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*Jonsonian Discriminations: The Humanist Poet and the Praise of True Nobility* by Michael McCanles. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992. Pp. ix + 306. \$65.00.

To write about Ben Jonson's poetry today is to take an ethical position. Does Jonson possess the personal integrity he stridently claims, or is that claim just the strategy of a calculating sycophant? McCanles has no doubt about the answer, no doubt about the high moral worth of Jonson's poetry and Jonson the man. McCanles provides a strong, ethically committed counterbalance to a current trend that regards Jonson, in the spirit of some of his poetic contemporaries, as a poet of *ressentiment*, a self-justifying hireling in a system of courtly patronage. McCanles makes a powerful and brilliant case for Jonson as a humanist—not a courtly—poet, most fully appreciated through the perspective of a humanist literary criticism.

The central issue of Jonson's poetry, as McCanles sees it, is the theme of true nobility. Jonson's real concern, adapted from Roman moral thought, is whether aristocrats and other eminent individuals deserve the titles and privileges that are the signs of their social status. Avoiding any judgement on the fitness of aristocrats to rule, Jonson's real concern is "whether they were fit to possess the powers and privileges of rule" (53), that is, the signs of their dominion. The function of the poet is to praise the congruence of outer social sign and inner virtue where he finds it, to satirize its absence by piercing through all dissimulation to turn false signs of nobility "into signs of its lack" (104); the function of the poet is to judge the true place of the socially prominent in a hierarchical society.

However, McCanles synthesizes his humanist reading of Jonson with the semiotic argument that Jonson's poetry is driven by the need to make ethical choices always differentiated from rejected alternatives. In fact, McCanles's aim is no less than "a semiotic restatement," within a structuralist model, of the meaning of a poetic corpus which has been "historically addressed in philosophical and ethical terms" (118). But in McCanles's version of Jonson's semiotics, the poet deploys the system of differences underlying ethical discrimination with full intentionality; Jonson's fierce ethical will, however semiotically constructed, is the unequivocal, irreducible stuff of his poems.

Perhaps McCanles's most important insight is the instability of ethical will. Jonson bases his praise on the classical "true nobility argument," but that argument exposes a potential contradiction that Jonson must contain (a contradiction, McCanles points out, in English humanism generally). True nobility, goes the argument, is the result of inner virtue, and only those who have inner virtue are truly noble; those who have no inner virtue are not truly noble and therefore do not deserve the signs and privileges of nobility. The humanist program to teach true nobility to an inherited aristocracy and then to praise them for possessing it opens up the possibility of their not having it to begin with—and therefore of being unworthy of their status and power. The potential of the true nobility argument to undermine itself drives McCanles's book with a keen and incisive logic that reveals the influence of dialectical deconstruction on his own humanism. Praising aristocrats for virtue always teeters on the edge of satirizing them for not possessing it. As McCanles puts it, "Jonson's addresses to royalty and nobility exhibit the diplomacy of a man

who realizes that any advice recommending the development of *vera nobilitas* implies its lack" (52).

McCanles deftly pursues the implications of this instability for Jonson the man and poet. The inherent ambiguity of praise always threatens to crack the shaky ground upon which Jonson struggles to maintain his personal dignity before social superiors who may be so in outer social status only. To praise the aristocracy without compromising his integrity, Jonson must—and does, in McCanles's view—master two temptations: he must—and does—overcome the *ressentiment* of the talented new man in an aristocratic world often enough undeserving of its status and power; and he must—and does, though sometimes barely—avoid challenging the aristocratic establishment in the process of praising its virtue as "the only true foundation of human worth" (73), an establishment Jonson, despite all, genuinely supports. Jonson's self-conscious rejection of unintended meanings is a way of controlling "the possibility of blame and subversion lurking at [the] margins" of praise. Praise for Jonson is thus "a continual burden" (73-74).

McCanles denies the possibility that Jonson may himself be a practitioner of the dissimulation he claims to abhor because "Jonson has earned the capacity, and therefore the right" to attack duplicity in others because he has attacked "the same thing with equal rigour in himself" (112-13). Because of this personal self-mastery—especially impressive in his socially vulnerable position—Jonson can in good conscience offer himself as humanist adviser to rulers and "arbiter of public manners and political ethics" (vii). McCanles insists on a "crucial connection" between Jonson's career and his criterion of merit in judging the social status of his addressees. Hence, his identification with talented new men, the real heroes of his poetry. For Jonson the new men celebrated in his poems embody the ultimate ideal of achieved nobility, and "With these Jonson is in his own element, for they offer the reader mirrors of the norms and values by which the poet measured himself" (70). McCanles makes some interesting remarks about Jonson's implicit rejection of Castiglione's *sprezzatura*, a pose based on the concept that "talent is natural and cannot be communicated by education, but only conveyed by blood, that is, noble birth" (59). Jonson's humanism conceives of labor as achievement, and as such, labor should be rewarded rather than concealed. McCanles's Jonson is the model middle-class career poet, whose humanism is fueled by justifiable ambition for upward social mobility based on merit, a mobility which in fact leaves him morally uncompromised. McCanles astutely points to Jonson's awareness that he risks becoming like the objects of his own satire in his resolve to gain acceptance in higher social circles, but, he argues, Jonson pre-emptively—and correctly—forestalls such criticism. Jonson, that is, has every moral right to expect *amicitia* from patrons that merit his praise.

McCanles's humanist reading of Jonson's humanism skews theoretically and socially informed critiques of Jonson against themselves; McCanles uses literary and linguistic theory to restate a position that Renaissance studies has been at pains to refute: the fundamental isomorphism between artistic form and ethical life, between art, life, and moral intelligence. When all is said and done, for McCanles Jonson's poetry is great because it is truthful—and it can teach any knowing reader how to be truthful in difficult social circumstances.

McCanles reveals critical facility, including technical analysis of prosody and philological investigation of classical sources, in addition to dialectical semiotic analysis. He is as much at home with Sallust, Pliny, and Juvenal as with Roland Barthes, with Werner Jaeger as with Jacques Lacan, and keeps his promise to "leave no poem unturned," to provide full, integrative readings of Jonson's poems. However, some readers will have difficulty with a view of Jonson the man based entirely on the rhetoric of Jonson's texts without taking into account the rhetoric of those texts. Accepting Jonson's claim of self-knowledge and self-mastery, McCanles sees Jonson's poems as self-sufficient moral statements that vouch for their own veracity.

Brooklyn College and CUNY Graduate School

Martin Elsky

*The Terms of Cultural Criticism: The Frankfurt School, Existentialism, Poststructuralism* by Richard Wolin. New York: Columbia University Press, 1992. Pp. xxv + 256. \$35.00.

Richard Wolin's new book, *The Terms of Cultural Criticism: The Frankfurt School, Existentialism, Poststructuralism*, features on its cover Man Ray's 1930 "Portrait Imaginaire de D.A.F. de Sade." Wolin notes that Sade "had become a figure of totemic significance for the Surrealists" (xxiii), refers to Ray's effort as "one of the most stunning achievements of the entire repertoire of surrealist painting" (xxiv), and then concludes his discussion with the suggestion that "Man Ray's Sade captures something of the dialectic of Enlightenment: the moment in which unchecked revolutionary enthusiasm turns into a licentiousness that knows no bounds. . . where absolute freedom turns into unmitigated terror" (xxiv). This brief analysis is indicative of the tenor of Wolin's project: that is, he attempts to read the apparently revolutionary spirit of various cultural critics against their own stated intentions—and within their respective historical contexts—so as to suggest that the vaunted radicalism of much critical theory (whether by Sade, Adorno, Heidegger, or Derrida, etc.) involves a fundamentally conservative, decisionistic "deconstruction" of normative thought that posits no viable alternatives in its place.

Indeed, in his "Introduction: Thrasymachus' Ghost," Wolin writes that "in the context at hand, everything depends on our capacity to distinguish freedom from anomie or gratuitous social deviance" (15). This is a dramatic claim, which seems to suggest that Wolin is about to engage in a reconstruction of the concept of freedom, complete with the critical rigor necessary to distinguish collective and democratic freedom from its more decadent, selfish variants. There is no question then, that Wolin is proposing a serious reevaluation of some of the most fundamental concepts of critical theory—in its World-War-II-era up to postmodernist versions—and that he intends to do so without shying away from the complex question of how critical theory's various epistemological and representational claims affect our notions of community, fairness, and responsibility.

The structure of Wolin's project is loosely chronological, beginning with three chapters on "The Legacy of the Frankfurt School," continuing with

three chapters analyzing "Political Existentialism," and concluding with three chapters discussing "Neopragmatism and Post-structuralism." I will summarize briefly the arguments of each of these three sections, progressing chapter by chapter, and will then conclude by raising more general questions as to whether or not Wolin has satisfied his own clearly stated intention of providing a critical theoretical framework that may enable us "to defetishize a reified social world and to reforge relations of solidarity and trust among women and men" (19).

*Part One: The Legacy of the Frankfurt School*

Chapter One, "Critical Theory and The Dialectic of Rationalism," retells the familiar story of the demise of the Frankfurt School's early attempts "to address the question of a normative basis for theory" (24). The search for a version of "rational" and normative thought that can play a liberatory role in political life was, so the story goes, placed in such jeopardy by the simultaneous horrors of Stalinism, Nazism, and U.S. hyper-consumerism that the utopian element in critical theory became compromised by its own nagging philosophical doubts and political frustrations. Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, written between 1941 and 1945, is seen by Wolin as highly representative of this shift from "concern for the imminent prospects for progressive social change" towards the more inward question of "the very capacity of thought itself to preserve a measure of autonomy or critical vigilance" (36).

Chapter two, "The Frankfurt School: From Interdisciplinary Materialism to Philosophy of History," then backtracks to tell another aspect of the story outlined in Chapter One. Wolin focuses in particular on the role played by Erich Fromm in structuring the Institute for Social Research's 1936 *Studies on Authority and The Family*, in which Horkheimer, Marcuse, and Fromm attempted a materialist re-working of Freud, complete with 3,000 questionnaires used as a data base for research. Fromm's *The Working Class in Weimar Germany* (completed in 1939, although left unpublished until 1980) and the Institute's *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950) are seen in this light as extensions of the 1936 project. Wolin's discussion of the texts cited above is cursory, but his schematic overview allows him to note that chronic problems in data gathering and processing left the Institute highly doubtful of the efficacy of such attempts at "scientific" research and prompted a move toward more philosophical and aesthetic projects.

Chapter Three, "Mimesis, Utopia, and Reconciliation: A Redemptive Critique of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*," posits Adorno's two master works, *Negative Dialectics* (1966) and *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), as the symptomatic results of the trajectory outlined in Chapters One and Two. It is well known that Adorno's remarkable texts are structured by relentlessly complex dialectic form, insistent recognition of the ever-present "remainder" of conceptual non-identity, and frustratingly complex discussions of aesthetic self-reflexivity. Wolin summarizes these concerns as indicative of the Frankfurt School's transition from its earlier, "strong versions of utopia" (71), to the "weak version of utopianism" (76) expressed in Adorno's notion of aesthetic non-utilitarianism as a sort of holding action against barbarism.

Taken as a whole, these first three chapters provide a quick and accessible

overview of the legacy of the Frankfurt School. This story, however, has been told in greater detail and with more critical rigor by numerous critics, particularly Susan Buck-Morss, Martin Jay, Fredric Jameson, and Eugene Lunn. Wolin's analysis of Adorno is particularly brief, totalling but 15 pages, which means that his discussion can do little more than hint at the numbing complexity of Adorno's work. The so-called "culture industry," for example, requires more than a few passing references, as does the notion of "postmodernity," both of which are discussed in the final two pages of Chapter Three. Students new to the field may thus find these chapters useful in helping to frame difficult theoretical questions, but Wolin's discussions of actual historical conditions are so vague, and the amount of space he devotes to individual texts so small, as to leave writers more familiar with the subject wondering what exactly Wolin is attempting to say that Morss, Jay, Jameson, Lunn and others have not already covered elsewhere.

#### *Part Two: Political Existentialism*

Chapter Four, "Carl Schmitt, Political Existentialism, and The Total State," is by far the most important element of Wolin's study, as he sets out to debunk the "disturbing and extremely tenuous" (103) rehabilitation of Schmitt carried out in the now infamous 1987 issue of *Telos* 72. Wolin's thesis—contra the "naive" and "intellectually dishonest" (104) arguments proposed by the critics in *Telos* 72—is that Schmitt's pre-Nazi writings on jurisprudence and political theory (*Political Theology*, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, and *Political Romanticism*), are fundamentally consistent with his many pro-Nazi manifestoes and pamphlets. Wolin begins his analysis by situating Schmitt's earlier works within the context of Weimar Germany's existentialist movement, labelling the dominant mood of the era as one of "crisis mentality" (86). Schmitt's writings are seen then, in typical existentialist fashion, as attempts to privilege "the irreducible particularity" of the moment (88) against the banal, normalizing, homogenizing function of bureaucratic liberalism and rampant monopoly capitalism.

Wolin argues that such sentiments clearly foreshadow Schmitt's later Nazi propaganda writings, as his romantic attack on the reification of social life is based on what Wolin describes as "political vitalism:" that is, a belief in the ability of "the exception" to "explode the routinization of life" (91). In Schmitt's view, however, the "exception" can have no normative, legalistic basis in the liberal parliamentary sense (as this is the root of moronic homogenization), and must instead be chosen or decided upon by the privileged individual who stands above the masses. Thus Wolin concludes that Schmitt's decisionistic version of existentialism "allows him to degenerate into an advocate of charismatic despotism" (91).

Chapter Five, "Merleau-Ponty and The Birth of Weberian Marxism" then attempts to reclaim Merleau-Ponty's *Adventures of The Dialectic* as "one of the most important discussions of Marxism in our Century. . . insofar as it remains. . . non-Marxist" (107, 108). Wolin's thesis here is that the existential sense of contingency present in *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) needs to be read in tandem with the realpolitik analysis of historical choices that structures *Humanism and Terror* (1947), with both studies foreshadowing the arguments in *Adventures of The Dialectic* (1955). In this sense Merleau-Pon-

ty's many works are made to appear—again, read as a dialectical whole—as harbingers of the “postmodern” turn toward the difficult question of how to make political choices without clinging to normative thought.

Chapter Six, “Sartre, Heidegger, and The Intelligibility of History,” stands as a final judgement on political existentialism, with the decisionistic, ahistorical wing of existentialism finding expression in the works of Heidegger, while the materialist, dialectical wing of existentialism finds expression in the later, mature works of Sartre.

Taken as a whole, this second set of chapters provides a general introduction to some of the most important aspects of political existentialism. The most striking problem with this second section of the book, however, is that it is not at all clear how Chapter Five relates to Chapter Six and/or how either of these analyses relates to Chapter Seven. Wolin's analysis of Schmitt is excellent, including detailed readings of important passages as well as much historical information, and yet Schmitt is barely mentioned in Wolin's ensuing readings of Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger, and Sartre. Wolin's analysis of Schmitt could easily stand as an introduction to further work on the question of existentialism as a political, philosophical, and aesthetic movement, but when joined to his brief and introductory readings of Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger, and Sartre, the analysis seems strangely isolated and without historical relation to the following chapters. There is no question then, that scholars interested in Heidegger would be better served by reading Wolin's previous work, *The Politics of Being*, as this provides a much more detailed and rigorous analysis of Heidegger's role in European thought. As for Sartre, once again it seems a bit curious to try and explicate one of the century's most prolific and thought-about figures in but twenty-one schematic pages that make no mention of the preceding two chapters.

### *Part Three: Neopragmatism and Poststructuralism*

Chapter Seven, “Recontextualizing Neopragmatism: The Political Implications of Richard Rorty's Antifoundationalism,” shifts the context of discussion from post-War European existentialism to the contemporary debates surrounding Rorty's much-ballyhooed critique of epistemology. Rorty's works have been the subject of much debate—usually laced with superlatives—so it is refreshing to find Wolin suggest that “the villain of Rorty's narrative—the old fashioned correspondence theory of truth—turns out to be rather a straw-person. The foundationalist mode of philosophizing, against which Rorty rails, lost its hegemony in Europe with Hegel's demise in 1831” (150). Wolin then attacks Rorty's version of antifoundational philosophy as little more than the “profoundly neoconservative” (151) alibi of a “self-satisfied, ethnocentric Westerner” (153) who has chosen simply to reduce questions of truth and justice to his own socially-sanctioned “preferences.”

Chapter Eight, “Michel Foucault and The Search for The Other of Reason,” then backtracks to the European scene, focusing in particular on the relationship between Foucault's critique of normative philosophical thought and the critique of bourgeois aesthetics found in Barthes, Mallarmé, Nietzsche, Sade, Artaud, Bataille, and others. Wolin thus reads Foucault's critique of “reason” as synchronous with the critique of language and representation that sees all attempts at normative thought as but politically-motivated moves in an endless “war of positions” (185).

Chapter Nine, "The House that Jacques Built: Deconstruction and Strong Evaluation," then makes the concluding gesture of addressing Derrida and the reception of "deconstruction" in the United States. Wolin is clearly suspicious of the political implications of deconstruction and offers the familiar caveat that "the omnipresent fear of a relapse into metaphysics can quickly turn into a paralyzing incapacity for qualitative intellectual judgement" (216). The most important moment in this chapter is when Wolin suggests that Derrida's insistence on the necessity of decentering both the bourgeois subject and all attempts at representational closure "may at the same time express a condition of acute cultural impoverishment. It may signify the fact that the bonds of human solidarity are becoming frayed beyond repair. It might in part reflect a logic of total reification" (207).

It is unfortunate that Wolin makes no attempt to pursue this question. Indeed, the bulk of the third section of Wolin's book seems to contain little more than suggestions of projects that are necessary, but that "the present study" seems unwilling to address. For example, in Wolin's scathing critique of Rorty he notes that Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael Sandel, and Charles Taylor are all doing work that is essential for enabling the reconstruction of a form of strong evaluative philosophy, and yet Wolin merely mentions these writers while spending twenty pages discussing the parochial and apparently unhelpful liberal musings of Rorty. Why? Rorty is little more than a joke on the "left" already, so why not explore the works of authors that Wolin himself suggests are more worthwhile? At the very least, it would have proven highly suggestive to read Rorty's postmodernist version of decisionism in the Reagan/Bush era against Schmitt's previously-discussed modernist version of decisionism in the Nazi era, and yet Schmitt is not mentioned even once in all of Part Three.

The same question may be asked with regard to Wolin's chapters on Foucault and Derrida: specifically, why does Wolin mention the possible link between deconstruction and social reification only then to move back into further discussion of Derrida's critique of metaphysics? Pursuing the relationship between deconstruction and reification (as Terry Eagleton, for example, has attempted elsewhere) would provide for a serious re-evaluation of deconstruction as somehow strangely synchronous with the accelerated onslaught of international monopoly capitalism, and yet Wolin leaves this important issue as but a hint of work to follow. As for Foucault, it again seems that much has already been said concerning his critique of reason and representation, particularly in the book-length studies by Dreyfus and Rabinow, Merquior, Major-Poetzl, Cousins and Hussain, Gutting, and others.

#### *Closing Thoughts*

Let me again emphasize my belief that *The Terms of Cultural Criticism* would serve well as a secondary text to accompany any syllabus dealing with the question of post-World War II critical theory, as Wolin does an excellent job of synthesizing and explicating dense and seemingly contradictory texts in essays that are, for the most part, quite short and accessible. Wolin's chapter on Schmitt is particularly solid, and his critique of Rorty—despite the flaws mentioned above—is right on target. It should be noted, however, that Chapters One, Three, Four, Five, and Six were published previously in jour-

nals and republished here with apparently little re-working: hence the connections between chapters are tenuous while the claims of one section are often left unaddressed in following sections.

The major problem with *The Terms of Cultural Criticism*, however, is that it makes no direct attempt to satisfy its own goals. For example, in the midst of one of Wolin's critiques of Foucault's undifferentiated notion of power, he writes that "such a perspective risks trivializing an entire series of ameliorative and piecemeal political gains—extensions of the franchise, reduction of the working day, national health care, and the preservation of basic civil liberties—that no post-totalitarian critical theory of society can afford to ignore" (187, my emphasis). And yet Wolin does in fact ignore these issues. It thus seems that the departmental and publishing-house constraints on "the present text" banish detailed materio-political thought to some assumed foreground from which they add legitimacy to the book's philosophical claims while nonetheless remaining conspicuously absent in their own right. It seems painfully obvious, however, that the "terms of cultural criticism" will continue to grow stale as long as critics refuse to move away from rarefied philosophical arguments and out into the aesthetic and political battles of contemporary social life. There is no question that detailed philosophical inquiry is a necessary element in this project, but its hypostatization as an autonomous field that does little more than allude to historical conditions and political possibilities can but lead critical theory ever deeper into its own officially sanctioned aporias.

University of California, San Diego

Stephen Hartnett

*Getting It Right: Language, Literature, and Ethics*, by Geoffrey Galt Harpham. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992. Pp. viii + 246. \$32.50.

*Getting It Right* is Geoffrey Harpham's theoretical intervention, largely from the perspective of deconstructive literary criticism, in current debates on ethical philosophy. Following in the footsteps of J. Hillis Miller's *Ethics of Reading*, but with a much more rigorous and systematic meditation on the philosophical tradition, as well as a more dynamic conception of ethical processes, Harpham rewrites and situates ethical discourse in relation to post-modern theories of language. Harpham borrows from Miller, Levinas, Derrida, Rorty, and de Man—among others—to sift through a wide range of ethical problems in an attempt to deflect the anti-ethical prejudice in contemporary criticism. With great learning and dexterity, he brings to the surface of critical debate a nest of problems and confusions that contemporary criticism ignores at its peril.

Harpham begins from the valuable perception that ethics, despite being an embattled term, has been accorded a prominent—but unexamined—place in current theoretical work, particularly as a result of the recent shift of attention to "acts" and away from "textualism." From the right, this shift comes as the call for a return to "values," whereas from the left it comes as the effort to

empower "the other." Harpham sets out to explore what thus appears to be an ineradicable ethical imperative—not as a timeless constant, but as an "underdetermined ought." His chief claim is that ethics contains a constitutive unclarity, built into the discourse itself, and that this principled confusion prevents ethics from becoming either a reservoir of utopian idealism or a formal set of logical rules. The general contention of Harpham's book is that ethics is a factor of "imperativity" embedded in all analysis, narrative, and creativity, even though the ethical imperative obligates us to labor in discursive anarchy.

The non-lucidity of ethical discourse, as Harpham formulates it, includes a necessary convergence of global principles and local codes of morality—what Harpham calls the "lamination" of transcendent and contingent prescriptions. But even in its own terms, Harpham's account of the sources of ethical unclarity tends to drift. He also suggests that the relation between constative and performative discourses—that is, the *is* and the *ought* (the facts and the values) of ethics—underlies the suspension of ethical lucidity. But another source of such confusion is the inevitable imbrication of freedom and constraint. Further confusions follow from these particular tensions, plaguing attempts to distinguish between such things as political grounds and more "independently" ethical grounds, between definitions of self-interest and disinterest, between utilitarian goals and principled ones—or, more generally, between principles and motives in the abstract—and between reflection and action. In the friction and slippage between these various binarisms—which Harpham calls "resistance"—ethical discourse compulsively represents a heterogeneous subject. And ethical discourse itself takes form only through a calculation of "distance" between the poles of such compromised binarisms. As a result, ethical arguments invariably redound on themselves, rather than grounding themselves in transcendent claims, and the ethical imperative can always ultimately be revealed as empty. Harpham goes beyond demonstrations of unreadability, however, to argue that ethics is marked by its active conversion of one binary term into its other—a process of conversion modeled fundamentally on the conversion of pleasure to pain, or pain to pleasure.

Harpham argues that language is the primary site of the ethical imperative, and that this origin explains both its transcultural and its "underdetermined" nature. Language does not have ethical agency, in Harpham's account—it remains something less than an agent but something more than a medium. Rather, language use itself requires the recognitions and choices about "otherness" essential to ethics. Harpham defends postmodern theories of language against charges of antihumanism by claiming that language is "saturated with otherness, and thus with ethics." He is careful to point out that this does not at all mean that language enforces liberal humanist values of "reciprocity," as Jurgen Habermas or Charles Taylor would argue, but only that language prescribes the tensional space of undecidability, particularly by activating the interplay of freedom and obligation that dominates ethical thought. The ethics of language, then, becomes the linguistic obligation of principled choice.

The weaknesses of Harpham's argument are, in large measure, simply the familiar weaknesses of deconstruction. For example, Harpham's tropological

emphasis manages completely to dematerialize ethics. One symptom of this dematerialization is that a number of key terms in contemporary leftist thought, like "otherness" or "resistance," are appropriated here for more properly textual functions. Harpham is right to point out that materialism itself often smuggles ethical terminology back into its attacks on ethical thinking, but this discovery might well point to the interminable need to historicize criticism's dependence on ethics, rather than to the supposition that ethics occupies the place of "the other" in anti-ethical criticism. It is also difficult to know where Harpham's pervasively bland cheerfulness about ethics comes from. Comparing ethics to "natural man" at one point, Harpham claims that ethics "is always in resistance with its other and in this resistance accomplishing its work." Given the ethical ungraspability Harpham has charted, it is difficult to know what this "work" might be, and whether we should feel reassured by its endless elaboration. To be "ethical," in Harpham's benign view, is simply and redundantly to be held in ethical tensions.

Moreover, positioning ethics within the dualisms of undecideability runs the risk of collapsing ethics into all the categories and figures of discourse that deconstruction has already placed within these dualisms. Harpham himself argues that, in his view, ethics becomes "spacious," and that it is hard to conceive principles that cannot be defended on ethical grounds. Indeed, it becomes difficult to imagine any use of language that does not qualify as "ethical." This might suggest that the definition of the "ethical" must be closely tied to material circumstances, commitments, conventions, habits, norms, etc. But Harpham is unwilling to surrender ethics to local imperatives, claiming that these are always corroded by the subversive effects of ethical reflection. For reflection will always determine a "law" that is other to practice, and ethics will always constitute itself as other to social constraints. In the course of this argument, Harpham claims that the very existence of ideological contradiction is evidence of the nonsynchronous and unreadable force of the ethical—even though Marxists have for a long time read such contradiction as the residue of material history, and even though few critics of any stripe these days would argue for symbolic consistency as the sign of interpretive validity. Harpham's view of ethics is ultimately a kind of benign formalism, whose key figure is the deconstructive labyrinth: "Ethics is a garden of forking paths, a discourse of mitosis that urges all who will listen to become such gardens themselves, to assume the form of ethics."

Despite these predictable problems, the strength of Harpham's book is that it sheds brilliant light on those dead ends of ethical discourse that need to be recognized as dead ends. Harpham's extraordinarily synthetic intelligence allows him to map out a range of persistent problems that ethical philosophy has never managed to untangle. Among his many useful discussions of interdependent ethical binarisms, Harpham has provocative and illuminating things to say about such things as the status of pleasure and pain in ethical discourse, or the relationship between ethics and creativity. His discussion of Freud is particularly informative. His account of narrative, which demonstrates narrative's perpetual reinscription of the relation between freedom and obligation through an extended reading of Conrad's *Secret Agent*, is original and astute. If nothing else, Harpham is enormously informative about the

relationship between deconstruction and ethics, particularly in his discussions of Derrida and de Man.

In addition to his command of the philosophical tradition, Harpham writes more lucidly about ethics than his model would lead us to believe is possible. His prose is crisp, and his wit refreshing. The absence of footnotes, while occasionally driving too much background material into the text, further quickens Harpham's prose and adds to the book's accessibility. Whatever one's convictions about ethics, *Getting It Right* will help formulate and clarify what we all mean—or cannot succeed in meaning—when we appeal to principle, since, as Harpham shows convincingly, we have no choice but to make such appeals.

*University of Michigan*

John Kucich