

# Criticism Limited: Singularities and Pluralities of Constraint

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## Abstract

This article reviews some of the key constraints on critical discourse today, when theory is supposedly on the wane. Many of those constraints are longstanding, but were undone with notable deliberation in certain theoretical texts, particularly those associated with deconstruction. That, at least, is what certain narratives of criticism contend, but what this paper does is to assess a contrary story, examining whether the will-to-transgression and the (counter-)aporetic imagination in certain theoretical texts can be said to have durably altered critical practice. Perhaps too much has been made of the gestures of subversion and radicality, and of the rhetoric of transgression and liminality. However, the conclusion will tend towards the idea that in proffering the possibility of a critical discourse that would be singular (in all senses of that term), certain areas of literary theory have, whatever their disappointments and possible failures, contributed a lasting sense of the possibility and value of singularity in literary criticism. Beyond that, it is argued, there may be limits to criticism that cannot be transgressed even in theory.

**Keywords:** *limit, singularity, will-to-transgression, counter-aporetic imagination, Jacques Derrida, deconstruction, Edmond Jabès, speed of light, Jean-Luc Nancy.*

## Criticism(s) and Limit(s): The Singularity and Plurality of Constraint

Ought some consideration to be given to the fact that the phrase which affords this special issue its title, *the limits of criticism*, is denominated in the plural? Is it worth asking whether anything significant might change if we wrote, instead, *the limit of criticism*, or indeed whether there is anything to be read into the conceit which turns the phrase around, to say *the criticism of limit* or *the criticism of limits*? The obvious reaction is “But you haven’t, have you!” or “But you wouldn’t!” Beyond the incredulity and the exasperation, however, there may just be something to follow up. This paper is built on that premise.

I shall speak about the criticism of limit(s) later in this paper. Here, however, I start with the suggestion that there might indeed be subtly different connotations that arise in the singular alternative to our title, the *limit of criticism*. Somehow, the plural appears to suggest re-negotiable possibility and amenability to future re-visioning of whatever constraints might exist, while the singular suggests foreclosed determinism and a situation which subtends rather more finally. Another and simpler way of looking at this is to suggest that any intrinsic or extrinsic constraining of criticism is more forbiddingly conveyed in the singular phrase than in the plural one. Consider, however, the following points, which involve mathematics, and where associations complicate connotations.

(1) The first point turns on a bit part to be played by mathematical calculus. I have no authority in that field and no competence in exploring the sense which *limit* carries there. However, I can quote the not unpleasing gloss provided some time ago now by Thomas M. Kavanagh in the introduction to *The Limits of Theory*, a collection which he edited and which includes among others essays by René Girard, Michel Serres and Josué Harari. Kavanagh notes that when “the word ‘limit’ is used ... in its mathematical sense”, what is designated “is a frontier beyond which a change occurs, a border beyond which one thing becomes another” (1989, 1-2).<sup>1</sup> Note the determinism of the singular, and the absence of any plural in that phrase: *a* frontier, *a* change, *a* border, *one* thing, *another* (*not*, therefore, frontiers, changes, borders, others). *One* appears to be the more natural number in this context. Note too that the implication of metamorphosis is not unpleasing because when applied to our context it suggests some kind of transformative and presumably bettering state of critical discourse – so our minds irrepressibly and positively run. Criticism moves beyond a border and thereupon changes. The interdiscursive and the transdiscursive – surely, we would thereby be in those spaces – might then allow criticism the identities, forms, reaches, and modalities (for we would be in the plural, then and there) which its limit(s) deny it. This would allow for a rapprochement between the connotations of *the limits of criticism* and *the limit of criticism*, for in the operation of transcendence (in all the senses of this term) of this limit, which we would doubtless think of approaching in the key of an aporia that has somehow been rendered *not* impassable after all, the limit(s) of criticism will be open to the emancipating and possibly p(l)urifying re-visioning that appears to be promised there. Once limit in the mathematical sense is traversed, all other limits fall away and allow transformation of what was once delimited.

I must stress, however, that this conclusion is possible only because the specificities of the mathematical meaning, which cannot unqualifiedly countenance such opportunistic appropriations, are allowed to recede. Let us therefore bring the specificities back to the foreground more rigorously. Here is the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) on the mathematical sense of limit:

*Math.* In various applications. (a) A finite quantity to which the sum of a converging series progressively approximates, but to which it cannot become equal in a finite number of terms. (b) A fixed value to which a function can be made to approach continually, so as to differ from it by less than any assignable quantity, by making the independent variable approach some assigned value. (c) Each of the two values of a variable, between which a definite integral is taken. (d) The ultimate position of the point of intersection of two lines which, by their relative motion, are tending to coalescence.

What appears common to all these definitions is the play of approach and non-arrival, the morphing of definiteness and variability. These are motifs which reappear below; here, meanwhile, we can note that we have already been, above, in the space of the (inter)disciplinary transgression of the integrity of different discourses. We are there

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<sup>1</sup> Bibliographic references in this paper, in accordance with the set conventions of *Word & Text* and with the system adopted for practically all other references in this essay, are given in-text. However, there are one or two instances below where parenthetical references would have been awkward and where they would have burdened, if used, the flow and appearance of certain sentences and paragraphs. In those instances, care has been taken to make it clear through the phrasing and through other cues which author (and hence which work) would need to be looked up in the list of References at the end of this paper. The reader should find no difficulty in pursuing that bibliographic trail and in negotiating the arrangement of the paratextual limits of this paper.

open to criticism. In our definitions of limit, a limit has been crossed, if only in thought-experiment. This too is something which will take on added resonances below.

(2) Like *limit*, the word *subtend*, which I used in my second paragraph above, has a mathematical meaning:

To stretch or extend under, or be opposite to: said *esp.* of a line or side of a figure opposite an angle; also, of a chord or angle opposite an arc.

Let us move with the facticity of the oppositional here. Something, more specifically a geometric quantity, opposes something else, which in the nature of this relation cannot but be geometric also. Note too the further fact that something that is in opposition to another is not in the geometric sense conceivable as also stretching or extending under that other. The second *or* in the definition looks quite absolute in that respect. The more common usage of the term therefore flouts the geometric sense of subtending insofar as the oppositional is involved, such accordance as there is arising only from the sense of a stretching and extending under, loosely understood. Hence, in keeping with the more common and non-geometrical meanings of *subtend*, it is possible to see the philosophical discourse of Schlegel subtending the critical excursions of Coleridge, for instance. In another example, Marxist political discourse – itself unwittingly subtended by supernaturalist motifs at the inception of materialist theorization – subtends the Derridean reading of Shakespearean discourse in *Hamlet* (Derrida 1994, 1-48). A further example, and a rather more tendentious one, occurs in the mathematical idiom that affords the phrase “the square root of negative one” in an improbable subtending of Lacanian reflections on the phallus (see Fink, 2004), and thence again when the Lacanian (mis)appropriation of mathematics subtends its own openness to the parody to which it was subjected by Alan Sokal, in one of the most damaging hoaxes played upon theory (Sokal and Bricmont, 1998). It is these last two examples which are significant, because subtending there, exceptionally, did become oppositional, as the fall-out and the polemics in the wake of the Sokal hoax demonstrated (see, for instance, *Lingua Franca*, 2000). In other words, limits can be transgressed a little too cavalierly. Care must be taken in criticism, where there is so much subtending of and by other discourses, to acquire a fine sense of the limitability of limit’s transgression. One cannot have too much othering, one might ambivalently say.

As I move away from the above two points, which will need to be re-echoed below, I would like to make a link to – and a separate point of – the fact that students, at least in this observer’s experience, tend to warm to the well-worn statement by Jacques Derrida in “This Strange Institution Called Literature”, where he confesses that he retains the dream of a discourse which would neither be literature nor philosophy but which retains the memory of both (Derrida, 1992). What is it in the nature of this hybridity that renders appealing the idea of a text unconstrained by generic affiliation, bound in practice only to the limits of the category it itself institutes? Such a discourse, which among other plural attributes would be critical too, appears to come across as somehow more affirmative than what might occur when the transcended limit of criticism opens rather onto one of the “‘states’ of theory”, to quote the titular phrase of another collection, this time edited by David Carroll. To that title are appended, in subtitled narrowing, the interdiscursive co-implications of *History, Art, and Critical Discourse*. If the traversed limit of *criticism* is a state of *theory*, however – which, historically, has not been untrue, at least in certain contexts – and if the transgressed prohibition of *limit* leads onto the protocols of *statehood* – which can be understood

here in the sense of institutionalizing practices of disciplinary foundation (see Herbrechter and Callus, 2004) – what we might have cause to fear is a sclerosis of theoretical discourse itself and the travesty of the promise that something quite different might yet occur (see the introduction to McQuillan and others, 1999, *passim*). The enthusiasm for the transgression of limit, at least in that mode, is discernibly dimmed in such an outcome. One notices that in students, too. I think we have learnt from the experience that the limits of criticism do not find a resolution in theory (in all the senses of this last two-word phrase). They find a resolution, rather, in limit-texts, as the phrase goes: texts which transgress the perceived limit(s) of criticism and gesture towards what criticism might conceivably be, if the limits and the states of theory were not plurally constraining on the singularity of a criticism which exists only in glimpses, only in the anomalies of texts best described as *voyous*, to cite yet another titular (and Derridean) term (Derrida, 2003).

Let me, away from the above points, recast what is implied in what has been said. Quite simply, it is this. For all the cleverness and ingenuity of criticism that in recent decades and especially in its theoretical (re)inventions has pushed at the limits of the discourse and the discipline, and for all the celebration of transgressiveness, subversion, liminality, hybridity, radicality and other grand tokens and narratives of disregard for the *limen* and the thresholds of critique, it cannot be denied that we are no longer in or around a ‘state’ of criticism or theory predisposed to countenance that kind of venture with any noteworthy complaisance. It is not so much that criticism has lost its nerve as the fact that there is a different tone of critical inquiry about. There are various demonstrations of this new state which can be cited: from the bravado of efforts to show that in fact things have shifted only slightly (Elliot and Attridge, 2011), to diagnoses and projections that seek to take the sounding of the way we read or are about to read now (*PMLA* 125.4), to accounts of how the university has evolved into an institution inhospitable to modes of reading that are not recuperable by processes that would be regularizing (Docherty, 2011). Thus, for instance, the limits of criticism are not necessarily any more moveable now by virtue of the fact that we live in age that post-dates by some years performances like *Roland Barthes* [by Roland Barthes] or Derrida’s *Glas*: singular, exceptional texts capable of challenging a discourse to readapt profoundly and away from what it is that they no longer wish to be limited and subtended by. The reaction has tended to be, rather, safe: spaces exist for the discussion of such texts, but the larger space seeks imperturbability in the presence of those areas, or perhaps a slight change of step merely, a re-measured *pas* that is however not minded to decisively move on any *au-délà* (see Blanchot, 1992). The idioms of theory can be co-opted and deployed, confidently and well, but the singular text that strains at the singular limit of criticism will not quite be seen to change the poetics of what remains on the right side of the pluralities of constraint. The poetics of the limit, to cite yet another titular phrase (Woods, 2002), is in that regard not for de/re-configuring – not, at least, where what is happening in criticism is concerned, though what is happening in literature may or may not be another discussion.

The temptation, then, is to believe that even as I write this there is emerging some new text which will launch a paradigm or make current a new critical idiom to explode that hunch. A third (way of) critique, so to speak, might emerge there. Or a text which we have misremembered and warrants a revisionist glance might prove newly resourceful, at least in a thinking through of the possibility of that explosion. Laurent Milesi’s paper in this issue, on Derrida’s *Limited Inc.*, demonstrates how such rereading

might proceed. Meanwhile, however, as we remain in wait for an event, as we always are, let me take the time in the rest of this paper to catalogue the limits of criticism – an insane task that uncontainably seeks to contain the containing, a task redeemed only because cataloguing is a good, solid critical move, quite in keeping with the mood and restraint of these critical times, these times of sundry crises and thwarted springs. It is *some* of those limits that will be catalogued, I should add: the ironic thing about limits being their illimitability, as they crowd upon each other and upon the limits of any attempt to fix them. Accordingly, I offer below some considerations on the plurality of criticism's constraints. The mathematical meanings of *limit* and *subtending* which have been invoked in this introduction will be important in that, because they help in a better understanding of what I refer to below as the will-to-transgression and the (counter-)aporetic imagination in literary and critical discourse.

### **Criticism's Unlimited Limits, or, The Will-to-Transgression and the (Counter-)Aporetic Imagination in Literary Theory**

Before the catalogue, a reflection: the desirability of transgression within literary criticism is an idea of comparatively recent date. One does not find any prominent construction of transgression as a value within Aristotle or Boileau, Dryden or Johnson, Hazlitt or Arnold, Valéry or Eliot, at least not insofar as it would relate to the practice and protocols of criticism itself (see, however, in one exception that proves the rule, Benjamin's epigraphic citation in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" of Valéry's acknowledgement that the conception of the aesthetic was changing in his time). Clearly, a lot more documentation would be needed to support that point, as well as to include the necessary qualifications and to historicize trends and counter-trends. But in the contracted context of this paper the point can, I think, be carried without excessive referencing, as can the further point that the propensity to propose the value of transgression, as it were, started to figure itself early in the excursions of theory: in Benjamin's undermining of the aura of the work of art, for instance; or the assertions, in Lukács or Williams or many others one could invoke, that the considerations of aesthetics should not overdetermine critical discourse, since the workings of ideology and politics or of the political unconscious, as Jameson would have it, merit some critical regard too; or the semiological speculations of Saussure and the taxonomies of the Russian Formalists even before that, and later the schemas of New Critics and structuralists and early *Tel Quel*-like groupings (not to mention the still underestimated William Empson), indicating that commentaries on the literary could take on some of the procedures (whether one called them semiological or typological or scientific) from which it had otherwise held itself separate. The present work of Rancière on the relations between aesthetics and politics and their interpenetrative prospects, or Badiou's on the idea that the matheme challenges the textual, find themselves prefigured there: no limit, therefore, and no thought of the limit's surpassing, without the experience of precedence. There is a rich paradox there. It turns on the originarity of transgression, on transgression's always-already there-ness, at least at the level of a potentiality subtending (to use that term again) the facticity of limit. With criticism and its limit(s), that point infiltrates itself into criticism's cultural memory *and* cultural forgetting of itself and its limits. Indeed, transgression can be shown to have been discoverably present in prior critical practice of even the most correct type (Johnson's famous self-referential definition of *lexicographer* in his

*Dictionary* being one good example) and in the further fact that evidence can always be found for overlooked prefiguring of transgression's grandest gestures (as in the example of structuralism's overcoming by poststructuralism having been anticipated in some of the speculations that Saussure consigned to his still largely unpublished *cahiers d'anagrammes*, which undo a number of those insights into the structure of language which his *Cours*, also of course unpublished in his time, would render fateful for the fortunes of criticism and theory). This too, is a limit worth exploring, in a field that might be called the critique of limits: the limits of the thought of limits in literary criticism, in other words, the critique of how limited the discussion of criticism's limits can still be, how unaware of the limits that have been and are not yet transgressed (or open to transgression).

As that would require a much larger project than there is space for here, let me instead proceed less ambitiously in what follows. Here, more doably and not without awareness of its evident limitations, is a tentative schema of the limits of criticism, or of some of them, since as has already been noted illimitability will subtend any construction of limits. Accordingly I set out below some of the limits of criticism, as I see them.

- (a) The limit(s) of *secondarity*, understood here in the key of criticism being constructed as being ever dependent on a prior discourse which subtends it and which it serves, this other discourse being, historically and tendentially, literature, but more recently and less limitingly (see *b* below), culture. This secondarity has prompted various uncomplimentary metaphors about the nature of criticism, including those which cast the critic as eunuch, parasite or host, these last two constructions having been amply discussed in Laurent Milesi's paper in this issue. Deconstruction, and theory, have tried to undo this relation, not only by speaking about it as such, as in J. Hillis Miller's attempt at that, but also in the increasing tendency for studies by critics about critics – a development that is not always well received, but which in fact predates theory, as is easily shown if we remember Eliot's essays on "The Perfect Critic" and "The Imperfect Critic", when criticism really did start to believe that it might acquire identities all of its own (see Eliot, 1920).
- (b) The limit(s) of *literature*, which has been the discourse to which literary criticism and theory have by definition attached themselves, but which is narrower than the additional potentialities afforded by the opening up to critical practice of textualities of another, redefined kind, so that it is *culture* entire that is readable by criticism's newly eclectic gaze.
- (c) The limit(s) of *institutionality*, imposed by the fact that literary criticism has become professionalized, with all the commitments and intensities and checks and balances which that opens onto. Criticism is now in and part of the university: part, indeed, of the all-administrative university (Ginsburg, 2011) and therefore subject to the managerial bywords of returns and audits and impacts, and the imperatives of relevance and sustainability. For Faculty, there are the pressures of seeking (and retaining) tenure or, failing that, pursuing renewal of one's adjunct teaching or definite contract, so that one can well not have much time, after all and when all else has been said and done, for criticism.
- (d) The limit(s) of *disciplinarity*, related to *c* in self-evident ways, and deriving from the fact that criticism must have an idea of itself as a teachable discourse, with

all the due curricula and methodologies and pedagogies. The impact of that on scholarship need not necessarily be negative, but it is worth noting that *scholarship* is a word that grows ever quainter.

- (e) The limit(s) of *interdisciplinarity*, criticism still moving only problematically across discourses and disciplines and sometimes inaccurately and ineptly, if the reports from the encroached fields are to be believed. The problem exists also because other disciplines, when they themselves attempt or engage with criticism, can themselves be less than detailed or fastidious in picking the finer nuances and protocols of critical practice, the otherwise admirable attempts of Douglas Hofstadter (1997) in this area being a case in point.
- (f) The limit(s) imposed by *tradition*, individual talent in literary criticism being rather less highly prized than it is in literature, for all the guru-dom and bandwagon-hijacking (to put it colloquially) that often besets it but that lives alongside an idea of what criticism at its foundational best can do (as in Arnold, presumably, in his counter-anarchical gospel for poetry and culture), and the consequent idea that it should continue to do aspects of that, essentially (as in recent calls for the humanizing vocation of criticism, as in the exhortations in the work of a figure like Mark Edmundson).
- (g) The limit(s) imposed by (and on) the *future*, which is never as open to messianicity as it is open to messianism, to go with Derrida's terms on the openness to the *à venir/avenir* and the *arrivant*; rather, the future always comes announced by some tract or programme, even when it will later surprise us, so that we adapt to criticism's futures and the futures of everything else according to what has primed us. As Catherine Belsey has it in *A Future for Criticism*, "Each new style or fashion comes into existence by challenging the prevailing orthodoxy" (123), so that transgression is always more predetermined than it likes to think, as well as predetermining the limits for what is subsequent to it.
- (h) The limit(s) imposed by *publishing* and its *markets*, especially in a "publish or perish" academic culture that boasts more university presses and journals than ever before but nearly all of which emerge from publishers working with increasingly narrower margins, such that digital alternatives, print-on-demand services, smaller print runs, uncertain lead times and occasionally indifferent production values exert effects on the reach and ambition of literary criticism that are not any the less tangible for being difficult to analyze.
- (i) The limit(s) imposed by the "*common reader*", or *the reading public*, both of whom are beings of increasingly apocryphal report, if some accounts are to be believed, and both supposedly substituted, not necessarily adequately or with any significant comprehensiveness or pervasiveness, by the undergraduates and postgraduates in university programmes who are the more direct "consumers" and "end users" of the critical discourse of our times, and whose perceived demands and expectations must be met.
- (j) The limit(s) imposed by the *form* of criticism, *form* being understood here not only in relation to what is obviously predetermined by the conditions on criticism's instantiations imposed by *h*, above, but also by ideas concerning the appropriate vehicles and formats in which criticism ought to be carried, such that the monograph remains a supreme expression of criticism, online publishing

remains suspect (though increasingly less so), and the kinds of typographical arrangements associable with the pages of *Glas*, say, continuing in certain circles to be regarded as aberrational.

- (k) The limit(s) imposed by *ethics*, particularly in regulating or decreeing, consensually, what is or is not permissible in literary criticism and in the sometimes fraught encounters between different critics, these limits being routinely disregarded in polemics and debate, as indicated also by the fact that lives in letters have regularly yielded monumental disagreements or, sometimes, non-encounters: between Cibber and Pope, for instance, to start with something distant yet forever chronicled in the *Dunciad*, or more recently between Picard (1965) and Barthes (1966), or Derrida and Searle (Derrida, 1998), or Derrida and Gadamer (see Michelfelder and Palmer, 1989). It must be said that the limit in this case can be a regulating one, as one would expect in a domain determined by the ethical, which is why *correctness* in this context is a term connoting approbation rather than one which exerts a deadening effect.
- (l) The limit(s) imposed by *politics*, criticism being circumscribed in various contexts by censorships that may announce themselves or may remain oblique and subtle; within these limits, however, must also be counted the ideological imperative, which Rancière's rationalizations notwithstanding (2011) is apt to suspect the ideology of the aesthetic (Eagleton, 1990) to a degree that its own programmatic constraints go unperceived or blithely accepted.
- (m) The limit(s) imposed by *aesthetics*, which will always expect commentary and critique to be at least to some extent about notions of the beautiful and the sublime, and which when not doing what an Adorno or Lyotard or a de Man does with the field (Adorno, 1997; Lyotard, 1994; de Man, 1996) can corral critique into the rhetoric of worth, of value, of richness, of connoisseurship. Calling *Hamlet* a "poem unlimited", for instance, is understandable enough (Bloom, 2003), but the problem can be that such "vocabulary ... does little more than *register* an enjoyment it does not illuminate further" (Belsey, 2011, 8).
- (n) The limit(s) imposed by *funding*, of which there is never enough and which apparently cannot come with enough conditions and inaccessibility when and where it does come. This is a dispiriting topic; let us move on.
- (o) The limit(s) imposed by *mortality*, a rather odd category to bring in here and which might invite the not unreasonable rejoinder that one might as well speak of the limits imposed by space and time and be done with all this. But this is not an irrelevant category, not in its supreme and self-evident relevance to the topic at hand. It is not banal to say that critics die and are aware that they do, especially since there is increasing awareness of the work that one ought perhaps to do while "learning to live finally" (Derrida, 2007), while shaping "late style" (Said, 2006), when realizing that the writing left is limited by its terminality and by its adequation to that fact.
- (p) The limits of *address*, which I was initially going to class as the limits of geography until I thought that to do so would be to bring in the impossibly broad idea of the limits of space, which is nearly not specific enough of the truth that the criticism produced in certain fora can be as considered or even as excellent as it likes, but it will not escape their peripherality. Criticism has its capitals and

its several *des res*, and those of its practices and exponents not accommodated therein will experience criticism's other limits all the more keenly for being outside the limits of those addresses.

- (q) The *speed* limit(s) of criticism, which arise beyond all the time-lags and slowness of response that have always dogged critique, beyond that valorization of slow thinking and of the contemplative stance which makes criticism possible in the first place. When the world moves at a faster pace and when connectivity is instant, criticism's mediations can appear laboured and page-heavy rather than light-speed and screen-nimble – a point returned to in the Conclusion to this paper.
- (r) The limit(s) imposed by *pragmatism*, which occur and exert their effect in any realization that some or all of the above constrain criticism, such that criticism is compelled to self-limit itself readaptively.
- (s) The limit(s) imposed by truth, quite possibly the most forbidding limit(s) of all, and which in citation, as “the limits of truth”, open the beginning of Derrida's book *Aporias*, in the section called “Finis”. Criticism is never objective, but that limit is not quite the limit of truth. Rather, truth can itself be something of an aporia, “nonviability, as nontrack or barred path” (Derrida, 1993, 13), and from that arises its further identity as “nonpassive endurance ... the condition of responsibility and of decision” (16). Transgression, then, becomes the experience of aporia: the experiencing of nonviability bars it, but the experience of the will-to-transgression to responsibly decide to proceed is what sets up “the plural logic of aporia” (emphasis added). In this logic, “nonpassage resembles an impermeability”, but “the nonpassage stems from the fact that there is no limit”, or it is “too porous, permeable and indeterminate”(20); “[f]inally, the third type of aporia, the impossible, the antinomy, or the contradiction, is a nonpassage because its elementary milieu does not allow for something that could be called passage, step, walk, gait, displacement, or replacement, a kinesis in general (21). *The (counter-)aporetic imagination*, then, is necessary for the transgression of limit, both enabling and thwarting it. Criticism and theory discover this aporia, and that discovery is their limit.

There we are, at *s* already; I could go on, and could run out of alphabet (unlike, say, Barthes in *A Lover's Discourse*, or Derrida in *Limited Inc.*, both of whom stayed within the limits of the alphabet, just). Had I run out, it would have been because criticism has that plurality of constraint which I have been speaking of from the outset of this paper. The sense of that constraint is, all too often, intimate. Indeed, the extent that *the limits of criticism* could ever be un compelling as a phrase is measurable by the degree to which all the above could ever be intuitive, or *lived*: there are situations where criticism's conditions are sufficiently bad to lead proposed discussions of criticism's limits to be received hollowly and all too knowingly. In that context, the limit of criticism, in the singular and mathematical sense, beckons as that which when exceeded can transform all of the above, promising a reinstatement of criticism in which limit and constraint are no longer unappealable. Indeed, it is as well to remember that there can be desperation as well as hope in the transgressive potentials of criticism. The possibility of transgression within criticism can in certain contexts be coextensive with the possibility of betterment of the situatedness to which one finds oneself thrown.

This explains why what I call here the *will-to-transgression* of criticism and the (counter-)aporetic imagination of theory can be more than an abstraction. It is a will and an imagination born in the hope placed in limit-texts, to use another key term in this lexicon of the dream of a criticism unlimited, for limit-texts can be the totemic indicators that there are other things to be hoped for once the conventions of literature and criticism are transgressed. If I mentioned, in the first section of this paper, the striking goodwill generally accorded to the thought of a text which would be neither literature nor philosophy but which would retain the memory of both – a writing that is aptly identifiable as most configurable in criticism and its re-modulations – then it is because limit-texts, whenever and however identified, all seem to promise an other(ing) textualization of criticism, the achievability of the dream that criticism need no longer be secondary but can be creative: the textualization of the impossible, the unthinkable, the unrealizable, which once glimpsed in any form of writing can be thought of as potentially writing themselves transformingly into everything else.

The will-to-transgression of literature and criticism is therefore the affirmative hope of betterment, of the improbability of situation, of the idea that contingency need not be illimitably constraining in its limits. Every transgressive text, every limit-text, is therefore an assertion that there is more than literature and criticism that is changeable when the limits of literature and criticism are challenged. The difficulty, of course, is that the performance of limits' transgression may perform nothing else. It may result in nothing else at all, or nearly nothing. A great, inventive, adventurous text may have been written – *and so? So what?* The colloquial response is exactly right exactly apt, exactly motivated. The world did not change, not really, in 1922, the year *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land* were loosed upon the world; criticism did, and had to, as did literature, but was the world transformed by those textual transgressions?

The question is asked because there is an inflation and hyperbole in the language and rhetoric of transgression in literary criticism. Blithe talk of subversive texts and of radical critical practice can be remarkably unreal, and the overextended and ubiquitous invocations of hybridity and liminality can be some of the most tiresome things in critical discourse today. The writing of Edmond Jabès is in this respect salutary. *The Little Book of Unsuspected Subversion*, by the author of *The Book of Margins* (1993), is arguably the wisest help we have in being measured in our thinking of the limit, in being mindful of “Limits transgressed within their limits: our daily bread”, and remembering that “[t]he extremes will always remain unknown to us”, to quote two of the aphorisms from the tellingly titled chapter, “Little Limits to the Limitless” (Jabès, 1996, 22). Rupture happens rarely, and when and where it does not happen we are only in the space of the resignation glimpsed in the following, for all our wonderful talk of limits:

The work is never done. It leaves us to die unfulfilled. It is this empty area we must not so much occupy as tolerate. Here we must settle.

To accept emptiness, nothingness, blankness. All our creating lies behind us.

Today I am – once again – in this blank space, without voice, without gesture, without words.

What remains to be done is always only what could claim that it is done: the desert where we are buried by our impotence.

To tell oneself that the end – the sought-after limit – is impossible. A consolation, surely, for most of us. Distress for those lost under the spell of the unknown. (22)

This is not to reassert convention or to be reactionary, for any defeatism occasioned by the above can be lifted by the hope implicit in the idea that “No step will ever be resigned to being only a step, *one solitary step*” (21; emphasis in the original). But it is good to be aware that it will indeed take something singular to change the world. The world is something else again, and is not the world of literature and criticism. The counter-aporetic imagination that does not realize this, that discovers aporias in the way of theory to immediately think they might be passable, despite everything, and that everything will thereupon change in affinitive articulation, is not necessarily admirable when it forgets the constraints of the transgressions of the singular. Transgression is always singular precisely because it is so rare.

## The Constraints of Singularity

Limit-texts cannot exist; they *don't* exist, because the ideal reader with the ideal insomnia doesn't. They do, of course, exist in the sense that they are there, but what they demand is impossible. In going beyond the limit, in exceeding what subtends them, the demands they make upon their own reception are limitless. They therefore remain apart, even when over-mined and when commentary on them becomes an industry, leading to wake upon wake of critique, to palimpsestic mimologies, and to the *glassaries* that are the next best thing in anticipation of the book to come (see Genette, 1994 and 1997, and Leavey, 1986).

Meanwhile, we have criticism, with its limits. We have the idea of the step (not beyond, following Blanchot, which helps to not be resigned to an impassability beyond the one solitary step, following Jabès. Criticism, as much as literature, now carries the thoughts of those steps, of writing's limits transgressed as it works a quilting upon writing (see Royle, 2010), threading critical and the fictional imaginings past and into each other. There was a time, of course, when criticism – theory – believed that if it were, rather, to react to the limit-texts of literature and the singularities that would be found there it would, itself, need to be singular. It would need to sign itself singularly every time it wrote about what is most singular in its straining at the limits of texts, not least when it is “going to try to recognize the impossible idiom of a signature” (Derrida 1984, 28) – for instance that of Francis Ponge – and rewrite itself accordingly, correspondingly, through a mirroring singularity that must yet remain itself, integral, identifiable, consigned to and ensconced within the limits of its own constitutions, knowing that in criticism “[t]here is nonetheless a law and a typology of the idiom, whence our problem”, a problem that occurs because “[t]he [critical] drama that activates and constructs every signature is this insistent [*sic*], unwearying, potentially infinite repetition of everything that remains, every time, irreplaceable” (20). Of course, we are here within the problematic that informs not only *Signéponge/Signsponge*, Derrida's reading of the Pongean singularity in literature from which these quotations are taken and which suggest that a singularity in the critical act is the only adequate and ethical response to a singularity of the literary, but also and above all *Limited Inc.*, as analyzed by Laurent Milesi in the pages of this issue, an example that there can be no correctness, only heterodoxy, where criticism's limits are rethought. Milesi's paper is particularly welcome in an issue like this one and in any project on the criticism of limits, for it counters and corrects a contrary tendency in literary criticism at present. Indeed, whether or not we agree with the construction, following Herman Rapaport, of a “late Derrida” and of an identifiable political and ethical turn in his writing, it is

noticeable that those adventurous transgressive earlier texts, which had often seemed to hybridize philosophy, literature and critique, are not as central in criticism now. But at the time, what emerged was criticism's unprecedented appreciation that it could write itself differently, even in the face of bemusement, incomprehension, hostility. Criticism could itself be singular, beyond the limits, in a state of exception. Its own self-rearticulation was a limit that could be touched, even passed. But those were heady times, and all that happened happened in theory. Now, back on the ranch of the actual, there are limits, it seems, to how long critique will talk about limits transgressed.

We shall not be beyond the speed limits of criticism then, which have already been alluded to above. Criticism may not have sufficient pace and range to run fast and long with what it will already have identified as crucial. It risks slowness – of nimbleness, of thought, of execution, of reaction – in the very moment when the experiments conducted in CERN recently on neutrinos' velocity have compelled physics to reassess its assumption that nothing can travel faster than the speed of light. When light, when illumination, when the limit of all limits may or may not itself have been exceeded, criticism cannot be slow. If this limit, which subtends all others, is transgressed, does not everything change, not least but especially critique, which is the only thing we have to reorient us and which must first go in to re-experiment, to re-test, to re-verify, to discover whether it must denature and re-nature itself and everything else in this possible new understanding of nature? Of course the limit may be intact, it may not have been transgressed. One day soon we shall know that we shall perhaps be remaining forever where we shall always have been: on this side of light and of enlightenment, positioned only in thought-experiment, not world-changing re-enlightenment. In which case, we at least have the technologies that have brought us thus far, and the conceit of technological singularity and the speculation that "the singularity is near" (Kurzweil, 2005), and thence our philosophical and critical thoughts about them, which alter even now, in lieu of re-enlightenment, the commerce of our thinking and the practices of our writing, as in Nancy's thoughts in a chapter he calls "Electronic Supplement, Binary Reprise, Digital Counterpoint" demonstrate (Nancy, 2003, 57), and on which we must stop, for beyond his ellipsis only limit lies: mere, entire, *there* – and here:

Without either volumen or codex or turned pages but on-screen or saved pages, bursting to the surface of water of ice of cottonwool of down of virtual swans renewing or drowning out this uninterrupted commerce nothing other than us ourselves changing always more into us others priceless commerce exchanging with each other or all of us charging into milky crystal swarm of insect pixels abandoned to their gnat dance in this moonbeam, finally abandoned and perhaps delivered from every book and every sign and .....

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## **Critica Limitată: singularitățile și pluralitățile constrângerii**

Articolul recenzează câteva dintre constrângerile-cheie impuse discursului critic în zilele noastre, când teoria se pare a fi în declin. Multe dintre aceste constrângeri au apărut cu ceva timp în urmă, dar unele au fost în mod deliberat negate în anumite texte teoretice, în mod special acelea asociate cu deconstrucția. Cel puțin așa s-a construit ficțiunea criticii. Articolul însă spune o poveste contrară, examinând dacă putem spune că voința de a transgresa și imaginația contra-aporetică au alterat în mod durabil practicile curente din critică. Poate că s-a făcut prea mult caz din gesturile subversive și radicale, precum și din retorica transgresării și din liminalitate. În orice caz, concluzia lucrării tinde către idea că atunci când ni se oferă posibilitatea de a afirma că discursul literar ar fi singular (în toate accepțiunile termenului), anumite zone ale teoriei literare, indiferent de dezamăgirile și posibilele eșecuri pe care le produc, au adus un sens durabil al posibilității și al valorii singularității în critica literară. Dincolo de aceasta, articolul argumentează că pot exista limite ale criticii care nu pot fi transgresate nici măcar în teorie.