WHEN MOST OF US CONTEMPLATE THE CRITICAL PHENOMENON KNOWN AS deconstruction, we tend to associate it with a distinctly Continental heritage. Its invocation of such major figures as Heidegger and Nietzsche rather than the philosophical authorities familiar to the Anglo-American tradition; its clear centering in the work of Jacques Derrida and various theorists linked with the French poststructuralist school; even its adoption of a simultaneously playful and magisterial discursive style—all these qualities endow the deconstructionist enterprise with a characteristically foreign air. We routinely construe the practice of deconstruction in New Haven as evidence that a European beachhead has been established along the eastern seaboard; we view the warm welcome extended to deconstruction at Yale not as an indication that there is a fundamental affinity between this critical methodology and the New Critical approach for which Yale has been historically famous, but principally as a sign that our Yale colleagues are receptive to the most advanced—if perhaps, we are inclined to think, also the most baffling—experiments in literary theorizing.

No doubt there is much that is distinctly European in deconstructionist activity, and I would not wish to deny Hartman, de Man, and others their Continental pedigree. Nonetheless, we should be aware that Yale has produced its own homegrown forerunner of deconstruction—namely, Charles Feidelson, whose *Symbolism and American Literature* (1953)¹ has been acknowledged as a major influence by a number of critics engaged in

deconstructionist readings of American literature. What is interesting about the popularity of *Symbolism and American Literature* among contemporary deconstructionists, however, is not simply that Feidelson’s book shows an American scholar of the 1950s to have been thinking along the same lines as Continental theorists of subsequent decades. For Feidelson’s study enacts a thoroughgoing application of New Critical linguistic and epistemological principles to the examination of literary history—it exemplifies, indeed, a remarkably consistent extension of New Critical methods of textual analysis to the delineation of an entire literary tradition. The influence that *Symbolism and American Literature* has exerted upon recent deconstructionist approaches to American literature suggests, then, that there may be a fundamental affinity between the assumptions undergirding two critical methodologies that seem, on the surface, to have little in common. While sympathetic interpreters of deconstruction such as Jonathan Culler would have us believe that deconstruction represents a radical departure from critical approaches—including the New Criticism—purportedly tied to the pursuit of meaning and interpretation,² I propose that the opposite is the case: implicit in the New Critical stress upon formal autonomy is a valorization of linguistic self-reflexivity that is simply extended to its logical limits in the openly antimimetic poetics advocated by the deconstructionist school.

The continuity between New Criticism and poststructuralism has of course been noted by other scholars.³ A number of important issues are raised by this affinity between the two critical schools, however, and these issues have not yet by any means been discussed exhaustively. Moreover, no one has noted the particular ramifications of this kinship for the study of American literature. In this essay, I shall briefly review the critical standing of *Symbolism and American Literature*, outline its argument and delineate its points of vulnerability, and then explore some broader questions that Feidelson’s study suggests about central tendencies in twentieth-century literary theory.

* * *

When Charles Feidelson’s *Symbolism and American Literature* first appeared almost thirty years ago, a number of important critics greeted it as a major work in the criticism of American literature. Sherman Paul, R. W. B.

Lewis, Kenneth Burke, and Edwin Fussell hailed the originality of its theoretical approach and the comprehensiveness of its literary-historical scope. Since its publication Symbolism and American Literature has fulfilled Paul’s prophesy that it would prove a “seminal” work, for its following has grown with the years. Literary theorists have testified to the usefulness of Feidelson’s discussion of symbolism. Eliseo Vivas, in Creation and Discovery, praised Symbolism and American Literature for its endorsement of a poetics of nonreferentiality, while Wimsatt and Brooks adopted central tenets of Feidelson’s formulation of symbolism in their Literary Criticism: A Short History. Feidelson’s influence has also been felt by critics attempting to stake out distinctive theories of American literature. Symbolism and American Literature is frequently coupled with Matthiessen’s American Renaissance as an authoritative text, and numerous scholarly articles treat Feidelson’s thesis about the mid-nineteenth-century writers as either a major influence or a respected adversary. Joel Porte’s The Romance in America and Wesley Abram Morris’s Toward a New Historicism, for example, both acknowledge a major debt to the historical and theoretical framework provided by Feidelson.

In spite of all the approbation and influence that Symbolism and American Literature has enjoyed over the years, however, the book has also been attacked on various grounds by some formidable scholars. When it first appeared, Perry Miller and Leon Howard attacked it, respectively, for its distortions of literary history and its “curiously barren” textual readings. Richard Harter Fogle, Richard Chase, and C. C. Walcutt, while acknowledging the importance of Feidelson’s study, expressed serious reservations about its method and findings. Over the years, Howard Mumford Jones, R. S. Crane, and Philip Rahv joined the chorus of disapproval, pointing out that Feidelson’s a prioristic conception of symbolistic language produced a


naive literary history, adopted a circular mode of argumentation, and, as Rahv put it, had "quite literally consumed the interest in literature." 8

Symbolism and American Literature has nonetheless recently experienced a remarkable resurgence of popularity. While standard studies of the American literary tradition have been repudiated for their old-fashioned endorsement of such concepts as authorial intention and thematic statement, Symbolism and American Literature has recently grown in stature. Joseph Riddel, perhaps the high priest of avant-garde theories of American literature, has celebrated Feidelson's book for its insistence that "American literature, in its Emersonian origins, had always been modern, in the sense that it had discovered the primordial economy of language, a self-reflexivity which poetic language or criticism could only idealize by lamenting the historical trials of the word. . . . 'American' thought originates in its own irony," Riddel argues, and "what American literature represents, in the very figures of 'Man Thinking' or the 'central man,' is critical thought itself." Accordingly he hails Feidelson's thesis about the self-reflexivity of American literature as a pioneering achievement in the history of American literary criticism. 9 Kenneth Dauber, in the pages of Diacritics, has paid homage to Feidelson as "the first American critic explicitly to formulate something like the position that American literature is a literature whose primary concern has always been its own nature." 10 John Irwin's recent American Hieroglyphics clearly locates its deconstructionist approach to the American literary tradition within the symbolistic framework developed by Feidelson. 11 Irwin's substitution of "hieroglyphic doubling" for the central figure of "Man Thinking"; his emphasis upon the American Renaissance writers' quest for a (predifferentiated) origin; his argument that these writers formulated a poetics of indeterminacy—presumably inspired by Champollion's decoding of the Rosetta Stone—all these theses represent a bold but logically consistent development of Feidelson's proposition that


self-referentiality is at once distinctively “American” and definitively “modern.” Thus while the stock of critics as diverse as Chase, Lewis, Smith, Fiedler, Parrington, and Kazin seems to have fallen in recent years—at least among scholars aspiring to integrate American Studies with the most fashionable directions in literary theory—the fortunes of Feidelson would seem to be approaching a new level of prosperity.

It is timely to explore the reasons why Feidelson’s study has achieved near-canonical status among contemporary theorists of American literature. Curiously, it may be the methodological connection that we can now discern between Feidelson’s argument and that of the deconstructionists that renders explicit the deeper difficulties besetting Symbolism and American Literature. For those theoretical statements about the nature of literature that constituted a cumbersome apparatus in Feidelson’s book have emerged as canonical principles of a critical approach that claims not merely to reshape the activity of reading but to revise our conceptions of language, textuality, and even reality. In other words, a lengthy epistemological agenda has now been attached to a critical method that orginally aimed to illuminate the writing of a particular phase in American history.

* * *

Feidelson’s central argument in Symbolism and American Literature is that “the unified phase of American literature which began with the tales of Hawthorne and Poe and ended with Melville and Whitman” was, although “not recognized as such by the men who made it,” a “symbolist movement” (1). Acknowledging that the germ of this idea was provided by Edmund Wilson in Axel’s Castle, Feidelson takes issue with Wilson’s notion that the primary affiliation of these writers of the American Renaissance was to romanticism, which Feidelson dismisses as “romantic egoism.” Instead, Feidelson argues, it was a shared preoccupation with “Man Seeing” that produced in American Renaissance literary artists a “commit[ment] to a common theory and practice of perception” (5). Countering F. O. Matthiessen’s more sociological thesis that the “vital common denominator” among the mid-nineteenth-century giants was a “devotion to the possibilities of democracy,” Feidelson states, “the really vital common denominator is precisely their attitude toward their medium . . . their distinctive quality is a devotion to the possibilities of symbolism.” The symbolist method is, for Feidelson, these authors’ “title to literary independence.” Because of “the relative immaturity of the American literary tradition,” they “wrote no masterpieces.” Hence, their main value is that “they look forward to one of the most sophisticated movements in literary history; however inexpert, they broaden the possibilities of literature” (4). Symbolism and American Literature is an ambitious theoretical, historical, and critical
study. It aspires to revise our conception of the distinctive features of the American Renaissance; it also provides close readings of several complex texts, formulates a theory of symbolism, and argues that this theory establishes five American writers of the mid-nineteenth century as the progenitors of modernism.

At the heart of Feidelson’s argument is the contention that symbolism is not a technique, but a mode of perception. Instead of being an instrument for ‘‘expressing’’ a reality that exists apart from the speaker, the language in a symbolistic work, he holds, is that reality: subject and object are merged in the act of perception. “The linguistic medium itself’’ (45) thus becomes the actual “subject” of symbolist literature:

To consider the literary work as a piece of language is to regard it as a symbol, autonomous in the sense that it is quite distinct both from the personality of its author and from any world of pure objects, and creative in the sense that it brings into existence its own meaning (49).

He argues that modern theorists of symbolism—from Langer and Cassirer to Blackmur, Tate, and Ransom—have worked to dispel the Cartesian dualism that has dogged theories of perception since the seventeenth century. Merging the old polarities of subject and object, idea and thing, “the philosophy of symbolism . . . is an attempt to find a point of departure outside the premises of dualism—not so much an attempt to solve the old ‘problem of knowledge’ as an effort to redefine the process of knowing in such a manner that the problem never arises’’ (50).

For Feidelson, a natural corollary of the autonomy of symbolistic language is its illogicality and hence its affinity with the language of poetry. “Logical language,’’ he claims, is “built upon the principle of discreteness’’ (57), whereby each element has a direct correspondence to some concrete, external object. “In poetry,’’ however, “we feel no compulsion to refer outside language itself. A poem delivers a version of the world; it is the world for the moment’’ (57). Similarly, “a metaphor insists upon including as many qualities as possible, thus introducing elements unassimilable by logic’’ (62). Indeed, Feidelson sees the language of logic as so fundamentally alien to the nature of literature in general that he often treats the terms “metaphor,’’ “poetry,’’ and “literature’’ as synonymous:

The exercise of the alogical language of poetry is necessarily antilogical. Existing in the same medium, literature supersedes, manipulates, and recasts logical structure. . . .

The elements of a metaphor have meaning only by virtue of the the whole which they create by their interaction; a metaphor presents parts that do not fully exist until the whole which they themselves produce comes into existence. Literary
structure, therefore, is logically circular. Any attempt to describe it must end in paradox (58, 60–61; emphasis added).

The readings that emerge from this theory of symbolism are predictable. Feidelson analyzes *The Scarlet Letter*, for instance, as a “kind of exposition of the nature of symbolic perception” (10). He calls “The Custom House” a “portrait of the artist as symbolist in spite of himself” (9), and observes that “the very focus of the book [is] . . . a written sign” (13). Similarly, the subject of “Lilacs” is “the poetic process,” and that of “Usher” is “aesthetic sensibility.” Melville’s early sea adventures focus on a “quest” of the “voyaging mind,” in which the hero is “less a man than a capacity for perception” (165). Discussing the ever-increasing circles of significance that surround the central symbols of *Moby-Dick*—the sea, the doubloon, and the whale itself—Feidelson concludes that the actual subject of that novel is the “meaning of meaning.” Feidelson argues that “the best clue to the method and meaning” of *Pierre* is Gide’s *Faux-Monnayeurs*, since “as in Gide’s novel, every character, including the author, is a counterfeiter; man’s life is a construct; the artist is the archetypal man” (186, 191). Naturally enough, Feidelson sees in Emersonian transcendent- alism an early theoretical articulation of the symbolist manifesto:

When Emerson says that the “perception of symbols” enables man to see both “the poetic construction of things” and “the primary relation of mind and matter,” and that this same perception normally creates “the whole apparatus of poetic expression,” he is identifying poetry with symbolism, symbolism with a mode of perception, and symbolic perception with the vision, first, of a symbolic structure in the real world and, second, of a symbolic relationship between nature and mind (120).

While Feidelson’s textual analyses illustrate his general concept of symbolism and challenge traditional interpretations of classic literary works—traditional in 1953, that is—they also shed light on the nature of his literary-historical inquiry. Convinced that these mid-century American writers were forerunners of a “problematic”—a favorite term of Feidelson’s—and difficult mode of perception that could reach full development only in the twentieth century, Feidelson attributes the artistic flaws he discerns in their work to the primitiveness of their attempts to enact the symbolistic program. Thus, while saluting Hawthorne’s achievement in *The Scarlet Letter*, Feidelson finds Hawthorne’s other fiction inferior because its mode was allegorical, rather than symbolistic, retreating to a “safe” means of exploring the relationship between “thought” and “things” (15). Melville, too, despite his triumphant maintenance of a state of paradox in *Moby-Dick*, was, according to Feidelson, for the most part confused and inconsistent. Because *Moby-Dick* was presumably written during a brief interim when

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“Melville’s artistic bankruptcy was postponed by his buoyant spirit” (175), Feidelson gives it less attention than _Pierre_, an aborted instance of the symbolistic method, but valuable for its anticipation of Gide’s later construction of an “infinite regress which establishes creativity as the subject” (189). _Billy Budd_, on the other hand, was in Feidelson’s eyes a cowardly retreat from the ontological theme of the “voyaging mind” which had absorbed Melville in his earlier work. Even Emerson, whom Feidelson hails as being on the whole the most successful nineteenth-century symbolist, he adjudges finally unable to discern the more sophisticated implications of his own theory:

His literary theory and practice were limited by the philosophic issues that led him to symbolism. . . . While he urged an experimental attitude toward literary form, the “spherical” structure of his own poems and essays remained rudimentary. . . . Thus our sense of alienation from the Emersonian brand of symbolism is justified to the extent that he was remote from the specific possibilities of the _literary_ symbol (122).

* * *

_Symbolism and American Literature_, to summarize, is a remarkably consistent book; its theoretical foundation, textual exegeses, and historicist outlook all work in mutually confirmatory ways. What I wish to call into question, however, is whether this is the consistency of creative synthesis or that of tautology.

Feidelson’s thesis about the nature of symbolism is based upon the familiar New Critical distinction between the language of logic (or prose) and that of poetry: the one is referential, the other self-contained. We may grant that poetic language enjoys a certain completeness of internal relations that differentiates it qualitatively from the referential language employed in much informational or argumentative—or, for that matter, even much fictional—prose. When Feidelson starts to treat “‘poetry’” and “‘literature’” as equivalent terms, however, and to conflate these with illogicality, he encounters serious problems. For presumably “‘literature’” comprises such categories as prose fiction and the essay, which for many critical purposes it is difficult to equate with poetry. Indeed, to treat the terms as interchangeable is useful only in the broadest discussions of literary theory, where the goal of the inquiry is to establish the constituent features of some category such as fictive discourse or aesthetic form, and where no single mode of discourse is privileged to impose its specific generic identity upon the definition of “‘literature’” as such.

Because Feidelson’s theory about “‘literature’” hinges precisely upon the reduction of all imaginative discourse to the strategy of lyric poetry, however,
he is simply assuming in advance what he should be setting out to prove. His adducing as "evidence" the purportedly symbolistic mode of perception discoverable in Melville's novels and Emerson's essays is a logical sleight of hand: the novelistic theme of questing or the philosophical pursuit of a synthesis of subject and object is hardly equivalent to a poetics that marginalizes the referential functions of literary discourse. What is more, the further conflation of "literature" with illogicality is—to borrow one of Feidelson's favorite words—somewhat problematic. In what sense are the cetology chapters in Moby-Dick nonreferential, or illogical? Does not their effectiveness derive precisely from their insistence upon the very objectivity of the tangible plenitude within which subjective awareness inevitably locates itself? While Feidelson has discerned something important about the philosophical and literary strategy of American Renaissance writers—even at their most discursive they clearly reject a naively logocentric rationality and seek to overcome the dualism of matter and consciousness—his definition of the symbolistic method loses force when it is rendered coterminous with the definition of "literature" as such. If Melville produces in his whale a symbol that implies ever-expanding circles of meaning, he has not simply invoked the primordial ambiguity of poetic language itself.

Part of the difficulty with Feidelson's approach thus derives from the tendency prevalent among New Critics prescriptively to exalt lyric poetry—defined in their own peculiar terms—as the definitive genre of literary discourse. In Feidelson's case, the New Critical formula that "All literature is X"—with "X" equaling some such term as "paradox," "ambiguity," "irony," or "tension"—becomes "All literature is illogicality." In fact, the assertion that "All literature is X" really means, "All literature should be X." Because Feidelson himself clearly has a spiritual affinity for the symbolistic mode, his favorite literary works are those that successfully embody it. Allegory is, accordingly, inherently a less courageous or imaginative or complex approach than is symbolism; while all romantic poetry is tainted by "romantic egoism." Perry Miller complained,

Armed with this [symbolistic] cleaver, Mr. Feidelson stretches out on his chopping block the works of Poe, Emerson, Hawthorne, Whitman, Thoreau and Melville, slices off the symbolical tenderloin, and throws the rest into the refuse pail of "romanticism," there to be chewed, as so much bone and gristle, by those who have become the scavengers of criticism, the literary historians.12

It would seem that any work not undertaken in the symbolistic mode is by definition an inferior attempt—indeed, possibly not even a work of

“literature” at all. If Feidelson comes down so hard upon the Romantic poets for their insistence upon the creative presence of an essential poetic self, it is questionable whether he would even include under the rubric of literary discourse such a work as *Sister Carrie*, which is shaped by the naive assumption that the authorial self can observe, replicate, and judge a world possessing distinct ontological status beyond consciousness. Feidelson fails to demonstrate that adherence to the symbolistic mode should be itself taken as a standard of value or a sign of excellence, or that the absence of symbolism should be taken as proof of second-rate artistry or “noliterariness.” Could there be such a thing as a literary work that fulfills this symbolistic program and yet fails to achieve artistic interest? Could there be any reason for *The Marble Faun*’s inferiority to *The Scarlet Letter* other than the fact—if it is a fact—that the former is written in the allegorical, rather than the symbolistic, mode? Is *Billy Budd* an artistic failure simply because Melville here chose—if he did—to abandon the symbolistic themes of voyaging and paradox and busy himself with other structural and thematic materials?

Naturally enough, the textual readings that Feidelson offers in support of his thesis about symbolism reflect these theoretical difficulties. Feidelson claims that his theory profoundly illuminates the masterpieces of the American Renaissance, and that his main goal, in the New Critical tradition, is “not pure theory but practical criticism.” Particularly when *Symbolism and American Literature* first appeared—and we had not yet been informed that writers from Milton to Dickens had all been obsessed with the problematics of a language wrestling with its own inability to express its intentions—Feidelson’s readings provided an important new angle upon the classics of mid-nineteenth-century literature. Certainly there is more than a trace of the modernist concern with artistic self-consciousness discernable in Hawthorne’s elaboration of the multiple significances of his letter A, or in Poe’s fascination with imagination as a constitutive feature of reality. Yet Feidelson has reduced his writers’ enactment of symbolistic perception to the level of epistemological cliché. In what sense is this interest in the process of mimesis the essential “subject” treated in these writers’ works? Why can it not be an ancillary interest or strategy? How do his readings make room for other vital, if more traditional, considerations, such as Hawthorne’s preoccupation with moral choice, Whitman’s democratic optimism, or Melville’s cosmic brooding? Surely it cannot be the case that symbolism cancels out the significance of ethics, politics, and philosophy. Had Feidelson chosen to describe the particular way in which the symbolistic method functions in individual works, determining the nature and extent of its significance in the total effect each author strove to create and the ideas he wished to explore, he could have retained his valid insight into the workings of the symbolistic imagination and at the same time have avoided
the trap of reductionism. As R.W.B. Lewis noted in an otherwise laudatory review, "the same mode of analysis would produce comparable judgments about nearly every great work of literature. . . . It would not be frivolous, for example, to describe the Odyssey as a poem about a great poet."\textsuperscript{13} In Symbolism and American Literature, not only does all literature end up confronting the same epistemological quandary: it even thematizes that problematic. By a curious twist, then, Feidelson undermines his own claim that symbolism locates the essence of literary activity in process rather than meaning: if literature is programmatically "about" its own referential incapacities, it is very much directed toward the elaboration—indeed, the repetition—of cognitive propositions.

The literary-historical dimension of Symbolism and American Literature also suffers severely from Feidelson's a prioristic approach to the definition of language and literature. For one result of Feidelson's implicit identification of "good literature" with "symbolism" is that it leads him to adopt the essentially ahistorical view that the literary theory of the present possesses a kind of absolute superiority for explaining and measuring the literature of the past. According to Feidelson, the literature of the mid-nineteenth century is to be valued for the degree to which it anticipates the themes and strategies of modernism and fulfills the criteria for successful New Critical exegesis. Feidelson thus entirely bypasses conscious intention, fixing upon the presumably unconscious fulfillment of a symbolistic program that is projected in his authors' work; the result is, inevitably, a certain twentieth-century chauvinism. A further consequence of Feidelson's preconceived notion of literary language is his odd preference for discussing failures rather than successes in nineteenth-century attempts to enact the symbolistic mode. Instead of treating Moby-Dick as the keystone of Melville's achievement, Feidelson passes over it as Melville's halfway house on the way to artistic despair and devotes greater attention to the problem of indeterminacy in Pierre. Feidelson's comments on Thoreau completely omit any mention of Walden and instead highlight the constant struggle to find "a 'point of interest' . . . mid-way between subject and object" (141) that is evidenced in Thoreau's other works; accordingly, Feidelson places emphasis on what he calls Thoreau's "ultimate preference for the art of life over the life of art" (150). Even when Feidelson discusses successful works such as "Lilacs" and The Scarlet Letter, he makes it clear that the authors here attained a clarity of symbolistic vision that they may not have intended and never managed to repeat. Thus, Feidelson's discovery of so few symbolistic masterpieces has the effect of endowing this privileged perceptual mode with an almost otherworldly quality. Even the heroes of Feidelson's

\textsuperscript{13}Lewis, "Literature and Things," 312.
method, in Leon Howard’s words, ‘‘shrink . . . under [his] scrutiny.’’ An ironic result is that we find it difficult to acknowledge the significance of Feidelson’s thesis about the symbolistic nature of mid-century writers; Feidelson’s imposition by hindsight of a modernist critical bias has the effect of trivializing the very point about the formation of literary tradition that he seeks to affirm.

Feidelson’s a prioristic approach to the definition of symbolism is not simply inadequately historical, but fundamentally ahistorical. For the logical implication of Feidelson’s argument is that the symbolistic mode is an inherent property of literary language working through individual writers, almost as the word of God is said to have been received by the prophets who were its scribes. From the symbolistic point of view, writers lose status as active subjects engaging specific configurations of historical circumstances; they become vehicles for incarnating a supra-individual—and transhistorical—linguistic essence. Language accordingly usurps history, and social considerations emerge as peripheral to literary production. Indeed, it becomes impossible to account for literary development in terms of any combination of extraliterary factors, sociological, economic, or political; the very attempt to introduce such a conception of causality is antithetical to the essence of the symbolistic enterprise. Yet it thereby becomes difficult for Feidelson to account for the drama of radical epistemological rupture that is central to his own literary-historical thesis. If illogicality is—one is tempted to say, always already—the constitutive feature of literary language, why was this trait discovered only in the crucible of the United States of the 1850s? What forces were at work in American society at mid-century that encouraged only a short-lived experimentation in the symbolistic mode, with realism and naturalism taking over the stage until the mysterious reappearance of symbolist modernism in the twentieth century? Feidelson’s insight into the role played by American Renaissance writers in establishing the strategies and themes of modernism possesses some validity, but almost in spite of the theoretical and historical arguments that he marshals to defend it.

* * *

If *Symbolism and American Literature* is flawed in the ways that I have pointed out, why does it continue to exercise influence—indeed, to increase its influence—upon literary theory? What I shall argue briefly here is that the difficulties that beset Feidelson’s argument are not logical contradictions peculiar to this one critic, but philosophical problems that charac-

14Howard, ‘‘Symbolism and American Literature,’’ 319.
terize a dominant tendency in modern criticism, as it has extended from the New Critics down to the deconstructionists of the present day. The deficiencies of Symbolism and American Literature therefore coincide with shortcomings in theoretical outlook that constitute a prevalent blind spot in modern critical methodology. I wish first to note, however, that it would not surprise me to hear that Feidelson himself has been startled, even dismayed, by the way his study of symbolism has been invoked as a prophetic precursor of deconstructionist poetics. Where he designated a particular grouping of mid-nineteenth-century writers as protomodernists, certain recent theorists of American literature claim that the whole national tradition is characterized by a thematics and a poetics of self-reflexivity; where he envisioned symbolism as a mode of bridging the epistemological gap between subject and object, his descendants propose that subject and object are themselves fictions, and that the goal of criticism is to reveal the implication of writer and reader alike in an infinite regress of texts that do not reflect and mediate historical reality, but instead constitute that reality. Beneath Feidelson’s apparently daring formulations about language and reality there lurks an old-fashioned Americanist who lavishes loving care upon the task of explicating the world view contained in classic works of literature, and who might well be reluctant to assume his exalted status among the apostles of deconstruction. Nonetheless, the history of ideas is in large part the history of misappropriation and redefinition; the historical world continues to move along and carries its texts with it, and participants in that world plunder the past without conscience in order to clarify and justify their own course in the present. I do not wish to adjudge Feidelson’s accountability in the deconstruction of American literature, but simply to point out the logical connections between his study of symbolism and subsequent studies that would have us view all American literature as an exploration of the epistemological abime. The construction of an ideological edifice transcends the personal intentions of the individuals who participate, consciously or unconsciously, in its formation.

One tendency (one might say, value) that the New Criticism and deconstruction share is the privileging of the nonrational—in criticism, in literature, indeed, in life. In one sense, of course, the New Critics attempted to bring analytical rigor to the study of literature: presumably, their treatment of the text as a discrete object requiring its own procedures of inquiry would enable them to perform readings eliminating vaporish subjectivity on the one hand and sociological reductionism on the other. Yet, as Gerald Graff has pointed out, in their well-known distinction between the languages of science and poetry, the New Critics routinely associated banal instrumentality with the former and rich complexity with the latter, thereby erecting a theoretical framework that—for all its apparent rejection of Romanticism—held up spontaneity and imagination in opposition to logic.
and reason.  

The designation of ambiguity, paradox, and irony—or illogicality—as the defining marks of literature suggested an implicit metaphysics: reality is inaccessible to the tools of rationality, and the finest literary endeavors to construe the nature of that reality necessarily convey its fundamental ambiguity. Allen Tate thus argued that poetry is superior to logic because it more accurately corresponds to the true tenor of experience: "in poetry, the disparate elements are not combined as in logic, which can join things only . . . under the law of contradiction; they are combined in poetry rather as experience, and experience has decided to ignore logic." This conviction that life itself defies the categories of rationality is, Graff argues, at the heart of the New Critical fondness for discovering paradox in literary works, as both structuring principle and theme. There is but a short philosophical distance to traverse between New Criticism and deconstruction, which is, as Graff puts it, "in many respects old ambiguity and irony writ large." What the deconstructionists have done is to extend the repudiation of determinate or paraphrasable meaning from poetry to discourse in general, and to codify the indeterminacy of historical reality. Since "reality" (frequently placed between quotation marks) is ultimately a text—the "géno-texte," as Julia Kristeva calls it—all the texts that we construct in relation to it, imaginative and critical alike, are "phéno-textes" that cannot, and should not, aspire to render an "objective" world beyond the realm of textuality.  

Indeed, in Kristeva's view, "reality is a convention produced by language."  

There is thus a fundamental affinity between Feidelson's New Critical contention that the symbol "creates its own meaning" and Dauber's poststructuralist claim that "meaning is not embodied in the written but is a function of writing." Dauber, of course, gently chides Feidelson for his slightly naive tendency to "mystify language," to "retain for the word a power of generation, a power of its own to create, where we would today be more likely to see its creativity as an operation performed by it in a particular language game." Deconstruction would also take issue with the immanentism of Feidelson's formulation of symbolism, arguing that Feidelson exhibits what Derrida would call a "longing for presence"—a nostalgia for the presumed organicism of the pre-Cartesian past—that is antithetical to the poststructuralist delight in epistemological rupture. However, both New Criticism and deconstruction found their concern with linguistic self-referentiality upon an implicit conviction that (the best)

15 Gerald Graff, Literature Against Itself, 129–49.
16 The quotation from Tate and the quotation from Graff are from ibid., 136 and 145. Julia Kristeva, La Révolution du Language Poétique (Paris: Seuil, 1974), 339.
17 Quoted in Graff, Literature Against Itself, 171.
18 Dauber, "Criticism of American Literature," 56.
literature (and criticism) turns to an examination of its own discursive procedures precisely because these procedures address the fundamental epistemological dilemma confronting humanity. This view of texts and textuality, therefore, "naturalizes" as an inherent quality of literature and language an ideological stance that is in fact historically specific, reflecting an estrangement from social reality distinctly characteristic of the modern era. While the endorsement of a poetics of antireferentiality and nonrationality would seem to set the critic apart from the mass of hapless readers who, grasping at the slippery life-line of logocentrism, seek determine meaning and "presence," this poetics, as Frank Lentricchia has noted, actually does not isolate [the critic] from the mainstream conditions of modern society, but rather constitutes an academic elaboration and intensification of them. American poststructuralist literary criticism tends to be an activity of textual privatization, the critic's doomed attempt to retreat from a social landscape of fragmentation and alienation.

If New Criticism and deconstruction jointly enshrine nonrationality and self-reflexivity in literature and criticism, they do so because they conceive of the historical world as lacking in inherent structure or meaning: discourse is enriched in its ontological significance to the extent that material "reality" (again, in quotation marks) is seen as impoverished, or at least inaccessible to analytical procedures that could render its essential configuration. We here encounter a second belief that reveals an underlying continuity in these two strains in modern criticism--namely, an abiding endorsement of the positivist epistemological assumptions that both fervently seek to transcend. The New Critical designation of scientific language as inferior to poetic language suggests that the "facts" of the material world are inert and fragmented data, possessing no capacity to illuminate the complexity of human experience. As Feidelson puts it—in terms echoing the dualistic sensibility of Thomas Hobbes—there is a profound epistemological abyss between the realm embodied in the symbolistic imagination, that of the "thinking ego," and the realm of "brute fact" (50)—a formulation that suggests a vital connection between the subjective idealism of the poetics he advocates and an essentially mechanical materialist conception of the workaday world. As Georg Lukacs has argued, this paradoxical relation is in fact characteristic of modernist poetics: while purporting to negate alienation by positing the superior synthesis of art,

19Lentricchia, After the New Criticism, 186.
it reinforces the apparent fragmentation and barrenness of historical actuality.  
Deconstruction collapses the New Critic’s dualistic distinction between the languages of nonfiction and poetry: to postulate a realm of the “aesthetic” apart from that of discourse in general is to privilege the workings of the mimetic imagination and to deny the textuality—indeed, the fictionality—of all cognitive activities. Deconstruction thus sets itself up in opposition to both positivism and the neo-Kantian idealism of modernist aestheticians such as Feidelson. Yet in its conflation of all types of linguistic functioning, deconstruction deepens rather than reduces its implication in both positivism and idealism: all discourse is a fiction precisely because the “facts” of experience are not anchored in, or reflective of, historical processes—objectively existing beyond the bounds of consciousness—that the writer can hope to comprehend, with more or less accuracy. The deconstructionists, of course, pose a critique of the metaphysics of “presence”—and in so doing evince an apparent radicalism—in their contention that the objectivist claim to self-evidence simply provides a cover for (bourgeois) self-interest: logocentrism is deployed as a strategy of ideological control, since truths that are relative or class-specific are proposed as absolute and eternal. Derrida’s notions of denaturing, free play, differance, and the structurality of structure expose the bankruptcy of metaphysical assumptions about the nature of “reality,” thereby subverting the hegemony of all systems of ideas that make a claim to “objective” (again in quotation marks) truth. For all the distance that deconstruction claims to have put between itself and positivism, however, there is a curious kinship between Derrida’s polemical contention that “Il n’y a pas de hors-texte”22 and Comte’s proclamation of the impossibility “d’obtenir des notions absolues . . . à chercher l’origine et la destination de l’univers et à connaître les causes intimes des phénomènes.”23 The principal difference is that Comte happily adheres to his limited realm of self-evident “facts,” while Derrida rejects empiricism

21Cf. Roland Barthes:
The only feature which distinguishes historical discourse from other kinds is a paradox: the “fact” can only exist linguistically as a term in a discourse, yet we behave as if it were a simple reproduction of something on another plane of existence altogether, some extra-structural “reality.” Historical discourse is presumably the only kind which aims at a referent “outside” itself that can in fact never be reached.
as pseudo-objectivist and delights in the contradictory interplay of competing shadow-truths. For all its polemicizing against idealist metaphysics, the deconstructionist argument, in its privileging of language and textuality, comes perforce close to engulfing materiality within the discourses produced by consciousness.24

The New Critics, as Lentricchia notes, clung fondly to a view of poetry as knowledge, whereas the deconstructionists would cast off all moorings to cognitive determinacy. Both, however, contemplate the abyss of the ontological problematic with worshipping fascination; paradox and indeterminacy themselves become the realm of ultimate significance. Yet this valorization of the linguistic activity that confronts and celebrates the ambiguity of the void has the effect not of enriching subjectivity or écriture, but of reducing the efforts of consciousness to the very barrenness that the critic so studiously aspires to transcend. Whether the historical world is constituted by 'brute fact' or textual indeterminacy, the productions of writers and critics alike are reduced to an exploration of existential angst that is almost as poignant as it is monotonous. The stale uniformity that accompanies the standard self-reflexive critical reading—from Feidelson's discovery of the 'meaning of meaning' in Ahab's doubloon to J. Hillis Miller's pursuit of epiphanic 'linguistic moments' in Shelley's verse—derives from this underlying conviction that the historical world is not susceptible to, or indeed worthy of, mimesis. For if critics cannot acknowledge what Raymond Williams has called the 'multiplicity of writing'—a richness generated by the widely varying conditions of mimesis in a changing historical world—how can they discover in literary texts anything other than the impoverished repetition of an infinite regress? To the extent that the critic envisions the object of mimesis as lacking in dynamism or inner coherence, then, the activity of mimesis itself becomes enslaved by a kind of determinism of irony or indeterminacy. Whether they claim to have merged subject and object or to have abolished them, both the New Critic and the deconstructionist are entrapped between the abiding poles of Cartesian dualism.

The root cause of the problems besetting New Criticism and deconstruction as theories of literature and methods of reading is, I propose, their

24The locus classicus of the argument that positivism (mechanistic materialism) is logically compatible with—and implies—idealism remains Lenin's Materialism and Empirio-Criticism. In contradistinction to both philosophical schools, Lenin proposed that a material world does indeed exist beyond consciousness, but that it is knowable to us only through interaction and penetration; the key to the expansion and refinement of knowledge accordingly is not contemplation—positivist observation or idealist abstraction—but practice.


common elimination of history from the lexicon of literary study. The classical New Critics are well known for their minimizing of biographical and sociological considerations in the analysis of literature. When New Critical methodology attempts to grapple with historiographical issues—whether in Eliot’s discussion of “dissociated sensibility” or in Feidelson’s theory of symbolism—the past becomes little more than a prelude to the aesthetic and philosophical configuration of the present, which in turn becomes suffused with nostalgia; indeed, present and past are joined along a historical continuum to the extent that they transcend change. The poststructuralist enterprise, of course, claims to have reintroduced a genuine historicity into the study of literature through its insistence upon the inevitably ideological and contemporary nature of reading. Readers are, according to Stanley Fish, inescapably bound by the interpretive communities to which they belong, and a critic’s claim to have approximated textual meaning (or even to have commented upon textual significance) is rendered questionable by the succession of abandoned construals of authorial intention that litter the path of critical history. As Riddel puts it, “A criticism of origins reveals only the false origins of criticism.” Beneath this apparent acknowledgement of the historicity of audience, however, there lurks a curious monism: for do not deconstructionists endorse as most valid those readings that point beyond the illusion of “meaning” itself, to the timeless struggle of texts as they heroically fail in their attempts to wrest determinacy from what Riddel calls the “primordial word”? Do not readings such as Irwin’s examinations of “narcissistic doubling” propose that literary works are, in their fullest dimension, ahistorical entities that enact the abiding ambiguity of the hieroglyph? As Stonum complains, Irwin’s argument fails to define either what is American or what is historical in American literary history, since

there can be in Irwin’s telling only one Quest, continually repeated, continually balked, and continually subverting the grounds of language and consciousness that make the Quest possible. Irwin’s problematic is thus so general that it either transcends historical particularity or renders secular history an idle pursuit.

It has been countered, we should note, that certain strains of deconstruction—especially those most closely associated with Derrida—have avoided the pitfalls accompanying the antihistorical brand of deconstruction that emanates from Yale. Jane P. Tompkins, for example, proposes that the linguistic self-awareness prompted by Derridean

deconstruction is in fact profoundly historical: "the deconstructionist view does not deny the relationship of literature to reality and history but makes that relationship inescapable by arguing for a reality that is continually shaped and re-shaped by discourse." Rodolphe Gasché, Michael Ryan, and even Frank Lentricchia would concur. We should be grateful to these critics for reminding us that our understanding of historical and cultural phenomena is inevitably mediated by our ideological and linguistic constructions, and that these constructions are themselves intrinsically historical; but we should also note that once the historical world has been assimilated to textuality, it becomes difficult indeed to work back from text to context. For historical causality has evaporated, at least in the sense that there can be something outside literature causing literature itself to change; ultimately, we are left with a boundless textuality that, like the protoplasmic monsters of science fiction, absorbs into itself all fields of force in the historical world.

For the New Critic and deconstructionist alike, both author and reader are eliminated, as active, individualized historical subjects: the New Critics accomplished this feat by fetishizing the autonomy of the text, while the deconstructionists carry out the extermination by collapsing the historical activities of textual production and reception into the reified institutions of "writing" and "reading." People do not write texts: language writes them. As Edward Said has complained, "In achieving a position of mastery over man, language has reduced him to a grammatical function." To the extent that historical considerations seek entry into this imposing edifice of formalism, they are hastily ushered out the back door. Lentricchia concludes,

Whether New-Critical or poststructuralist, the formalist critic is concerned to demonstrate the history-transcending qualities of the text, and whether he wields the textual cleaver of difference or that of irony, he portrays the writer as a type of

30Rodolphe Gasché, "Unscrambling Positions: On Gerald Graff's Critique of Deconstruction," MLN, 96 (1981), 1015–34; Michael Ryan, Marxism and Deconstruction: A Critical Articulation (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1982). Lentricchia is difficult to pin down on an assessment of Derrida. On the one hand, he charges that "Derrida's deconstructive project is formalist through and through. Its synchronous desire for 'the greatest totality,' for dialogue with a unified tradition (logocentrism), defeats its would-be historicist disposition." Yet Lentricchia also insists that Derrida's enterprise is to be qualitatively distinguished from the "pleasure-oriented formalism of the Yale critics," and he reaches the ambiguous conclusion that "[Derrida's] formalism is at the same time one of his greatest strengths, for it is the basis of an elegant, commanding overview matched in philosophic history only by Hegel." It is not clear how elegance compensates for ahistoricism. See After the New Criticism, 177, 176, 177.
31Quoted in ibid., 162.
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Houdini, a great escape artist whose deepest theme is freedom, whose great and repetitious feat is the defeat of history’s manacles.32

Rather ominously, however, one signals this freedom by immersing oneself—or, more accurately, by acknowledging that one is always already immersed—in an all-encompassing linguistic totality that affords writer and critic alike a release from the pressures of choice in the historical world.33

In its application of New Critical principles of reading to the construction of a theory of literature and the delineation of modernist literary history, Symbolism and American Literature thus carries to their logical limit the philosophical assumptions latent in New Criticism; it therefore serves as a bridge between the epistemological program implicit in traditional New Criticism and the world view explicitly endorsed by the contemporary critical avant-garde. What I am suggesting, of course, is that these schools of criticism can themselves perhaps most fruitfully be viewed as limited and historical phenomena, and not as theories or methods possessing anything like the far-reaching explanatory power to which they lay claim. Feidelson made an important discovery when he noted that the American Renaissance giants anticipated the strategies of modernism in their preoccupation with the expansive possibilities of the literary symbol. What he should also have realized is that his own critical venture represents a logical extension of that development, in that it embeds in the domain of critical theory some of the same epistemological assumptions he discovers at work among nineteenth-century symbolists and subsequent modernists. Because it evinces no awareness of its own genetic relation to this philosophical tradition, however, Feidelson’s book is finally less a literary study than it is a work of ideology: that is, it proposes an analytical framework for comprehending a historically unified set of materials, but then it dehistoricizes that framework, converting what is a temporarily specific scheme into a presumably timeless attribute of literature itself. While rooted in historical and philosophical imperatives characteristic of a particular moment, the ideological text, to borrow the formulation of Marx and Engels, ‘has to give its ideas the form of universality, and represent them as the only rational, universally valid ones.’34

While this unexamined ideological bias lies at the heart of the methodological flaws in Feidelson’s book, it is, I believe, this very shortcoming that

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32Ibid., 185.
33For an adept critique of deconstruction’s conservative implications, see Maria Ruegg, “The End(s) of French Style: Structuralism and Post-Structuralism in the American Context,” Criticism, 21 (1979), 189–216.
allows Symbolism and American Literature to enjoy such high esteem among deconstructionist critics of American literature, who gladly subscribe to the canonical prescriptions that Feidelson offers. Where the interest in linguistic self-reflexivity serves primarily as a tool for textual explication for Feidelson and other New Critics, however, it has become a new metaphysics in the hands of the deconstructionists. Nonrationality, ahistoricism, and the abandonment of mimesis become privileged in literature, as both subject matter and strategy, by a critical method that proclaims indeterminate linguistic textuality to the homologous with, and coterminous with, the textuality of everyday life. If we are to avoid the error of seeing in deconstruction a viable critical program—or the even greater foolishness of supposing, as does Michael Ryan, anything politically radical in a philosophical outlook that enshrines relativism and decentering—we might do well to remind ourselves of its essentially ideological character. Both deconstruction and the New Critical method with which it is in part genetically connected are fundamentally formalistic and idealist schools of criticism that would negate—or at least drastically marginalize—the referential power and historical significance of literary discourse. While proposing themselves, in their different days, as qualitative new directions in literary theory, they have not offered new philosophical syntheses as much as they have reformulated, updated, and in fact further institutionalized the old problems of reified perception and alienation that have beset bourgeois philosophy since the time of Descartes. An examination of the underpinnings of these schools may tell us a good deal about where we have been and where we may be going in the development of modern critical theory; but we should view them as limited in their explanatory power, and certainly as less than fully capable of illuminating literature, history, or the configuration of the contemporary world.