

# *XYZ, or, the ABCs of Deconstruction*

GREGORY JONES-KATZ

IT WAS THE SPRING TERM of 1977 in 317 Linsly-Chittenden Hall, a Romanesque building on the High Street edge of Yale's Old Campus that housed "The Best English Department in the World," and Geoffrey Hartman had just finished a lecture in Lit Z, an innovative course that he team-taught with Paul de Man. Hartman's lecture was based entirely on the final lines of Keats's famous poem, "Ode on a Grecian Urn": "Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all/Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know." Coming to the podium to deliver his own lecture on Locke, Kant, and Marx, Paul de Man handled the transition with his habitually ironic aplomb, commenting: "Professor Hartman has given you beauty, now you will get de trut" (de Man's way of pronouncing "the truth").

Traded in some quarters like a precious coin or baseball card, this wry anecdote hints at the more serious role that undergraduate classes—Literature 120a Narrative Forms (known first and best as Lit X), Literature 300b Introduction to Literary Theory (Lit Y), and Literature 130b Reading and Rhetorical Structures (Lit Z)—played in the production and diffusion of deconstructive reading practices at Yale University during the 1970s and early 1980s. Not only serving as testing grounds for new material, these classes also introduced deconstruction, an interpretative method and a disposition, to a student population—not just seniors but freshmen, sophomores, and juniors—whom academics and the public at large usually think of as untouched by the octopus of "high theory." What is commonly thought of as deconstructive reading—ironic, reflexive, demanding, prescient, a relentless foe of dualisms and foundational truths—rather surprisingly occurred, in various forms, in different ways, in several key low-level undergraduate courses. In these classes in New Haven, deconstruction inhabited undergraduates, and undergraduates became habituated to deconstruction.

The deconstructive tradition in the American academy began to be questioned in earnest during the 1990s by a small but growing number of scholars, many of whom were literary critics and philosophers of literature. The informal group initially included Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and George Steiner; today it comprises Yves Critton, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, Eelco Runia, and many others. Indeed, those in the humanities who feel as though they have suffered under the domination of a tradition in which rigorous scholarship is concerned solely with assigning concealed causes and unconscious processes to texts might rejoice at scholars' recent efforts to topple this regime. It might be tempting to embrace the frequent observations of the "death of theory." But before applauding these efforts and turning the page on the deconstructive tradition, we must find our bearings. How and why did this hermeneutic of suspicion become such a formidable habit of thought? Answers to this question require us to understand this tradition's beginnings as much as its endings.

Yalies had eagerly embraced the new hermeneutic. In fact, by the early 1980s, Yale undergraduates' enthusiasm for a radical revision of literary studies had become something of a tradition, stretching back to the late 1960s. In 1970, during a period of unrest in New Haven, with May Day anti-Vietnam protests and, perhaps most disruptive of all, the decision, resisted by faculty and alumni alike, to admit women to Yale's undergraduate ranks, Yale students demanded substantial alterations to the curriculum. Under the heading for Comparative Literature in the 1970 *Yale Course Critique* (YCC), students cheekily wrote: "You look in vain. Yale has no Comp. Lit. major. Harvard does. Berkeley does. Aren't we ready?" Students were ready; Yale was not. The university did not establish an undergraduate Comp Lit major until the 1980s. It was modeled not only on the school's prestigious graduate program, but also on the Literature major—established in 1972 to satisfy undergraduates' twin desires to escape the confines of national literature departments and for more popular culture in the classroom, and eventually disbanded and replaced by the Comp Lit major.

Nevertheless, Yale students throughout the "Me" decade enjoyed the heady sequence of courses in the Lit major. In these classes,

undergraduates performed acts of textual deciphering that instilled in them a heightened awareness of the duplicity of language and the uncertain links between signs and meaning. And, significantly, undergraduates understood courses in the Lit major as not simply fostering relativistic doubt, but also as training them how systematically, methodologically, to decode meaning. In the 1980 YCC, students explained that, though a “controversial, avant-garde endeavor in the sixties,” the Lit major was “now recognized as one of the foremost Literature departments in the country.” The major was “unique in that it is an interdisciplinary study” founded on an “approach toward literature [that] is not historical—it is concerned more with the function and nature of literature. Some prefer to think of it as a more ‘scientific’ approach to literature.” This uniquely interdisciplinary approach of Lit major courses cultivated a deconstructive temperament.

Take the figure of the detective, with whom Yale’s young deconstructive apprentices were trained to share not only a suspicious mind, but a mood of mistrust as well. In the fall 1981 iteration of Literature 120—a course first known as Literature X, then Man and His Fictions, and finally, in the fall of 1980, the inaugural year of Yale’s Women’s Studies Program, as the gender-neutral Narrative Forms—J. Hillis Miller, upright chief inspector that he was, drilled his pupils to adopt a deconstructive stance and style. “In the detective story,” Miller’s 28 September exercise explained, “the inquest is fixed on the past, in an effort to elucidate the events leading to the ‘crime.’ Yet the inquest takes place in the present, and creates its own chain of events.” Narrative Forms investigators were to conduct inquiries by applying the “model of the detective story” to discern “the transformations of the model in one or more of. . . four works”: Sophocles’s *Oedipus the King*, Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, Freud’s “Wolfman,” and James’s *The Aspern Papers*. Though Miller’s students executed their inquests on texts in the Western literary tradition rather than the streets of New Haven (or London), they mimicked the methods of the police inspector, searching, in each story, for a criminal, a clue, and a crime.

But Miller’s young sleuths did not solely embrace the persona of the detective. From the beginning of the academic year, Narrative

Forms students were encouraged far more generally to adopt a spirit of skepticism with which to question accepted meanings of literature. Sophomore Judy Wurtzel (a Literature major who went on to become Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy at the US Department of Education from 2009 to 2011) found herself lost in an abyss of illimitable interpretations rather early in the fall 1981 semester. In response to a question Miller posed—“How does one know if one’s interpretation of a text is correct?”—Wurtzel declared in her partly autobiographical confession that her Yale experience broke her trust in the bond between word and world, and cast her into a sea of doubt:

From childhood I have read voraciously and always trusted that I could understand and correctly interpret what I read. Yet at Yale, confronted with interpretations of literature different than mine, I am forced to reevaluate my sense of security and familiarity with interpretation. I feel in a critical watershed caught between standards & choice.

The very fact that others may have interpretations different from mine indicates that there is not one “absolute” reading of a text. I have found no “how to” guide for interpretation, no set of directions which lead to a fool proof correct analysis. I have discovered no absolute standard by which I can judge analysis & say “Yes, this is correct.” For a correct analysis one must first look at the text and explore it. . . . There seems to be a limit—determined more by moderation & good sense than by rule or formula—beyond which one should not go. But where that limit lies is still questionable.

This aesthetic experience of being atop a critical precipice, suspiciously staring into an interpretive abyss, accelerated—albeit at varying rates—Narrative Forms students’ habituation to deconstruction. Junior Juliet Guichon (currently an Assistant Professor at the University of Calgary whose work addresses human vulnerability at the intersection of law, health care, ethics, religion, and journalism) was already such a cadet by early fall 1980. In her response to Miller’s question, she calmly stressed the need for self-effacement and impersonality: “The validity of one’s reading of a work is determined by the text itself. The

text stands alone and must be interpreted in relation to the unwritten rules the author implies throughout the work.” This internalization of the ascetic deconstructive ethos occurred even among students not all that serious about literary study. Guichon’s classmate, a dual major in Economics and Political Science named Dong Ho Ahn, confidentially declared: “There is no one right interpretation of literary writings. One can find many shades of meanings from a very simple nursery rhyme. In reading a story, one never really knows the intention of the author.” A deconstructive bearing and technique of reading unmistakably disciplined these Yale students, and well before “deconstructionism”—not to mention “poststructuralism,” “postmodernism,” and other isms—clogged many American academics’ parlance.

Regardless of whether it overturned or simply strengthened a student’s approach to literary interpretation, Narrative Forms inspired students to produce critical essays of a labyrinthine complexity. One of Miller’s final assignments in the 1979 iteration of the course required his pupils to parody an interpretive method employed by a school of literary critics that Borges described in his short story “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius.” Miller’s deconstructive apprentices were to “attribute two works (e.g., *The Words* and *The Confessions*, *Great Expectations* and *Absalom, Absalom!*) to the same author and discuss how one revises and elaborates the plot model of the other.” In his inquest, “Closure in Literary Criticism: A Parable,” sophomore Bill Jewett, imitating Borges’s style and stance, wove a *mise en abîme* that surely made his New Haven chief proud. Jewett escorted readers through a deconstructive maze in which the plots of “Wolfman” and *Heart of Darkness* “developed two examples of enigma with complementary yet diametrically opposed methods: in Freud’s ‘Wolfman’ the reader sees the unknown illuminated by clues, whereas in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* the reader sees clues illuminated by the unknown.” In addition to opposing methods of detection, Freud’s and Conrad’s stories “progress through a process of revelation in opposite directions yet end up in the same place.” By exchanging clue for enigma, enigma for clue, and reversing beginning and end, end and beginning, Jewett’s Freud and Conrad turned out to be deconstructive detectives

who disassembled (the other's) narrative form, not just temporally but structurally as well.

Jewett's paper must have provided a good deal of pedagogical pleasure to Miller, above all because of its impressively self-aware internal mirroring. In fact, from the very start of his gumshoe work, Jewett, with a Borgesian grin, alerted his reader that it was Jewett and Miller—not simply Freud and Conrad—who were guilty of the essay's deconstructions. It was a "T.A." named "Miller," Jewett knowingly claimed in his paper's first paragraph, who distributed Freud's and Conrad's stories for his professor's final assignment in "Elementary Hermeneutics (conducted in English)." After fictionalizing Miller, Jewett began his paper on Freud and Conrad, but not before placing scare quotes around the entire essay. By doing so, Jewett self-reflexively advanced the deconstructive claim that texts refer in a frame-in-frame way to other texts; Jewett consigned his paper to another layer in his *mise en abîme*. The real Miller was likely impressed with Jewett's use of intertextuality and metafiction, central writing techniques for post-modern literature. Alas, Jewett's fictional professor, following a series of critical remarks on Jewett's failure to prove that "there can be no closure to either the text or the reading of the text," simply gave his student a "C." Jewett's imaginary teacher wrote: "Your paper has some merit for what it is; also, grade inflation compels me not to fail you."

After Lit X, the next letter floating in the Lit major's alphabet soup: Y. In the early 1970s, Peter Brooks and Michael Holquist—two of three architects of Lit X—lobbied hard to conjure Literature Y: Introduction to Literary Theory into existence. Though the object of a good deal of intellectual support from faculty and students (that is, after fierce resistance from conservative professors in several humanities departments), the fledgling Literature department lacked financial support; Brooks and Holquist had to cobble together funding for Lit Y. Their effort succeeded, though, with Lit Y initially sponsored and paid for by the German department, and Peter Demetz in German and Comp Lit presiding over its first semester in the fall of 1972. To the untrained eye, Lit Y likely appeared the least innovative—and consequentially the least interesting—of Lit major courses,

as the class schooled students, not to practice exegesis or apply critical theories, but in the history of contemporary critical theory. It was simply a survey course.

Lit Y drilled Yalies rapidly to embrace and then just as quickly shed an impressive sequence of skeptical personae and techniques of reading. By the early 1980s, Lit Y's semester-long semichronological process of cycling through suspicious hermeneutics had helped produce an atmosphere in which deconstructive reading practices of all kinds flourished in New Haven. Traces of this atmosphere are found in the early 1970s iterations of the course, where Lit Yers explored an array of texts and interpretive methods. In a 26 May 1972 letter to Horace Taft, Dean of Yale College, Demetz explained that Lit Yers considered "Literature, oral tradition, and the media; theories of meaning and interpretation (hermeneutics); questions of genre, with discussion of representative examples, the mixture of forms, and the fusions of various arts. The structure and range of literary value judgments, and a critical analysis of Marxist, psychoanalytic, formalist, and structuralist approaches to literature." Lit Yers' absorption of this assortment of critical languages—each of which stressed the artificiality of boundaries drawn around or accepted definitions of literature—habituated them to the deconstructive manner and style of reading.

A decade after its—admittedly local and relatively minute—first attempt to transform Yale into a residence for varieties of deconstructive life, Lit Y's atmosphere was thicker, its elements heavier, and, important for fulfilling the course's pedagogical aims, its historical trajectory clearer. On 13 January 1982, for instance, Demetz's Lit Y began disciplining students in the tradition of skeptical reading with the lecture, "Homo Signifer: The Challenge of the Semiotic Tradition." Demetz's lecture aimed to inculcate in undergraduates the view of humanity as a translating and signifying subject, as much the producer as product of the endless sign process of semiosis. Embracing humanity as fluid, a dynamic process that has no essence or substance, Lit Y students became hermeneuts of suspicion, mistrustful of the established, the obvious, the familiar meanings of texts. And for the rest of

the spring semester, Lit Y lectures and exercises groomed undergraduates for the class's skeptical mood and mind. Students absorbed techniques of suspicious reading by influential American and European philosophers—Frye, Hegel, Propp, Heidegger, Marx, Freud, Lacan, Barthes, Foucault—and, in the final weeks, shifted focus to feminist criticism (including the work of Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Mary Jacobus, and Sandra Gilbert) and Afro-American Studies and the ways those fields revised literary canons.

To acclimate young hermeneuts to a deconstructive atmosphere, Lit Y instructors sometimes exploited a native resource: the most prominent deconstructionists in America, most of whom worked just a stone's throw away in Linsly-Chittenden Hall. On 5 April 1982 at 11:30 a.m. in 113 William L. Harkness Hall, another of the striking Collegiate Gothic buildings on the Old Campus, Miller lectured to Demetz's Lit Y course on "Post-Structuralist Thought: Derrida." Almost precisely three years later, Miller treated the assembled hermeneuts of Paul Fry's Lit Y with another dose of Derrida and de Man. Equipped with the English translations of relevant texts on reserve or photocopied, Miller introduced students to the ways terms and concepts such as *trope*, *unreadability*, and *metaphor* functioned within a deconstructive model of reading. While students embraced Miller's deconstruction and the deconstructive spirit of Lit Y's other authors, the cumulative effect of students' exercising of skeptical personae and methods of reading was to help build a domicile for deconstructive reading practices in New Haven. And each time Lit Y students used a literary theory to step back from and interrogate what seemed self-evident about literature, they added yet another brick to the house of high theory. Though it had changed by the mid-1980s to reflect shifting intellectual trends, Lit Y's reading list during the late 1970s and early 1980s reads as a who's who of high theory precisely because it helped to birth high theory. The fact that this labor partially occurred in undergraduate classrooms at Yale should give pause to the impulse to investigate the history of theory solely at a high elevation.

Literature Z, the third and final core course of the Literature major, was, in the words of Paul Fry, "the world according to de Man."

This class's introduction to the curriculum was well timed. In the 1975 YCC, undergraduates, though they proudly acknowledged the Lit major as "the ultimate liberal arts major," complained that the major's core course—Lit X—needed "revision." The class was "supposed to be an innovative course, but seemed to have gotten into a rut." Several professors also sensed the need for change. The same year that undergraduates bemoaned the dullness of the formerly exciting and experimental Lit X found Paul de Man and Geoffrey Hartman drafting plans for this new course in the Lit major. Proposed to be taught in the fall of 1976 but in fact taught for the first time in spring 1977, Lit Z became what some have deemed—though this is open to debate—Yale's most distinctive undergraduate literature course. What is surely indisputable is that Lit Z—more so than Lit X or Lit Y (and these courses' subsequent versions)—offered the most rigorous deconstructive training for undergraduates, not just at Yale, but in the entire world. De Man and Hartman's brainchild was simply unique. There was neither precedent nor contemporary equivalent, not in New Haven and not in Paris.

Lit Z's success can be partly traced to de Man and Hartman's 1975 course proposal. De Man and Hartman pitched Lit Z to their New Haven colleagues in a curious—and implicitly deconstructive—manner. "At Yale and elsewhere," the two arch-deconstructors wrote, "the curriculum for the teaching of literature . . . has undergone very little change over the last two or three decades." Teachers have trained students to consider literature either "as a succession of periods and movements that can be articulated as an historical narrative" or "a set of statements which, taken together, lead to a better understanding of human existence." But, de Man and Hartman suggested, these two approaches—the historical and the philosophical—lagged behind cutting-edge pedagogies in America and Europe.

Though he did not mention it in the Lit Z course proposal, de Man may have been thinking of Reuben Brower's famous Humanities course, "The Interpretation of Literature," at Harvard University, where de Man served as a teaching assistant during the 1950s while a graduate student. In Hum 6, Brower rigorously limited students'

interpretive options, asking them to derive the meaning of a literary work not, as they were accustomed, from a process of generalization or abstraction, but solely from the text itself. “I have,” de Man recalled in a 1982 essay, “never known a course by which students were so transformed. . . . Hum 6 did not make writing easier for them for they no longer felt free to indulge in any thought that came into their head or to paraphrase any idea they happened to encounter.” Hum 6 might have been a precursor to the innovative pedagogies that de Man and Hartman referenced in their Lit Z proposal, because, just as Hum 6 trained students to attend to the language of the text, those innovative pedagogies “moved toward [treating] literature as a language about language, or a metalinguistic discipline best understood as a response to the specific complexities and resources of language.”

Like this progressive curriculum, Lit Z would train students to consider literature as a self-deconstructive text, a text that possesses a sort of metacognition of its own irresolvable contradictions. In addition to schooling undergraduates to recognize a text’s deconstructive agency—the ways it undoes itself—Lit Z trained students “to decide how gifted they in fact are for literary study.” The last letter in the Lit major’s alphabetical soup, the course would be a gatekeeper, after which undergraduates, not professors, would choose either to guard themselves from or further embrace the challenging descent into the crypt of high theory.

De Man and Hartman not only suggested in their proposal that Lit Z would transform undergraduates into deconstructive debunkers as well as offer students the chance to jump on textual whirligigs of vertiginous troping. Beauty and de trut also implied that Lit Z would deconstruct literary studies. Though contemporaries might have viewed it as a new “orientation of literary studies toward language,” according to de Man and Hartman, Lit Z was “far from being something new-fangled,” and “represents in fact a return to an age-long tradition which rooted the study of literature in philology, poetics, rhetoric, and grammar.” By realigning literary studies toward the complications of language, Lit Z was innovative *and* traditional. This portrayal—which likely appealed both to faculty who hoped to preserve

conventional methods of literary interpretation and faculty eager to move beyond the established boundaries of literary study—perhaps accounts for de Man and Hartman’s success at persuading their colleagues to introduce Lit Z as a core course in the Lit major. Such a portrayal also hints at the extent to which deconstruction was built into the very fabric of Lit Z, as the course both affirmed and denied its radicalness, training itself as it trained undergraduates to interpret literature—including the course proposal—as a language about language.

This self-deconstruction of Lit Z extended—kudzu-like—to all levels, all aspects, and all versions of the course. During Lit Z’s second month, instructors often required trainees to sit at the feet of Nietzsche, who foresaw nearly every move that an arch-deconstructor could make. Students were specifically expected to wrestle with mimeographed selections from Nietzsche’s corpus where he argued that language is the locus of conflict and power. In the inaugural spring 1977 iteration of Lit Z Reading and Rhetorical Structures, for instance, de Man and Hartman solicited students to dance with this ur-deconstructor of dualisms. “In the second part of the essay *Truth and Falsity* (pp. 512–15),” de Man and Hartman’s 13 February exercise explained, “Nietzsche sets up what appears to be a contrast, a polarity, between the man of ‘science’ and the man of ‘art.’” However, adopting the deconstructive stance and style required Lit Zers not simply to identify, but—like Nietzsche—to interrogate this ostensibly natural and self-evident binary. “By a close reading of this section,” de Man and Hartman wrote, “you are invited (1) to discuss the structure of this opposition and (2) to examine its implications with regard to the relative value of both activities, in themselves as well as [with] regard to history.” De Man and Hartman certainly recognized the demands of this assignment. And, as such, they offered four “suggestions to assist [students] in organizing [their] thoughts.” One prompt asked Lit Zers to center their thoughts on how “the opposition between ‘science’ and ‘art’ related to the theory of language as figuration developed in part I of [Nietzsche’s] essay in answer to such questions as ‘What is a word?’ (p. 506) or ‘What is therefore truth?’

(p. 508).” With this suggestion, students oriented themselves—like de Man and Hartman’s Nietzsche—toward a deconstructive comportment and technique of interpretation in which the self-evident opposition between “science” and “art” as well as foundational truths were caught in the grip of unstable linguistic and semiotic systems.

Lit Zers became Nietzschean sticks of dynamite. And these pupils’ explorations of texts’ inner stresses and strains continued unabated in Miller and de Man’s spring 1979 version of the course: Lit 130b—its notorious Z, like its siblings X and Y, having been translated into administratively acceptable course numbers. In a revised version of de Man and Hartman’s 13 February Lit Z exercise, for example, Miller and de Man offered students tactical information about where and how Nietzsche conducted his deconstructive raid on the notion that the Subject is a unitary whole without difference—an explosive idea for undergraduates, future boilerplate for opinion pieces by the culturati a decade later. Lit Z debunkers-in-training were to “write an essay of not less than 5 and not more 10 pages” about Nietzsche’s description in section 5 of *The Birth of Tragedy* about the “transformation of what he calls ‘subjectively willing man’ (p. 50) into ‘the one truly existent subject’ (p. 52) that appears in the work of art.” To help pupils unpack Nietzsche’s dismantling of the Subject, Miller and de Man not only, as during de Man and Hartman’s Lit Z, pinpointed an opposition, in this instance the binary between “the self” and the “Aesthetic Phenomenon” in Nietzsche’s text. They also directed students toward the fact that Nietzsche often stated the “interplay” between this opposition “by means of such terms as, on p. 49, copy (*Abbild*), repetition (*Wiederholung*), example, symbol (*Gleichnis*), etc.” By tracing how Nietzsche’s conversion of selfhood into an artwork pivoted on figures of speech, Lit Zers joined Nietzsche in stripping the Subject of substance, and in transforming it into a chain of linguistic substitutions, which, like Nietzsche’s smooth, worn-down coins, is a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms.

The deconstructive (de)bunker in New Haven housed a number of other classes taught by de Man, Hartman, and Miller during the 1970s and early 1980s. In one of Miller’s 1978 undergraduate poetry

courses, junior Carl Goldfarb (an English and Philosophy major who three decades after leaving Yale led 2011 and 2014 briefings against the Halliburton Corporation at the US Supreme Court) executed a series of textbook deconstructions in his essay “‘The Wild Swans at Coole,’ ‘Leda and the Swan’ and ‘Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931’; a toehold in Yeats’s poetry.” Yeats’s “The Wild Swans at Coole,” written between 1916 and 1917 for Yeats’s friend Lady Gregory and dedicated to her son who was killed during World War I, ponders the changes since he’d counted the swans swimming at dusk in a lake at Coole Park nineteen years before. Acclimated to the deconstructive bearing and method of reading, Goldfarb argued that Yeats, due to the duplicity of language, could neither have said what he meant nor meant what he said. At first, Goldfarb’s Yeats appeared to offer readers a stable foothold on his poem’s meaning: “Yeats shapes an emblem as he transforms the natural swans of the second stanza—mounting, wheeling, and clamoring—to the meaning laden emblems of the fourth and fifth stanzas—unwearied, unaging, mysterious, and beautiful.” However, Goldfarb maintained, readers’ hopes for a secure narrative about the swans’ voyage from change to permanence were dashed, as Yeats “contradicts himself,” “claims ‘All’s changed’ (p. 322 1.15)” since he first counted the swans but also that “the swans have not changed,” “are ‘unwearied still’ (1.19),” “their hearts have not grown old’ (1.22).” “In formal terms,” Goldfarb wrote, “the poem deconstructs itself, laying bare the change that Yeats had tried to cover.” Thanks to Yeats’s deconstructive dexterity, his swans did and did not transition from the sublunary to the celestial world. Like Lit Zers, like Lit Xers, like students schooled in various courses in the Lit major, Yeats self-deconstructed. Ultimately, Goldfarb’s reading of Yeats demonstrates the extent to which he and other students acclimated to deconstruction in New Haven.

The French philosopher (and oft-dubbed “father of deconstruction”) Jacques Derrida began teaching at Yale during the fall semester of 1975. From that point on, Yalies occasionally latched onto Derrida’s arresting statement “there is nothing outside the text” to orient themselves toward the deconstructive stance and style. Goldfarb implicitly

used Derrida's maxim during his reading of Yeats's "Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931" in his paper for Miller's 1978 poetry course. Upon a first reading of the final two lines of the poem's third stanza, Goldfarb maintained, Yeats appeared to suggest that the reader should trust the ontological independence of his swan emblem, its externality to nature. Goldfarb's Yeats "explains both the power of the emblem, it's 'so lovely that is set to right/What knowledge or its lack had awry' and its illusory appearance, it's 'so arrogantly pure, a child might think/It can be murdered with a spot of ink' (11.21-24)." (In the paper's margins, Miller—or one of his Teaching Assistants—enthusiastically wrote: "That is, by being written about, [the swans] turned into writing!") But, Goldfarb argued, because of its independent existence, Yeats's swan emblem could not, despite what a child might think, be killed with a spot of ink, as *it*—that is, the swan emblem—was actually the real swan. While Yeats gave the impression of sketching an opposition between his swan emblem and the real swan, he in fact questioned this binary. "The child is indeed right," Goldfarb wrote, though "his reasoning is mistaken," as "the swan can be murdered by a spot of ink, not because the swan is so pure, but because the swan is itself only a spot of ink. The swan is not a real swan, but Yeats's creation. The swan only exists as a spot of ink, as Yeats's verbal creation, and can be easily murdered as it was created by words." ("Yes, good!" either Miller or his TA scribbled approvingly in the margins.) In the space of a couplet, Yeats collapsed the opposition between his swan emblem and his real swan—with his poem, writing and reality had become united by their difference. Goldfarb's paper further exemplifies the extraordinary ways that Yale undergraduates embraced the deconstructive mind and mood.

But just when a deconstructive tradition was solidifying during the early 1980s, de Man died from cancer in 1983 at the age of sixty-four. De Man's passing was a blow to his friends and colleagues and outpourings of sorrow followed. At the January 1984 memorial service, Professor of French Shoshana Felman honored his "generosity" and maintained that "through him, through his work and through his person, something extraordinary spoke"; others commented on a sort of

paradox of de Man's career, that, though he would not have "wanted to be . . . a moral and pedagogical example for generations of students and colleagues," he "became the Yoda figure" during the "space war of the theorists." It was from de Man, observed Hartman, that so many—even his esteemed colleagues—sought wisdom, advice, and training. But perhaps most moving was Professor of French and Comparative Literature at Harvard University Barbara Johnson's speech about her former mentor. Johnson's speech, she herself wryly observed, included the "very words that [de Man] was most suspicious of—words like integrity, honesty, authenticity, generosity, even seductiveness." "In a profession full of fakeness," Johnson professed, "he was real; in a world full of takers, he let others take; in a crowd of self-seekers, he sought the truth, and distrusted it." Johnson's self-conscious use of the rhetoric of authenticity to praise her former mentor says much about de Man's centrality to the deconstructive community at Yale. Though de Man offered many models of how to subject declarations of sincerity, uniqueness, and reality to deconstructive acid, his most successful former graduate students, like Johnson, could not bring themselves to pour deconstructive acid on de Man himself.

Still, de Man's untimely death hardly halted performances of deconstructive reading exercises in New Haven, at both the undergraduate and graduate level. There was a second generation of deconstructors at Yale, including not just Barbara Johnson and Shoshana Felman, but also E. S. Burt, Andrzej Warminski, Cathy Caruth, and Margaret Ferguson, among others. Nevertheless, de Man's absence affected his intellectual partners-in-crime and changed Yale's institutional culture. Miller has reflected that he felt de Man's death had made Yale "less exciting intellectually," "not only because of the loss of his presence but also because of his unparalleled ability to get brilliant junior appointments made that we wanted." More generally, members of the deconstructive community suspected that the center of gravity for critical thought had begun to move away from the Atlantic Coast, particularly Ivy League institutions. In a 20 August 1985 letter to Derrida, Miller pondered "whether there is not occurring now a general shift of intellectual activity to the West Coast and whether both

of us might not have a greater effect for ‘deconstruction in America’ out there than in spending another decade at Yale.” “Yale will always be Yale,” Miller continued, “but I wonder if we haven’t done about as much as can be done there for the moment. Certainly Paul thought so, and spoke in his last months of how he had thought he could make a real change in Yale but ‘had not made a dent’ in the place.” While de Man held that he had not made much progress in altering Yale’s intellectual culture, it is clear from his other comments to Miller that he felt his and others’ deconstructive efforts at the undergraduate level were rather effective. “I remember de Man,” Miller has recalled, “asserting to me at one point with obvious pleasure that we were demonstrating [in Lit Z] how teaching ‘rhetorical reading’”—de Man’s preferred term for his deconstructive enterprise in the study of figural language—“could be pedagogically successful.”

Unfortunately, the designers of XYZ, those courses that trained generations of Yale undergraduates in the methods of deconstruction, in how to suss out the conflicting warps and woofs of prose and poetry, had moved on from New Haven by the mid-1980s. Soon after de Man’s death, Miller and Derrida transferred to the University of California-Irvine. Though Hartman remained at Yale, he pursued undertakings quite different from those of his days in Lit Z, establishing Yale’s Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies and helping to found Yale’s Judaic Studies Program. Along with his colleagues and friends at Yale and beyond, Hartman was understandably shocked when it was discovered in 1987 that de Man wrote approximately one hundred eighty articles for collaborationist journals—one blatantly anti-Semitic—in his native Belgium under Nazi occupation at the beginning of the Second World War. This discovery would considerably complicate the legacy of deconstruction for years to come.

Lit X, Lit Y, and Lit Z introduced the ABCs of deconstruction to undergraduates at Yale University during the 1970s and 1980s. But these courses—and their various iterations—did not simply instruct pupils in deconstructive methods of reading. Instead, XYZ inculcated a sensitivity in undergraduates to the intellectual virtues of irresolution, contradiction, and duality. While scholars and nonacademics

often believe this student population to have been either oblivious to or uninterested in the arcane workings of high theory, a number of Yale students, as these fragments of a larger history of XYZ show, intensely embraced the deconstructive stance and style. To be sure, the vast majority who enrolled in Lit major courses did not pursue graduate studies in literature. Nor did they necessarily apply deconstructive principles to their future endeavors. Nevertheless, to the varying degrees that they became hermeneuts of suspicion, debunkers of dualisms, slayers of foundational truths, XYZers, through practicing an array of deconstructions in a rather circumscribed area of the Old Campus, helped shape the current—and dominant—tradition in the American academy: the tradition of mistrust, indeed in some cases denunciation, of any claim of naturalness, originality, primordialness, and authenticity.