no longer possible. The

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<sup>1</sup> Field concludes that Pnin "as a serious character" could be distinguished from Pnin "the campus 'character'" (*Vladimir Nabokov: His Life in Art*: 135f).

<sup>2</sup> Maddox sees in the theme of madness the influence of Gogol's *Diary of a Madman* (*Vladimir Nabokov's Novels in English*: 21).

thus produced extreme self-referentiality of the text has occupied literary criticism like no other of Nabokov's novels.<sup>1</sup> The following analysis will demonstrate that psychological and thematic interpretations, especially concerning the Kinbote character, have to fail, as these critical works usually do not recognise the importance of the text's metafictional dimension.<sup>2</sup>

In its external form, *Pale Fire* barely follows the norm of the genre 'novel': the text consists of four parts, a foreword by the editor Kinbote, a neo-classicist poem of 999 verses (the 1000th was cut short by the arrival of Shade's murderer, Gradus), a commentary and an index. This does not even suggest fictitiousness – the novel pretends to be a literary critical edition of Shade's last work. It is obvious that Nabokov, who was simultaneously working on his monumental translation and commentary of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, works with the parody of philological conventions.

The apparent choice of genre induces us to anticipate a referential relationship between the four parts of the novel; but as early as in the foreword such expectations are disappointed. Already on the first page the biographical atmosphere is interrupted by the editor's textual intrusion:

[...] he [Shade] preserved the date of actual creation rather than that of second or third thoughts. *There is a very loud amusement park right in front of my present lodgings.* [my emphasis] (*Pale Fire*: 13)

The present report about the poem's genesis and the simultaneously developing friendship between the poet and the subsequent editor Kinbote increases the impression of the editor's incompetence to abstract both himself and his writing position. He narrates irrelevant details of his rather one-sided friendship with Shade that have little or nothing to do with the poem itself (*ibid.*: 23ff). At the same time, he claims—consciously breaking with the aesthetic premises of Shade (and of Nabokov)—the priority of interpretation over the literary work of art:

Let me state without my notes Shade's text simply has no human reality at all [...]. To this statement my dear poet would probably not have subscribed, but, for better or worse, it is the commentator who has the last word. (*ibid.*: 25).

However, in the foreword, Kinbote's madness is still relatively coded. The account of his talk with the head of the department, Professor Nattochdag (*ibid.*: 22) reveals, at least retrospec-

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<sup>1</sup> The interpretations of *Pale Fire* are so numerous and different that I cannot repeat them here in detail.

<sup>2</sup> Pifer (*Nabokov and the Novel*) and Clancy (*The Novels of Vladimir Nabokov*) present two interpretative approaches that attempt to do the novel justice within their own mimetic concepts of literature. Clancy's accusation of aesthetic inconsistency of the Kinbote character can only be voiced as long as the interpreter assumes both a possibility of a clear distinction and a realistic design of the narrators and their texts; however, the novel's self-reflexive character, which also becomes evident in the blurring of characters, contradicts this view vehemently.

trast, requires a *discursively coherent analysis* of their deconstructive, disseminating aesthetic strategy and not a deconstructive reading. Although, or maybe exactly because, (post)modern texts undoubtedly show a special affinity to deconstruction (and this was demonstrated by Nabokov's metafiction), it is in exactly these texts that deconstruction's limitations as an interpretation theory are revealed.

The legitimacy of a deconstructive reading practice can therefore only be justified by the literary text's degree of aesthetic or discursive self-reflexivity. A rigidly deconstructive interpretation, however, carries the peculiar mark that it usually loses its insight through intertextual liquefaction: for one, because it can hardly be perceived and also maybe because in practice the deconstructive discourse tends to forget the pre-text's *differentia specifica*, i.e. its individuality, through the metaphysical patterns of thought and their involuntary self-dissolution. It is the paradoxical consequence of a text theory which emphatically rejects static and general semantic models that in its readings it most often discovers variations of the same (the thinking of presence, the illusion of mimetics, etc.). As the pre-text is only a *pre-text*, with which then the deconstructive discourse unfolds itself, it never comes clearly to the fore. The choice of literary criticism, if one thinks deconstruction through, does not exist: it is between a limited deconstruction which therefore is always vulnerable to the charge that it falls behind its own theory, and a radical deconstructive practice which lacks a critical motivation, an epistemological interest – which always assumes a belief in the general *possibility* of insight.



## REFERENCE



## DECONSTRUCTION

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# INDEX

- Abrams, M. H., 27, 40, 58  
Adams, Robert M., 80  
Adorno, Theodor W., 17, 134  
Albright, Daniel, 96, 111, 113, 114, 124  
Allen, Walter, 89, 96  
Alter, Robert, 67, 68, 70, 86  
Amis, Kingsley, 95  
Appel, Alfred Jr., 85, 86, 95
- Bader, Julia, 90, 93, 97, 116, 123, 127  
Barthes, Roland, 19, 22, 37, 59  
Bloom, Harold, 43, 44, 45, 56  
Blumenberg, Hans, 55  
Bové, Paul, 43, 45, 49, 50, 58  
Boyd, Michael, 66, 67, 68, 69, 70, 71, 92, 93, 94, 125, 132  
Bruss, Elisabeth, 116  
Bruss, Paul, 81  
Bullock, Richard H., 97, 98  
Butler, Christopher, 27, 40, 47, 55, 59
- Calvino, Italo, 6, 136  
Clancy, Laurie, 80, 91, 97, 102, 108, 113, 122  
Cohen, Hazel, 101, 106  
Cohen, Walter, 81  
Couturier, Maurice, 116, 118, 119, 120, 123, 124, 125, 127, 128  
Culler, Jonathan, 3, 7, 11, 12, 19, 22, 25, 44, 50, 53, 56, 60
- de Man, Paul, 2, 3, 6, 28, 40, 43, 44, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 65, 74, 76, 131  
de Saussure, Ferdinand, 7, 8, 9, 10, 15, 18, 19, 20, 21, 24, 27, 41  
Dembo, L. S., 85, 86  
Derrida, Jacques, 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 31, 32, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 57, 58, 59, 61, 62, 63, 65, 67, 76, 131, 132, 138  
Domerque, Sonya, 126
- Eagleton, Terry, 10, 43, 53  
Eco, Umberto, 10, 19, 22, 23, 56, 59, 60, 61, 63, 66, 93, 136
- Field, Andrew, 80, 81, 83, 89, 95, 100, 103, 107, 111, 112, 113  
Flores, Ralph, 66  
Forget, Philippe, 6, 8  
Foucault, Michel, 22, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 37, 38, 39, 71  
Frank, Manfred, 3, 7, 8, 9, 10, 14, 22, 29, 30, 31, 34, 35, 36, 37, 47, 62, 139
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg, 8  
Gasché, Rodolphe, 3, 6, 8, 12, 13, 14, 20, 34, 36, 39, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 50, 52, 53, 54, 55, 58, 138  
Genette, Gerard, 106  
Grabes, Herbert, 80, 106  
Grayson, Jane, 80, 83, 87  
Green, Geoffrey, 81, 83, 85, 95  
Gullette, Margaret M., 96  
Gumbrecht, Hans-Ulrich, 139
- Habermas, Jürgen, 9, 12, 16, 17, 20, 26, 27, 40, 41, 56, 58, 72  
Handelman, Susan, 39  
Harari, Josué V., 9, 17, 18, 38  
Hartman, Geoffrey, 43, 44, 45, 56, 77  
Hassan, Ihab, 71, 72, 73, 78, 134  
Hempfer, Klaus W., 37, 40, 55  
Hofstadter, Douglas, 65  
Hutcheon, Linda, 65, 67, 68, 69, 70, 74, 82  
Hutchinson, Peter, 65, 67  
Huysen, Andreas, 72, 76, 77
- Iser, Wolfgang, 56, 61, 67, 117
- Johnson, Donald B., 80, 94, 109, 117, 126
- Karlinsky, Simon, 84  
Krupnick, Mark, 14, 15
- Lee, L. L., 81, 97  
Leitch, Vincent B., 9, 15, 16, 18, 25, 38, 43, 44, 45, 56, 76  
Lentricchia, Frank, 37, 43  
Lodge, David, 56, 59, 60  
Long, Michael, 81  
Lyotard, Jean-François, 23, 24, 40, 67, 71, 72, 74, 76, 77, 78, 81, 135  
Maddox, Lucy, 81, 89, 103, 106, 107, 120, 128

- McCallum, Pamela, 44  
McCarthy, Mary, 110, 111, 112, 113  
McDonald, D. C., 80  
McHale, Brian, 65, 67, 126  
Merrill, Robert, 81, 82  
Miller, J. Hillis, 15, 16, 40, 43, 44, 52, 143  
Morton, Robert E., 89, 113
- Nabokov, Vladimir, 1, 2, 3, 49, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96, 97, 99, 100, 101, 102, 103, 104, 106, 107, 108, 109, 110, 111, 112, 113, 115, 116, 117, 118, 119, 120, 121, 122, 123, 124, 125, 126, 127, 128, 131, 132, 133, 134, 135, 136, 137, 138, 139, 140  
Nägele, Rainer, 73, 74, 135  
Norris, Christopher, 10, 12, 19, 27, 43, 44, 45, 53
- O'Donnell, Patrick, 81, 117
- Packman, David, 81, 100, 117, 133  
Page, Norman, 80, 82, 83, 89, 95, 97, 109, 110, 111, 112, 113  
Pearce, Richard, 115, 116
- Pifer, Ellen, 81, 86, 108, 116, 123
- Ray, William, 22, 51  
Richter, David H., 105  
Rimmon-Kenan, Shlomith, 106, 121  
Rorty, Richard, 8  
Rose, Margaret A., 23, 66, 74, 136  
Ross, Charles S., 124  
Roth, Phyllis, 80  
Ryan, Michael, 10, 14, 34, 43
- Said, Edward E., 28, 38  
Scholes, Robert, 67, 68  
Seidel, Michael, 111  
Sloterdijk, Peter, 22, 29, 30  
Spanos, William, 43, 44, 45, 58  
Stegner, Page, 81, 88, 113, 115, 116, 127
- Tekiner, Christina, 98  
Tobin, Patricia, 120, 121
- Waugh, Patricia, 65, 68, 70, 74  
Weber, Samuel, 19  
White, Hayden, 32, 33, 100