



UNIVERSITY OF NIŠ

The scientific journal FACTA UNIVERSITATIS

Series: **Linguistics and Literature** Vol.2, No 7, 2000 pp. 175 - 189

Editor of series: *Nedeljko Bogdanović*, e-mail: nedbog@filfak.ni.ac.yu

Address: Univerzitetski trg 2, 18000 Niš, YU, Tel: +381 18 547-095, Fax: +381 18 547-950

<http://ni.ac.yu/Facta>

TO SERVE ART OR THE SYSTEM: ON MISUSE OF CRITICISM AND TRIVIALIZATION OF ART

UDC 820.01

Petra Mitić

Faculty of Philosophy, Niš, Yugoslavia

Abstract. *This paper is about different strategies the patriarchal system has been using to diminish the power of art and make art promote the ideology of the masculine-oriented culture. The author makes use of several examples: a play by Howard Barker, Shoshana Felman's analysis of the critical readings applied to a story by Balzac, and Sallie Goetsch's discussion of some modern productions of the **Oresteia**. The focus is on different ways in which criticism has been misused, and different forms in which art comes to the audience, its subversive power already neutralized. The author proceeds to refer to the famous and still controversial essay on interpretation by Susan Sontag in order to consider the possibility of conceiving a critical discourse whose power will not be that of mastery or repression, but of true liberation.*

One of the main issues raised in Howard Barker's most provocative play *Scenes from an Execution* could be formulated as the clash between art and criticism, and the ability of the latter to neutralize the subversive power contained in a work of art. When Galactia, the woman artist in the play, is given a commission by the official authorities of the Republic of Venice to paint the Battle of Lepanto, in which the Christians triumphed over the Muslim enemy, the clash in question is already at work: the glory of the victory, or the nobility of the sacrifice, which is what they expect the artist to immortalize in her picture, does not coincide with her own vision of the event. The only sense she will be able to make of the supposedly glorious battle does not have much to do with either pride or glory - in the artist's mental picture the most prominent feeling, overpowering everything else, is that of horror at the destructive futility of the whole event; the glorious victory has become an instance of the most horrifying slaughter. Filtered through the optics of her mind and sensibility, the triumphant battle has, in fact, lost all of its triumph and acquired a new, unexpected and ghastly dimension of a universal madness in which no distinction could be made between the alleged representatives of good and those who

Received November 01, 2000

stand for evil: all participants have become united in a single, indistinguishable mass of mutilated bodies, blood and death - one thousand square feet of canvas filled with the pain and noise of men minced. The universal destruction and the utter lack of any sense in it are fused together generating the atmosphere of overwhelming horror at the waste of human life and the loss of man's dignity. The Admiral's indifferent stare overhanging the shoal of dying figures, his hands portrayed to resemble claws, supplies the final, ironic touch to the whole tragedy: the soldiers of both sides are thus presented as victims of the same, insatiable greed on the part of those who possess enough power to start wars and give orders to others who wage them on their behalf.

By allowing her private vision to deviate so drastically from the official account, and by choosing to paint the private and not the official truth, the artist has committed an act of the most subversive heresy and the highest treason against the State. Addressing Prodo, one of the survivors who has made peace with life by choosing to commercialize his mutilated body, Galactia declares her intention to be that of locating responsibility and painting the why of all his terrors. By showing the victory for what it is and then by "shoving the thing into the world's face", Galactia has completed what she believes to be her own responsibility as an artist - she has penetrated the smoke screen of the lies the system fabricates in order to mask the unpleasant truth, and she has exposed this naked truth for all to see. Her expectations, however, of the effect this "screaming truth" will have upon the public prove to be not only overly optimistic but also tragically naive. Convinced that the picture will have the power of an explosive - that it will affect the spectators to such an extent that they will never be the same after seeing it - she is quite mystified to learn, on her way out of prison, that in the meantime the picture has been exhibited, the people, including the soldiers, have been flocking to see it, and yet no sounds of rioting could be heard. In her naive, misguided optimism, Galactia has envisioned nothing less than a mental revolution ("Any soldiers trampled on their tunics? Much mutiny down the docks?"), the people, realizing the horror of the bloodshed they have been tricked into accepting as a noble self-sacrifice for a just cause, to be shattered out of their self-deceptive peace with life. She has expected nothing less than a mutiny, and yet there are no signs of any disorder whatsoever. The mental deconstruction she has anticipated, as the only true measure for the subversive energy emanating from her picture, does not happen.

The explanation Barker provides for this tragic failure of art to effect a mental change comes, significantly, from another woman - a critic. "In art nothing is what it seems to be," explains the self-confident critic, "but everything can be claimed. The painting is not independent, even if the artist is. The picture is retrievable, even when the painter is lost." The truth of this shattering cynicism is unfortunately, but predictably, corroborated by the epilogue of the play: numbers of people, members of the local community, are shown admiring the picture but unable to grasp anything of the meaning intended. By writing a catalogue instructing the audience how to look and what to appreciate in the work of art, the critic has paved the way for a rather miraculous neutralization of the subversive power contained in the artist's vision and transferred to the canvas in, apparently, a quite masterly way. Guided by the critic's instructions, the audience approach the picture admiring the virtuosity of the artist's masterly presentation, praising the perfection of the realistic detail and failing to feel the emotional charge implied in it. Their being instructed in the ways of seeing has, paradoxically, made them incapable of the very act of seeing: it has rendered the object of their attention virtually invisible for them.

Seemingly, they are given unrestricted freedom to enjoy and appreciate art but only after the process of their inoculation - against undesirable revelations - has been successfully completed. In fulfilling what she believes to be her task, the critic has actually assisted the system in preserving the authority of the official truth intact and has given it yet another opportunity to perpetuate, and flaunt, the illusion of its own greatness. Instead of burning the picture and punishing the artist for her heresy, which would have rendered the repressive nature of its power altogether visible and, therefore, vulnerable, the system has made "good" use of criticism, which ended in turning a potential enemy into a powerful ally. The critic did save the work of art, but in such a way as to make it not only entirely innocuous but also nourishing for the very system it was intended to demystify. The prophecy that "there will be no art outside", but "only art inside" seems, therefore, much too appropriate for the epilogue of Barker's play to be taken lightly.

In her discussion of how a story by Balzac (*Adieu*) was dealt with by contemporary criticism, Shoshana Felman, whose position is that of a deconstructionist feminist perspective, emphasizes the irony implied in the fact that the critic's intervention had already been inscribed in the text; that by applying the murderous power of criticism he actually repeated the gesture dramatized in the work itself. Significantly enough, it was by successfully manipulating, as Felman reveals, the very dimension - the realistic mode of presentation applied in telling the story - responsible for its most provocative subversiveness that the critical exegesis managed to annul the subversive effect, thus making its own "accomplishment" all the more disquieting. Using the traditional model of scholarly presentation - the method of selected passages - the critic performs a subtle trick upon the reader: he succeeds in persuading him, and does so in such a way as to make the persuasion impossible to perceive, to ignore the inconvenient parts and direct his undivided attention to reading and appreciating the "relevant" ones. The feat accomplished consists in the insertion of the Preface and the Notice which had been written by two eminent scholars and which came along with the text in the current pocket edition of the story. In this way the critical reviews are imposed as indisputable authority regarding the text's meaning - the kind of authority one is expected to take as self-evident.

The shedding of the critical light upon the story - the apparently neutral act of situating its importance - amounted, amazingly, to nothing less than putting two crucial chapters out of the picture. Guided by the knowledgeable critic, the reader was encouraged to give his whole attention to the second chapter and admire the author for the virtuosity of his realism in describing the hardships borne by the French soldiers as they were retreating from Russia during the Napoleonic Wars. The first and the third chapter, intended as a most significant frame within which the realistic description of the war was to acquire its true and ultimate meaning, as well as its most disturbing and ironic dimension, were conveniently pushed aside. The trick was necessary since the two 'troublesome' chapters dealt with two themes the critic found quite impossible to adjust consistently to the vision of the war glorifying the heroism of the French soldiers, which the reader was supposed to understand to have been the sole "noble" purpose on the part of the author. The two themes - the woman and her madness - proved impossible to incorporate in the interpretation set upon sanctifying the heroic sacrifice, or those same patriarchal truths and ideals already discussed in the context of Howard Barker's play. The two chapters, which the author, obviously, intended as a truly appropriate frame for the horrors of the war, encouraged the reader to contemplate the brutality of warfare in its most essential, and most disturbing, connection with the issue of the woman and her

madness. It was necessary, therefore, that they should be trivialized to the status of a quite insignificant background for the historical narrative which the critical commentary established as the main plot. The truly amazing feat accomplished by the critics thus amounted to turning the story upside down - the retrospective sub-plot was given primary importance while the true focus of the story was relegated to an almost irrelevant background.

Briefly summarized, the story follows the destiny of one woman, crushed by the brutalizing forces of patriarchal history, which quite inevitably ends in her madness and eventual death. The culture in which this destiny appears to be inevitable, as the context of the woman's madness seems to suggest, is shown to be in direct opposition to the possibility of mental health, and yet, ironically, it is this same culture which the traditional critic praised by performing his subtle inversion. The masterly way in which Balzac conceived the opening scene presents the first powerful hint of the disastrous effects, for both man and woman, produced by the masculine-oriented culture. By means of a most effective metaphor, the unmistakable symptoms as well as fateful consequences of the opposition in question are immediately rendered quite visible: two men, both representing patriarchal establishment - a former colonel and a magistrate - are shown to be lost in a mysterious domain into which they inadvertently wandered while hunting. The symbolic undertones of their loss of direction are thus placed in the very foreground, demanding the reader's immediate attention as well as supplying additional irony to their plight. Anxious to find their way out, the disoriented hunters do not have any other choice but to address the only people they meet - two women. The women, however, are rendered incapable of providing any meaningful help: one of them is a deaf-mute, while the other woman's entire vocabulary is reduced to a single word - *adieu*. On hearing the word, the colonel faints, because he has recognized in the madwoman his former mistress, whom he has not seen ever since their separation on the banks of the Berezina River during the chaotic retreat of the French army. As it turns out, *adieu* was the very last word she said to him before they parted as well as her last lucid word before she lost her reason. What follows is the realistic presentation of the historical context in which the beginning of her illness is most significantly situated. The third chapter reads as a description of the misguided endeavour on the part of Phillippe, the former colonel, to cure his mistress. The preposterous method he applies, because he takes its validity to be unquestionable, to restore her back to reason is shown to demand the repetition of all the elements included in the historical setting which once brought about the very illness he now wants to cure. The former lover, who has now, in a deliberately suggestive ironic inversion intended by the author, become a "stranger" at the sight of whom Stephanie runs away in the manner of a frightened animal, has not a single doubt about the method to be used to grapple with the woman's madness. By the very self-assurance he displays about his competence to treat the problem, as well as by the disastrous epilogue of his therapeutic project, the lover is revealed to have considerable share in the agency of the forces which crush the woman. The curious incapacity to get one's bearings, dramatized in the opening scene, is now recognized in its essential connection with the unredeemed crime: the loss of direction is shown to be significantly related to the way the feminine has been repressed and perverted in the culture in which the precarious balance seems to be almost irrevocably lost.

In order to hasten Stephanie's recovery, Phillippe designs a minute setting supposed to reconstruct the moment of their wartime separation. The most rigorous replica of the

separation scene is created in order to provoke her recognition of him, which he craves desperately, and which, in his mistaken belief, he anticipates as the first dependable sign of her recovery. The psycho-drama she has to go through, re-living the history of the war which generated, as it were, the history of her own illness, proves remarkably, but fatally, successful. The woman does, indeed, recognize her former lover: she smiles to him, repeats the fatal word once again, and then dies. The cure which does happen, in so far as the lover's anticipation of its visible manifestation - the woman's recognition of him - materializes, becomes, simultaneously, the agent of her death. The gruesome realistic detail which he reconstructed most convincingly could not but hit the target; what once caused the loss of the woman's reason is now, when re-played before her eyes, the cause of her death. The ultimate irony of the cure which proved a murderous weapon for both lovers - the man ending by committing suicide - is, unfortunately, yet to come. It comes in the way the traditional critic completes the chain of deaths by performing his own misguided project of "curing" the text. By repeating, on the level of interpretation, the very same gesture Phillippe makes in the story, the "realistic" critic could not help repeating the implications of his therapeutic intervention: the murder which the critic commits is, thereby, that of the text itself. In her lucid analysis of the correspondence between the therapeutic project dramatized in the text and the one performed upon the text by the critic, Felman succeeds in unmasking the process at the end of which criticism is revealed as itself a powerful murder weapon: in his own way, she claims, the traditional critic has also killed the woman. By killing the woman, as Felman makes a point of emphasizing, the critic has killed the question of the text and the text as a question. Both Phillippe and the critic have thus fallen a prey to the same forces, which by crushing the feminine are destined to end in not only death of the other but also death of the self.

At this point, it would be both helpful and instructive to examine the process in which what has come to be known and accepted as feminist criticism could also be revealed to contain the same seeds of self-betrayal as we observed in the example of traditional patriarchal criticism applied to elucidate, in truth - tame and trivialize, the amazing complexity of Balzac's story. In the case of early feminism, it was the insistence on rigid gender definitions that proved most unfortunate. It led the first and, paradoxically, the most revolutionary generation of feminist critics to produce readings of what they insisted on calling and defining as "male" literature, which happened to be rather strikingly, and most disturbingly, similar to those produced by traditional critics they themselves had labelled as masculine-oriented, misogynist and patriarchal. It was, therefore, to be expected that the feminists' insistence on creating separate, gender-oriented and gender-divided studies of literature, accompanied by the similar tendency to distinguish between male and female works of art, would also end in both negation and self-defeat. When viewed from this perspective, the institutional acknowledgment that feminism has achieved in the greater part of the Western world comes to be recognized as exactly the opposite of what it seems to be. It is of vital importance to observe that the superficial victory feminism has won by its successful incorporation into academic establishment does not mean or prove its victory over patriarchal attitudes; on the contrary, it is easily demonstrable that the official acceptance, in fact, proves its assimilation by these very attitudes feminism has claimed to be able to demystify and, by doing so, undermine. What is the result, one may wonder, of repudiating, because they were written by men, the most valuable works of art if not to perpetuate, unawares, the

same sectarian ideology which feminism, by definition, was expected to expose and correct? What is the result, one may wonder, of reading the *Oresteia*, to take the example of, admittedly, one of the most remarkable texts in the Western literary canon, in the fashion of the most conservative patriarchal critic, the only difference being that you outwardly condemn the ideology which traditional criticism persists in camouflaging as unproblematic reality? In her discussion of the history of reading Aeschylus and the problems involved in staging the classic play, Sallie Goetsch is, therefore, rightly embittered by the way the *Oresteia* has been dealt with by contemporary directors, some of whom also happen to be both women and feminists. It fills one with wonder, she says, that for the last 2,400 years almost no one has ever thought to question the traditional characterization of Aeschylus according to which his political conservatism and militancy are indisputable elements to be found in the plays he wrote; it fills one, however, not only with wonder but with justified bitterness that this same reading of Aeschylus, as a propatriarchal endorsement of Athens, which has no basis in the text itself, has been produced by those who define their critical stance to be in uncompromising opposition to the misogynist attitude of traditionally accepted scholarly criticism. Instead of examining the text of the plays for elements which, by suggesting ambiguity as well as parody of the, seemingly, triumphant justice, implicit in the resolution of the conflict, point to deficiencies implied in traditional interpretations, the feminist critic, but also the feminist director, insists on disowning what she should be eager to claim back; instead of recognizing, in other words, the ideology implied in and promoted by traditional reading, the feminist critic directs her rage towards the actual work of art which, because it was the product of a man, she is incapable of seeing otherwise but as anti-feminist and conservative. This is how the production of Ariane Mnouchkine, which prompted Goetsch's discussion, could not but succumb "to the traditional and pervasive interpretation of Eumenides as a play with a happy ending"; this is also how, as she goes on to lament, "women's construction of women can be as destructive as men's constructions, and not only when those women are antifeminists". The profoundly disquieting irony implied in the fact that this production, like other similar productions and similar readings, was widely hailed as feminist suggests, once again, that the pervasive, and most pernicious, misuse of criticism is, quite certainly, the problem requiring both our vigilance and our close attention. The fact that even those who, according to their political programme, were set upon the most scrupulous unmasking of the insidious presence of patriarchal ideology in all spheres of culture were themselves unable to avoid being co-opted by that same ideology supplies additional seriousness to the issue in question.

Before concluding our discussion, by considering the possibilities of avoiding the gloomy picture of the world prophesied in Barker's play, in which there will be no art outside, it seems appropriate to briefly refer to Susan Sontag's essay *Against Interpretation*, which at the time of its publication (1964), was taken to be the most controversial attack ever written on what had been, until then, so rarely exposed to scrutiny. The relevance of the essay for us today, in spite of her radical suggestions and the way she brings the matter to a rather hasty conclusion, is in that it throws most revealing light upon the problem of criticism and the implications underlying the activity of literary interpretation. The juxtaposition of Sontag's essay and Barker's play seems to be a most convenient procedure since the inappropriateness of some of Sontag's conclusions becomes more visible when placed in the context of the critic's intervention

in Howard Barker's *Scenes from an Execution*. The juxtaposition of the two is quite appropriate for our purpose because it facilitates, considerably, our examination of the ways in which it has been possible for the system to use criticism for promoting desirable ideology, and the ways criticism might be used so as to avoid betraying art or serving false masters.

The capacity for neutralizing art's power to make us nervous or uncomfortable is by no means a recent phenomenon. As Sontag reminds us, the first appearance of interpretation in the form of critical intervention - applied with the purpose of adjusting the meaning of the text to suit the needs of the system - could be traced as far back in history as the culture of late classical antiquity in which the 'realistic view' of the world superseded the earlier myth-oriented perspective; interpretation was summoned because of the need that the ancient texts should be not only preserved but also reconciled to the demands of post-mythic consciousness. As in their pristine form, they were found to be no longer acceptable, and yet could not be discarded, interpretation was employed to conserve the old texts by rewriting them so as to be in line with the new demands. The most immediate advantage of applying interpretation was that it was now possible to allegorize the 'crude' meaning of the text and present it as a spiritual paradigm. Sontag reminds us of how interpretation made it possible for the undesirable note of eroticism to be erased from *the Song of Solomon* and convenient spiritual meaning read into it; and that it was only when this conversion had been completed that the poem was allowed to enter the Holy Scriptures. It was, in other words, only after the text was successfully purged of its subversive power, and when there was no longer any danger of its being interpreted in ways deviating from the official truth, which it was meant to illustrate rather than problematize, that it was made available for public appreciation. Whenever a discrepancy of this sort appeared to pose a challenge for the version of reality fabricated and promoted by the system, interpretation was summoned to solve the problem. The solution, of course, in most cases amounted to mastering the text, so that in its outward form the text remained what it was before it went through the process of interpretation; in essence, however, it was an entirely new text. It is precisely this recurrent pattern of mastery that seems to have inspired Sontag to label some of the most influential schools of criticism as reactionary, aggressive, and impious theories of interpretation. Their aggressiveness is manifested in that they have been used, in too many instances, to subdue the revolutionary potential immanent to all true art. Although this, we may call crucial, aspect of critical or interpretive activity is not further developed or problematized in Sontag's essay, the very mention and the insistence on the possibility for interpretation to be 'aggressive' and 'reactionary' did mark a turning point in literary criticism in so far as it posed for the very first time, it seems, another crucial question - that of the meaning and purpose of the activity of interpretation itself. One does not have to, necessarily, agree with the radical attitude Sontag adopted in this essay to be able to appreciate the central idea of how urgent it is for us to re-consider the meaning of interpretation in the light of pervasive impoverishment of modern life on all levels and in all segments of culture. It was this same idea of how urgent and necessary it is for us to reclaim the art's power to make us more, and not less, human that once prompted Kafka, at the age of twenty, to write, in a letter to a friend, the following words:

If the book we are reading does not wake us, as with a fist hammering on our skull, why then do we read it? So that it shall make us happy? Good God, we would also be happy if we had no books, and such books as make us happy we could, if need be, write ourselves. But what we must have are those books which come upon us like ill-fortune, and distress us deeply, like the death of one we love better than ourselves, like suicide. A book must be an ice-axe to break the sea frozen inside us.

Because she believed modern man to be suffering from intellectual hypertrophy - the principal malady evident in all spheres of modern culture - and believed modern life to be, consequently, devoid of most vital energy and sensual capability, Sontag was quite right to conclude that "what we, decidedly, do not need now is further to assimilate Art into Thought, or (worse yet) Art into Culture." This pervasive assimilation of art into culture, which she identified as the most insidious trick manufactured and performed by the system, and which she proclaimed to be the most undesirable future we may choose, if we remain ignorant of what is at stake, is precisely what happens in the epilogue of Barker's play. Even if Barker did allow one man to be different from the others in that he did behave in the way the painter had anticipated, the fact that there was one such man is hardly enough for us to hope that his will be the choice of modern man. The fact that this man, because he was unable to read and was, therefore, unable to make any use of the catalogue, after coming back to the picture several times, returned once again only to go down on his knees and weep in front of it does not even point to enough belief, on the part of the author, that the capacity this single man regained - to probe, intuitively, into the very heart of the matter, let the artificial barriers fall down and transfer himself to the very place and time of the battle - is something modern man himself will be able to recover and use to change his present or his future. If not unambiguously optimistic, it is, however, at least a flicker of hope that modern man can still save his future by learning how to recover his numbed sensibility and how to identify the choices which may change his life. It is also in the light of this ability to respond to art in ways other than those prescribed or desired by the system - in ways which let the work of art appeal to what Conrad defined as "the subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts [...] and binds together all humanity" - that we can more easily notice not only the methodological fallacy but also the irony contained in the proposal Sontag puts forward for modern criticism. Guided, as she most certainly was, by Conrad's conviction that all art appeals primarily to the senses, and that the artist's task, as Conrad defined it, is to make the reader feel, and before all, to make him *see*, Sontag proclaimed the critic's task to be that of analyzing artistic structure rather than meaning; because of the principal malady of modern man which she identified as the hypertrophy of the intellect at the expense of sensual capability, the critic's task, Sontag concluded, should be "to make a work of art more real to us by telling us not what it means but by showing *how it is what it is*, even *that it is what it is*, rather than to show *what it means*."

Indignant, as she rightly was, about the way academic criticism arrogated to itself the exclusive privilege to instruct us in the ways of reading, so that, more often than not, it ended by closing the reading process for us, instead of opening it, Sontag appears to have been too hasty in her dismissal of interpretation. Her conclusion was that, since interpretation always converts the work of art into something else by distorting its

original meaning, it would be a truly liberating gesture if we were to discard interpretation altogether, and concentrate on sensuous aspects and the very texture of the work, which was in accordance with her belief that "in place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art". It is not necessary that we go into elaborate analysis of the methodological problems involved in her argumentation to see what the error is really about; it is enough that we compare her proposal to the way a truly subversive potential contained in Galactia's vision, and most convincingly transferred to her picture, is neutralized by the critic's intervention which, as it were, is quite in line with Sontag's ill-considered idea of what criticism should be like in order to be a liberating and not a repressive force. The ultimate irony of this curious coincidence lies in the fact that it is by doing what Sontag thought revolutionary criticism should be doing, that the critic in the play succeeded in achieving exactly the opposite of what Sontag envisioned. The critic did concentrate upon the form and not the meaning, he did analyse the sensuous aspects of the work, he did even praise the brilliance of the artist's technique, but it all ended in making the spectators incapable of precisely that act of seeing and feeling which all three of them - Kafka, Conrad, and Sontag - had in mind. Remembering, therefore, Sontag's diagnosis of modern man's predicament, we have to go beyond her partial solutions, which, when tested, prove both too hasty and too naive, and reconsider, from a changed perspective, the crucial question of how it has been possible for so many critics, and so much criticism, to become servants of repressive, life-denying ideologies instead of being servants to life itself by remaining loyal to art's revolutionary potential.

Since interpretation is never an 'innocent' activity, in so far as we can not but project a certain ideology - usually the one of whose existence we remain ignorant - on to the text we are reading, and since we can not avoid doing it by concentrating on form rather than meaning, what remains is to examine the ways available for us, as readers, to use interpretation to our advantage instead of allowing to be manipulated by somebody else's. In the age of post-deconstruction, when most truths have lost the unquestioned authority they used to have, in the age witnessing the collapse of most, if not all, values which once were held sacred, the question of reading and understanding literature has become more relevant than ever. In the age when all metaphysical landmarks have been erased, and the feeling of being disoriented seems to be lurking behind our most confident attitudes, it is more urgent than ever that we re-examine the old structures of thought and, hopefully, come up with different, more satisfactory maps for orientation. Finding himself confronted with the collapse of certainties, reflected in the once authoritative field of literary criticism, a renowned critic asked, although in rather disgruntled spirits, a most relevant question: "If all interpretation is misinterpretation, and if all criticism (like all history) of texts can engage only with a critic's own misconstruction, why bother to carry on the activities of interpretation and criticism?" In trying to answer the challenge posed by Abrams's question, and yet uphold deconstruction's most valid insights into the nature of text and literary meaning, I will attempt to delineate the position of the contemporary critic and the possibilities left to him to both cherish his enthusiasm and keep 'bothering' with the activity of interpretation. A good way of beginning to answer his question may be to quote yet another question formulated by the critic who, after deconstructing the former readings of Balzac's story, thought that to pose the problem of recovering our capacity to respond to art is not less than essential for our survival as humans:

From this paradoxical encounter between literature's critical irony and the uncritical naivety of its critics, from this confrontation in which Balzac's text itself seems to be an ironic reading of its own future reading, the question arises: how should we read? how can a reading lead to something other than recognition, 'normalization', and 'cure'? How can the critical project, in other words, be detached from the therapeutic projection?

In our endeavour to fathom the 'why' and the 'how' of criticism's perennial capacity to fabricate desirable emotional responses to art, we first have to identify the relevance and then, necessarily, re-examine the following interrelated concepts: the literary text, literary meaning, and literary criticism, as well as the position of interpretation in all three domains. In her analysis of the origin of interpretation, which she traced back to the age of late classical antiquity, Sontag focused on the disparity between the demands of a new scientific outlook and the literal meaning of ancient texts which was in conflict with the newly established 'realistic' view of the world. The interpreter was summoned to resolve the conflict by allegorizing the 'troublesome' text thus making it both intelligible and acceptable in the light of doctrines which came to be recognized as new, valid maps for orientation. It was, according to Sontag, an overt contempt for appearances that prompted the whole "curious project" of transforming a text, the task of interpretation being, in fact, that of translation; the interpreter, surely, never admitted to altering anything about the text - he claimed that he had only read off a sense that was already there. Having reduced the work of art to its content, he then set out to replace it with something else, producing in the end an acceptable version purged of its undesirable original meaning. It is, precisely, at this point that our examination of the problem - that of interpretation's ability to convert art into manageable formulas - has to diverge from both Sontag's view of literary meaning and her radical proposal.

Since the domain of literature is that of metaphor - since, in other words, all literature operates by means of symbol - to claim that the authentic meaning of a literary text is to be found on the most literal level of reading is obviously contradictory. To claim that we do justice to the work of art if we refrain from going beyond this level - by, actually, going 'beneath' the surface of the text in search of a more suitable sub-text - amounts to cancelling its semantic plurality, or that very quality which makes art what it is. Even the kind of criticism that "appears only to be taking the words of the text at their face value" cannot, as the British critic, K.M. Newton convincingly argues, escape from interpretation, since any particular form of literary reading and understanding is already a kind of interpretation. The analysis of a work of art which ignores content and meaning, and gives priority to matters of form and style, and which Sontag proposes as a route away from the aggressive grip of interpretation is recognised as, ironically, only a form of interpretation in disguise. The critic's intervention in Barker's play is successful precisely because the act of interpretation remains hidden behind the apparently unprejudiced formal analysis. It is because of this latent possibility for manipulation implied in what appears to be objective or neutral criticism, the kind Barker put into action in his play, that Sontag's proposal can not work. It can not work because one can not avoid making an *interpretive choice* even if he reads the text in its most obviously literal sense. This is so because there are always other possibilities of reading available, and there is no necessity that compels one to read a text in a certain way. As soon as we start arguing for

a certain form of literary reading, which we prefer among other possible forms, we have made the choice in question and have, thus, entered the realm of interpretation. "Anyone", says Newton, "who engages in reading literature and tries to communicate or discuss his or her response with someone else is inevitably involved in trying to justify a particular interpretation or to persuade the other of the validity of that interpretation." Even modern textual criticism, he goes on to say, whose aim is to establish the most authentic version of an old text and not to talk about its general meaning, is not removed from interpretation; textual criticism itself cannot proceed without certain preconceptions which will have interpretive consequences and which can be challenged by the critic who starts from different assumptions. The problem, therefore, is not about interpretation being integral to the reading process; the problem is rather related to the fact that in the greater part of the criticism produced in the past, interpreting the text was identified with understanding it. The trick concerned the way literary meaning was taken to be some given, objective property inscribed in the text, this property being the exclusive privilege of the critic's penetrating mind whose authority on all aspects of meaning or significance was indisputable. It is, by fostering, deliberately, this profitable illusion about the existence of objective truths and absolute meanings which can be disclosed and fixed once and for all that patriarchal society has been able, in too many instances, to turn even the most dangerous enemies into obedient servants. The use of this subtle trick has made the unfortunate inversion possible - possible for criticism to serve the system by pretending to be loyal to art, and for art's subversive energy to be made ineffectual; it is the curious inability to see through this trick that we may call responsible for the first generation of feminists' failure to identify the true target of their criticism. It has made possible the curious failure to distinguish between the text's inner potential for non-patriarchal readings and the existence of the *Patriarchal Institution of Reading*, which made these readings inaccessible. What made even feminists remain blind to the presence of this same patriarchal pattern of thought in their own readings was precisely their inability to recognize the problem in the illusory language of objectivity which pervades the whole Western epistemology. The most valuable canonical texts, such as the *Oresteia*, remained, in this way, encrusted with invisible patriarchal standards of readability, and feminism itself remained enthralled by the very ideology it had set out to expose. It is worth, therefore, quoting the words of another feminist critic who was able to identify the reasons for the regrettable failure of this, most laudable, project. Referring to the necessity for the vital distinction to be made so that we can claim back what orthodox feminism disowned much too easily, Adrienne Munich concludes her essay on feminist criticism and literary tradition in the following way:

In the background of patriarchal texts are women trying to escape into readability [...] Traditional literary works carry stories of a two-sexed world where difference has been mythologized and hierarchized but where other knowledge in the same texts subverts those categories. The canon has been owned by a monopoly, but acts of repossession have begun.

The acts of repossession which Munich has in mind are directly dependent upon our ability to see the history of criticism and reception of literature in the larger context of the whole epistemological background of Western culture. The difference between the first

generation of feminists and those coming after them can, therefore, be described in terms of development of this ability, which later feminists have shown in their readiness to reconsider the basic postulates upon which the whole cultural edifice has been erected and perpetuated. Alison Jaggar, for instance, has been able to crystallize the problem, arguing that Western epistemology is shaped by the belief that emotion should be excluded from the process of attaining knowledge, which, in turn, has determined the epistemic authority as the exclusive domain of the masculine; because women in patriarchal culture are identified as the bearers of emotion, and men are culturally conditioned to repress it, it seemed reasonable that women should be banned from the realm of knowledge. Thus, not only the problem of criticism, which has been the focus of our attention here, but also the whole issue concerning the perennial repression of the feminine can be traced back to the very origins of modern culture when Western man determined the course of his future by opting for the rational aspect of his mental structure to be used as his most dependable guide for life. This choice, which soon came to be recognized as self-evident truth about life to be taken for granted, is well documented not only in classical works of art, but also in the writings of ancient philosophers some of whom, like Aristotle, tried hard to provide justification for the obviously unjust and artificial discrimination. It is significant to observe that Aristotle's main argument rests upon a completely unsubstantiated claim that the whole idea of such dualism is beyond doubt:

It is clear that the rule of the soul over the body, and of the mind and the rational element over the passionate, is natural and expedient; whereas the equality of the two or the rule of the inferior is always hurtful. The same holds good for animals in relation to men; [...] Again, the male is by nature superior, and the female inferior; and the one rules, and the other is ruled; this principle of necessity extends to all mankind. Where then there is such a difference as that between soul and body, or between men and animals, [...] the lower sort are by nature slaves, and it is better for them as for all inferiors that they should be under the rule of a master.

The fact that this claim remained for so long basically unchallenged in spite of numerous challenges coming in its way demonstrates how deeply rooted the dualistic approach to existence has become. In spite of numerous attempts made throughout history, and not only by artists, to problematize the issue, the first significant change of perspective is a phenomenon of the most recent history. Although there was a whole book written almost three centuries ago by Giambattista Vico (*The New Science*, 1725), on the way man projects his mental structures upon the world thus creating his own reality, the tough framework of patriarchal logocentric edifice cannot be said to have been significantly shaken until the second half of this century when French Structuralism and Deconstruction seemed to have undermined, for the first time, the very intellectual groundwork of Western culture.

The main idea behind Deconstruction's rejection of what it calls the logocentric Universe seems to draw on Vico's claim that man's spiritual survival would not have been possible if it were not for his gift of *sapientia poetica* - the principle informing the way all humans have always lived. This faculty of poetic wisdom, due to which all men can be

defined as structuralists in their experience of the world, manifests itself as the capacity, as well as necessity, to create myths and use language metaphorically; it is through the agency of this capacity, which we cannot help employing in our 'dealings' with the non-human world of pure physis, that we survive as human beings. We make the world a more hospitable place by imposing a humanising shape upon it; we make it intelligible by structuring it. In his discussion of the use of myth in modern society, Roland Barthes developed this idea so as to emphasize the reverse process in which our own structures become potent agents for further structuring. He, in other words, focused upon the negative implications and consequences of man's myth-making capacity; he saw them in the way our lives have been usurped by depoliticized speech in which things lose the memory of their true origin.

A conjuring trick has taken place; it has turned reality inside out, it has emptied it of history and has filled it with nature, it has removed from things their human meaning so as to make them signify a human insignificance. The function of myth is to empty reality: it is literally, a ceaseless flowing out, a haemorrhage, or perhaps an evaporation, in short a perceptible absence.

The absence of human significance in the structures originating in the human mind itself is precisely what the trick is all about; the task of depoliticized speech, as Barthes makes a point of emphasizing, is to perform a subtle inversion by giving natural image to what is, originally, historical and man-made reality. Throughout the process, the ideological aspect of this inversion remains so carefully concealed that in most cases the trick goes off unnoticed by those it is intended to deceive. The deception it performs amounts to something very similar to what Barker's critic gives her 'generous' contribution - inoculating ordinary man against unorthodox insights, which, if allowed, might begin to deconstruct the artificially imposed logic of dualism, and thus endanger the whole oppressive structure of binary hierarchies embedded in patriarchal culture. To prevent even the slightest possibility of 'deconstructive thinking', the system has to proceed with extreme caution: to simply deny things - which is what Venetian masters in Barker's play come to realize - would be most dangerous as it might provoke people to start asking undesirable questions. As Barthes goes on to explain, the most efficient procedure is, therefore, not to deny things; instead of denying, the system does talk about them, but in such a way as to make them appear innocent of human intervention; it has to talk about them so as to make them appear natural and eternal, the complexity of human acts blissfully abolished.

In the age of post-deconstruction, when the spirit of a major break-through has lost much of its initial controversy and excitement, the choices left for the critic seem to be leading in two opposite directions: he may joyously immerse himself in the 'galaxy' of signifiers, embracing the free play which never leads one anywhere in particular, or he may opt for a new, self-guided direction by fully exposing and accepting his own responsibility for 'the way of seeing' he has chosen to follow. The critic, in other words, may choose to be involved in an endless process of unravelling contradictory meanings, indulging in his playful 'deconstruction' of a text until almost nothing is left of it. Put to practice, this concept of deconstructive criticism proves to be far from the liberating force it appears to be; more often than not it leaves one empty-handed, the skeleton of the

deconstructed work ending as a trophy of no use to anyone except, again - the master-model of the system whose own power seems to be proportionate to the lack of power in those who might endanger it. The paradox implied in this choice consists in that the method of deconstruction becomes itself the powerful tool for ideological manipulation which it was initially meant to expose and deconstruct; the practice of too many contemporary critics demonstrates once again that even the most serious challenger can be turned into another ally. To prevent this, a truly deconstructive critical practice, as Raman Selden insisted upon, has to be used politically - as a way of, exposing, undermining and overcoming repressive discourses. In order for criticism to become a truly meaningful and liberating activity, this 'political' use has to be the product of a new, rehumanized epistemology in which the impersonal and deceptively objective 'father tongue' will be replaced by the personal *discourse of the mother* whose power should not be that of dividing and distancing, but that of bringing back and connecting.

The challenges posed by the reconceptualized activity of criticism are neither few nor small. The critic can no longer pretend that either epistemology or his own reading of a text has nothing to do with his personal life; he can no longer hide behind the public-private dichotomy and speak of literature, as Fraya Katz-Stoker put it, "as if it were unattached to anything else in the world". The pledge he makes is that of individual experience and personal ideology which he can no longer camouflage behind the supposedly neutral language of impersonal criticism. To see, and make others see as well, that in criticism, as anywhere, there are no value-free perspectives, that our reading of a text draws to a considerable extent upon our reading of 'the world as a text' means, therefore, to accept personal responsibility for the meaning found in the text; it comes down to admitting that, to quote the words of Maurianne Adams, "our literary insights and perceptions come, in part at least, from our sensitivity to the nuances of our lives and our observations of other people's lives". The validity of criticism conceived in this way resides in its readiness to render this responsibility visible by instructing the reader how to identify the point in his reading when in order for the overall meaning to be constructed a certain referential framework has to be either chosen or applied unconsciously. By making the ideology of his own reading accessible, the critic helps the reader recognize this vital point where a choice is to be made, and where critical intervention must stop so that both art and life may resume.

REFERENCES

1. Abrams, M.H., "The Deconstructive Angel", *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, ed. David Lodge, Longman, London and New York, 1989.
2. Adams, Maurianne, quoted in Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1983.
3. Aristotle, *Politics*, quoted in Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, Routledge, London and New York, 1997.
4. Barker, Howard, *Scenes from an Execution*, John Calder, London, 1985.
5. Barthes, Roland, "Myth Today", *Mythologies*, Seuil, 1957.
6. Conrad, Joseph, Preface in *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus', Typhoon and other Stories*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1973.
7. Felman, Shoshana, "Women and Madness: The Critical Phallacy", *What does a Woman Want? Reading and Sexual Difference*, The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1993.
8. Goetsch, Sallie, "Playing Against the Text: Les Atrides and the History of Reading Aeschylus", *The Drama Review* 38, 3, New York University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1994.

9. Jaggar, Alison, in Jane Tompkins, "Me and My Shadow", *Gender and Theory: Dialogues on Feminist Criticism*, ed. Linda Kauffman, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1989.
10. Kafka, Franz, quoted in George Steiner, *Language and Silence*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1979.
11. Katz-Stoker, Fraya, quoted in Ellen Messer-Davidov, "The Philosophical Bases of Feminist Literary Criticism", *Gender and Theory: Dialogues on Feminist Criticism*, ed. Linda Kauffman, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1989.
12. Munich, Adrienne, "Notorious Signs, Feminist Criticism and Literary Tradition", *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism*, eds., Gayle Greene and Coppelia Kahn, Routledge, London and New York, 1991.
13. Newton, K.M., *Interpreting the Text: A Critical Introduction to the Theory and Practice of Literary Interpretation*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, Hertfordshire, 1990.
14. Selden, Raman, *Practicing Theory and Reading Literature: An Introduction*, Harvester, 1989.
15. Sontag, Susan, "Against Interpretation", *Twentieth Century Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. David Lodge, Longman, London and New York, 1986.
16. Vico, Giambattista, in Terence Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics*, Routledge, London, 1989.

O ZLOUPOTREBI KRITIKE I TRIVIJALIZACIJI UMETNOSTI

Petra Mitić

Rad se bavi načinima kojima je patrijarhalni sistem, u svojim istorijski različitim pojavnim oblicima, do sada gotovo uvek uspeva da marginalizuje umetnost i stavi je u službu vlastitih ideoloških interesa. Na primeru drame Hauarda Barkera, analize jedne Balzakove priče i savremenog izvodjenja Eshilove Orestije, razmatraju se načini zloupotrebe kritike i različite forme trivijalizacije umetnosti. Autor se zatim osvrće na još uvek kontroverzni esej Suzane Zontag "Protiv Interpretacije" da bi preispitao mogućnost koncepcije jednog drugačijeg kritičkog diskursa koji ne bi služio represiji već istinskom oslobadjanju.