

THE FALL OF LITERARY THEORY

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A 21st Century
**Return to Deconstruction and
Poststructuralism, with Applications**

Liana Vrăjitoru Andreassen



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*The Fall of Literary Theory: A 21st Century Return to
Deconstruction and Poststructuralism, with Applications*

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FOREWORD

My love of literature began in a freshman English class in which students read stories and poems and wrote papers on the “meanings” of those works. Each piece I read seemed to be a locked box in which hid a mysterious secret that would be revealed only if I had a special key, one I believed to be in the possession of all my professors. I thought of my literary education as a gnostic initiation in which I had to prove worthy of being awarded a key of my own. I looked forward to a day in which I could unlock all those written treasures.

This was in the late 1970s, and my professors had attended graduate schools where they were steeped in the New Criticism. Follow Brooks and Warren, learn how to apply close readings, and meanings would emerge like flowers in a garden. Poems and stories were organic, self-contained items that should be allowed to speak for themselves, not forced to fit into theoretical templates.

When I studied philosophy in graduate school, that approach to literature aligned well with my interest in phenomenology. Husserl directed us to the things themselves, and Heidegger maintained that his treatment of *Dasein* was nothing more than a description unfolding from a rigorous introspection. After all, Heidegger taught us that truth is *aletheia* or unconcealedness, not some property of propositions as the analytic philosophers claimed. Similar approaches came from hermeneutic thinkers such as Gadamer and Ricoeur. All of this deepened my understanding of

literature by setting horizons on my readings of fiction and poetry just as these thinkers had done with other art forms.

By the time that I finished grad school and had substantial training in phenomenology and its precursors Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, I found that many other thinkers—all of whom had taken their cue from the phenomenologists—were the rage in literary criticism. They were called “poststructuralists” or “postmodernists,” terms with which I was barely acquainted. How had I missed the excitement? Was their work the logical outcome of the earlier philosophers I adored? I needed to catch up with theory.

Books by Derrida, Lacan, Lyotard, Cixous, Baudrillard, and others cluttered my desk. The array of approaches was vast. Some incorporated forms of Marxism, psychoanalysis, and other ideologies for new ways of understanding, not just literature, but politics, architecture, classical history, and nearly every field of academic study. Theory was exciting for me, although also bewildering. I would read a novel and consider it in terms of deconstruction, reader-response, or the failed Enlightenment project. Invariably, I wondered which approach worked best. Could I combine several, even those that appeared at odds with each other? This occurred when I was beginning to write fiction of my own, and I had to wonder if I was, like other authors (as Barthes claimed), dead.

Just as I began to see literature (and the world) through these theoretical lenses, rumors flew that theory was dead. Theory had led to the rejection of truth, of historical progress, of moral conviction, the rumors whispered, and had left us with a post-modern predicament of economic, artistic, and social bankruptcy.

I refused to believe the rumors. True, theory had uncovered in literature and other cultural artefacts insidious hidden agendas of various sorts of hegemony, and it offered no antidotes. But ugly truth is still truth, right? Besides, colleagues discussed my novels with me in terms of some of these theories, and I learned a great deal from them. Theory was taking a beating, but I was convinced that it was not down for the count. Someone with better skills than I surely could get it back on its feet and in fighting form again.

Liana Vräjitoru Andreassen does so in this book. She pushes us to reconsider questions such as: What should be the practical effects of literary interpretation? What should theory, or any kind of critical apparatus, do for readers? Most importantly, she insists that such questions cannot be separated from one more fundamental—what *is* literature? Andreassen rightly

sees that every important work of poststructuralism or postmodernism forces these questions, and if we are in a post-theory era, have we abandoned the questioning to which literature, by any estimation, naturally leads?

Andreasen makes a brilliant and thoroughly original move by showing that we can use theory to auger towards the essence of literature by engaging the categories of identity and fallenness. Literature is largely about identity and how the many forms of identity are illuminated by the questioning inchoate in literature. The questions, however, are only the start. As each stratum of linguistic concealedness is scraped away, the remaining substrata crystallize in response, requiring ever-sharper shovels to break through to the central, ultimate meaning of a work.

Such an endeavor cannot, of course, reach fulfillment. Andreasen explains that our failure to find completion in our literary archaeology is due to fallenness. Her selection of this term is an ingenious example of retrieval, which is largely what this book is about. The obvious connotation is a biblical one in which humankind is fallen from grace and lost its divine immediacy. For anyone raised in or touched by the Judeo-Christian legacy, is not this fallenness exactly what literature addresses? Without it, why the Bible? Why the works of Augustine, Aquinas, Maimonides, and Ibn Rushd? Why the *Divine Comedy*? Why *Paradise Lost*? Patching the wound created by religious fall is not restricted to outright religious works. With no notion of human infirmity and the limits of reason and writing, would we have *Hamlet*, *Don Quixote*, *Candide*, *Crime and Punishment*, *Heart of Darkness*, *The Waste Land*, *Ulysses*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, or the works upon which Andreasen focuses, *Billy Budd*, *Absalom! Absalom!*, and *The Crying of Lot 49*? Each of these pushes identity to its literary precipice, beyond which it plummets.

The other sense of fallenness Andreasen draws upon is from Heidegger. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger deems *Dasein* fallen to its core, rejecting its “ownmost” identity for an ersatz notion of self that is defined by *das Man*. We relinquish our authentic selves to “the they,” so that any possibility to own our future is covered up, buried in anonymity, and nearly impossible to excavate. In his later works, Heidegger speaks of fallenness in a broader sense, of how the original sense of awe of presocratic philosophers that signaled the birth of philosophy has been lost and of how the history of thought itself—the ability to ask fundamental questions about the nature of Being—has been usurped by calculative thinking endemic to our technological age. For Heidegger, phenomenology is the

auger that can bore through *Dasein's* fallenness to the existential structures that make possible its authentic identity (a process that he calls fundamental ontology) as well as the balm for reversing the concealedness of thought to its restorative sense.

The thinkers whose work led to poststructuralist and postmodernist theory were immensely influenced by Heidegger. Andreasen is well aware of this connection and how those theorists moved beyond the boundaries of phenomenology to develop their own notions of how to ask questions about the nature of Being through the medium of literature yet succumbed to their own distinctive kind of fallenness. Perhaps theirs was a series of failed projects, but the failures were nevertheless grand ones that left clues to how they can be rejuvenated to help us return to literature without plunging into the endless maelstrom of fallen identity. Andreasen convincingly argues that we can reverse theory's failures, but we may have to make a few sacrifices and amend a few assumptions about what literary criticism is all about.

Theory is not dead. It was at an earlier time no match for an opponent such as fallen identity that carried the freight of era upon era of writing. Like a skilled boxing coach, however, Andreasen knows her fighter's strengths and weaknesses, and has studied the same in the opponent. She has devised a new strategy hitherto unforeseen and has secured a rematch. I know where I shall place my bet.

Ron Cooper, College of Central Florida, author of *Hume's Fork*,
Purple Jesus and *The Gospel of the Twin*

PART I

BRINGING BACK THEORY

INTRODUCTION

WHERE HAS THEORY GONE?

In times of confusion, people want answers and seek comfort in the strength of conviction. Whenever there is uncertainty and a shift in the precarious balance of power, there are many who will embrace those with the strongest statement. It is no wonder that, along with the advance of new ideas, there is a parallel stream of terrified people swimming against the current and trying to hold on to their respective versions of social values. They conjure, mostly from an idealized past, their preferred methods of re-centering the *axis mundi*, or rather a retroactively-proclaimed golden age that would turn back the clock and erase the confusion brought by change. In the United States, “Make America great again”—the campaign catchphrase that, no doubt, had some contribution to Donald Trump winning the electoral vote in 2016—reassured a lot of people that the center can push back the racial, gender-based, or other threats. At the dawn of the 21st century, such threats have been edging closer with the advent of a black presidency, or the legalization of gay marriage, among other manifestations of the unrelenting need for change. In every age, power pushes back when the disempowered take steps toward that mythical center, and the tug-of-war, just like earthquakes, exposes fault lines of absolutist thought.

The fault lines need to be turned into momentum, or else when the quaking subsides a new “greatness” emerges, resurrected from the past, congealing power anew in its appearance of absolute stability. After, say, an

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event such as Vietnam, once the fault lines of imperialistic ideology were forgotten, it was easy to plunge the country into other unjustifiable wars, such as the post-9/11 wars targeting questionably defined enemies in the name of re-stabilizing Western values.

Who, one may ask, is responsible with exposing the fault lines? Who makes sure the center does not recoil and regain its appearance of eternal stability? In the 60s, the academia managed to shift from the dry terrain of abstract dialectics and various philosophical critiques of idealism to a more practical incarnation that broadly gained the name “theory.” Drawing from psycho- and socio-linguistics and earning legitimacy through applications in literary analysis, “theory” quickly spilled over into the streets, with Jacques Derrida marching along with the hippies and demanding the de-centering, de-construction of traditional structures of power. The fault lines, or rather, the cracks that expose the constructed nature of power have always been there in one form or another, and people are quick to cover them up if the change seems too abrupt. In the middle of the second decade of the new millennium, many rushed to embrace the phrase “Make America great again” because it is frightening to think the center is unstable. A sweeping, purist, idealistic phrase such as “great again” implies both the fear of being insignificant (falling from an assumed former greatness), and the belief that the past holds the key to regaining significance. I have no doubt that, if society today seems in danger of becoming too certain of its center again, “theory” can be useful once more (after falling into a slight disgrace), as it was in the 60s and 70s, as the tool for exposing the constructed—and violent—nature of power.

At the height of its popularity, literary theory, or criticism, seemed to have taken over English departments to the chagrin of those who believed it to be a fad. Poststructuralism was expanding in different fields, shattering walls and causing confusion, while its close kin, deconstruction, was the ultimate test for true scholarship: does one, or does one not “understand” it? Is one able to talk about *différance*, phallogocentrism, and signifiers in academic circles, as well as at the bar where all graduate students congregate? Yet “theory” was all but abandoned and almost everyone was quick to disavow it before the cock crew thrice: 9/11 happened and “proved” that the world is still structured in binaries of good and evil; then Jacques Derrida died in 2004 and apparently he was resurrected as a philosopher, so literary studies could breathe a sigh of relief, and then English and American departments rushed to embrace the much more reasonable, practical

teaching of paper-writing as a disembodied skill without content that can be quantified and assessed without the need, even, for human interaction.

In other words, we have fallen from theory, or theory itself has been exposed as a fallen, failed project dripping with nihilistic relativism. Or so we have been led to believe by the more vocal detractors. Even in the late 80s and in the 90s, when theory was the golden child of literary studies, there was a lot of resentment due to the imposition of unreadable essays and books in the analysis of literary texts, seemingly rendering them meaningless and a free for all of interpretation. In *Against Deconstruction*, known detractor of Derrida, John M. Ellis, was bent on proving that deconstruction is needlessly complicated, and what its obscure language hides is that, in fact, it offers no new idea: instead of dismantling Saussure's ethnocentrism, for example, it reasserts it. Following Ellis, Denis Dutton was "debunking" deconstruction, as if it were simply a pesky conspiracy theory with the sole purpose of creating books, and books about books.

In more conservative circles, such as in the words of British professor of Aesthetics, Roger Scruton, "Derridizing a text" turns readers away from the meaning of a text and imposes a sort of metalinguistic dictatorship, by virtue of the fact that, apparently, deconstruction is closely related to other words that start with de-: decrepitude, depravity, derision, destruction. That was written back in 1993. Terry Eagleton has long mocked post-modernism and deconstruction in particular for being deluded enough to believe they could "crack" the tyranny of social totality. In fact, Eagleton claims, the theorists themselves have been inside that totality all along, but in their comfortable chairs in Ithaca or Irvine, where they could afford to be "deliciously indeterminate" without really having much to offer. In the end, he dismisses it as methodologically incoherent and even dangerous to literary studies, as it encourages dilettantism for the sake of trying to keep up with more legitimate studies that have true depth of knowledge.¹

Sometimes, it was only hear-say that kept people away from exploring these challenges to Western thought. Various critics were making claims about the failure of poststructuralism and deconstruction without having read Jacques Lacan or Jacques Derrida, and dismissed them offhand as altogether too French for the sound American or English mind to accept. What is more, such second-hand critique of "deconstructionist" thought, as they called it, drew attention to an assumed relativism and claimed that deconstruction tried to level all values, all texts, all audiences and so forth, making them all equally meaningless.

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In a book that came out in 1999, Catherine Burgass doubts that literary theory truly can (or did) have an impact on politics, and even scolds impotent (though sincere) theory for its political failures, as “there is a certain amount of bad taste in the failure to attend closely to the world outside text or conceptual structure while claiming to address its social, political or economic problems.”² Again, the claim is that postmodern thought is too relativistic to have political power; in other words, there is no reconstruction offered after deconstruction.

Moreover, there was a real concern that deconstructing the center would only take power away from those at the margins, who would be discouraged from participating in the structure of society if they were persuaded of the arbitrary nature of power; the powerful, on the other hand, would most likely not be willing to relinquish their power. The gap between the rich and the poor, or between any other powerful/powerless pairs is not, however, caused by the skepticism of deconstruction. Contrary to some interpretations, deconstruction has never encouraged marginalized groups to give up identity (as a source of power)—a suggestion that belongs in a Buddhist temple. To be clear, while I use deconstruction’s concepts to critique deeply rooted ways to understand identity (and I add the concept of *the fall*, as will be seen), taking power away from the marginalized is not even remotely my purpose. The issue at stake in deconstruction (and by extension in this book) is not to see who will blink first and inadvertently let the Other grab the reins. The issue is this: the self and the Other must find ways to end the judgment of each other’s (and their own) identities for allegedly being fallen, corrupted. That judgment, I believe, is the essence of conflict, and my approach will show the process by which such judgment occurs.

Back to challenging traditional social systems, anyone who knows what deconstruction in effect deconstructs should realize that an attempt to offer a specific system in return for the one it poked holes in would amount to yet another return to the potential for systemic violence. “Changing the world” is a gross misrepresentation of the shift in mentality that is encouraged by poststructuralist thought, which can have positive effects if pursued in a subtle way and over decades. Burgass claims that what she (mistakenly) calls relativistic thought cannot work in the real world because it asks for a suspension of judgment. Not one poststructuralist thinker that I have read has asked for institutions of law and order to be taken down and everything and everyone to be declared equally valuable,

never to be weighed in judgment again. The changes that a theorist would hope for are internal shifts, an internal questioning of the rationale for judgment and different, possibly new but at the very least rethought ways to interact in the world. That is not revolutionary thought, and it needn't be seen, then, as a failure, since it has never ceased taking place, and has been taking place before it was even given a name (such as deconstruction).

Yet whatever denomination one prefers—postmodernist theory, post-structuralist analysis or deconstruction—the debunking of this line of inquiry has finally been itself debunked. As I mentioned before, one way in which deconstruction and Derrida in particular have been redeemed in academic circles was that philosophers, not English scholars, have come to the rescue. This is ironic, of course, given that Derrida himself was called a charlatan and kept away from the cookie jar philosophers were apparently hiding in the pantry. Simon Critchley, English philosopher who came to Derrida's defense in the '90s, recalls the scandal that erupted when Cambridge tried to offer Derrida an honorary doctorate, and eighteen respected philosophers from all over the world signed a letter protesting this, citing his lack of clarity and rigor and likening him to the Dadaists. In the end, Cambridge did award him the doctorate, but with very few philosophers on board.³

Today, Derrida has been embraced by philosophers (when the dust settled in the departments of literary studies). David Wood places him in the long line of Platonists, and in more direct kinship with the thinkers who challenged self-identity (when it is stripped of relationality), such as Nietzsche, Heidegger or Derrida's friend Levinas.

But this book is not about Derrida and his detractors, or the fact that now he is a "legitimate philosopher," or even particularly about Derrida. Nor is this book an attempt (and there have been many) to give another definition to deconstruction or poststructuralism, though of course clarifications, when needed, will be offered. My first task is to ask new questions. Why, first of all, have we divorced "theory" from political action (with a sigh of relief, for some)? Why, on the other hand, are we quick to dismiss this invaluable method of thinking about texts from our English classes, where complex thought is needed? Why, also, should we accept the claim that deconstruction is a failed project and that it did not, does not, and will not ever prove of use outside of writing papers or books? Do we even understand enough what the purpose of deconstruction was to begin with, before we can claim that it has failed? To say that, if it did not trigger a

clear revolution, inside or outside the university, then deconstruction did not succeed and should be left to die is to ignore the enormous outreach that the practice of poststructuralist and deconstructive analysis in the classroom has been part of, once the students have left the classroom with a new awareness of what takes place within their lives and at a global scale, I would dare say. To believe that, for example, gay marriage is just a random result of moving around justices in the Supreme Court is a willful blindness to the decades of slowly but surely challenging, in universities, the way students think. With a new set of tools (some taken directly from deconstruction) to challenge patterns of thought, students have been stepping into the real world, where undoubtedly they have made dents in deeply rooted mentalities. And I am not, again, randomly linking causes and effects just to suit an argument.

I also happen to be the product of the dissemination of poststructuralist and deconstructive ideas, as a student of a student of Derrida and having dedicated my graduate years to “theory.” I have no choice but to disseminate these ideas as I teach—it is not even because I have convinced myself that I have a doctrine to preach or because I am an idolater of Lacan and Derrida. Poststructuralist deconstruction is part of my teaching because it is now part of my thinking. This is precisely how I identify the type of impact I believe “theory” has had over a few generations already, and why literary analysis (with the help of theory) is the one bastion of decentering thought that can never be forced to go away. It will continue to challenge power, no matter how much the funding for liberal arts studies is slashed. “Literature” is the safest way to question the world since, just as an example, the political discussion can be veiled under literary analysis, while students can safely hide behind characters, to avoid escalation during sensitive debates.

I have been teaching for over 15 years, and in all this time I have seen how the classroom offered the (mostly) safe type of environment where people were allowed to hit their own walls of prejudice, see their systemic thought mirrored in other students, dare to listen to different rationales than the ones they had come in with, and in the end, the dialogue has been changing practically before my eyes. At the college in South Texas where I teach, to continue with the convenient example of gay marriage (since it has recently won the legal debate), I have noticed the same gradual change, over the years, that the country has been noticing, until the minority became the majority and the voices of prejudice and intolerance became

the exception, not the norm. I myself am the product of classrooms where I learned to deconstruct myself, most of all, and my bicultural identity. My own transformation is still spilling over into my classroom.

There should, therefore, be no question whether the theory of deconstruction or poststructuralist analysis should still be taught in literature classes or not. What should still be debated, perhaps, is how it can help cope with shifts in the political landscape and how “literature” (from the most ancient classic texts to contemporary works) can be made relevant in every new context. It would be up to the readers of this book to decide the way it should be taught, to what extent, and what can still be expected to result from the all-but-dismissed use of theory.

Aside from offering my own approach to theory through new uses of the concept of *the fall*, I also offer some practical applications. I will not deny that the chapters in the “Applications” section of this book may not seem very practical, as they delve quite deeply (though less abstractly, since they rely on literary texts) into the “theory” with which I challenge absolutist thought. Hopefully, at the end of the day they will show the usefulness (maybe not the easiness) of such a challenge, through a type of literary analysis that I believe can never be irrelevant.

To begin with, before we are ready to abandon concepts to competencies in literary studies and the humanities in general, we need to reexamine the purpose of reading and teaching literature to begin with. Roger Scruton would be happy to return to a formalist unfolding of meaning in front of students since, after all, a metaphor is always a metaphor. We don’t, presumably, want the poor student to wonder what kind of knowledge we possess if we can’t even pinpoint exactly where that meaning can be found, and on what page, and whether it will be on the test.

I am not merely a Derridean deconstructionist. To me, Derrida’s deconstruction is the logical conclusion of a line of thinking that began with the challenge brought to Saussurian structuralism, most notably by Lacan. Lacan’s challenge to the chain of signification and binary thought, combined with his struggle to connect the dots of signification and link them to the alienating desire for signification that founds identity, for which he found tools in Freud’s psychoanalysis, has enabled the different branches of poststructuralist thought to expand: Julia Kristeva’s injection of the feminine into the symbolic order, Jean Francois Lyotard’s interest in history as narrative of legitimation, Jean Baudrillard’s simulacra, Slavoj Žižek’s more politically charged voice as he refashions Marxism, Gilles Deleuze

and Felix Guattari, who angered Lacan by challenging the Oedipus complex, Emmanuel Levinas' ethical concerns with the face and the call of the Other, and, perhaps the most popular, Derrida's deconstruction. Derrida, for one, mentored directly some of his followers, such as the group called the Yale School or those who were his friends over the years—Levinas, Paul de Man, Hélène Cixous, among others. However, in truth, the conversation did not go only in one direction, and many of the theorists and philosophers of the last decades of the 20th century were, whether they admitted it or not, relying on each other to shape their own ideas, even when they were bitterly disputing the nuances in how they differed or what brought them together.

But before we can decide if what is called theory (which, of course, can be many things) has failed, or was already doomed to fail as soon as it was formulated, it would be wise to pay attention to what it was meant to achieve in the first place, at least according to its more prominent stars. In *Deconstruction and the Other*, Derrida himself confesses that “the available codes for taking such a political stance are not at all adequate to the radicality of deconstruction I try where I can to act politically while recognizing that such action remains incommensurable with my intellectual project of deconstruction.”⁴ Following the same idea, Gayatri Spivak explains that deconstruction is not a political project, or it would be irresponsible to attempt to harness it to a political program. Take, for instance, the practice of Marxist theory, one I am very familiar with having grown up in a communist country before moving to the US. Marxist application is an example of how destructive a “theory” can become when coupled with politics. Marx' theory critiquing capital should have never become a social experiment and should have remained just that, a critique. If changing the world hadn't been taken so literally, Marxism would have had a less ambitious but more desirable effect if it had remained subtle and had let its impact be felt within a few generations. As it happened, it was the practice that killed the good intentions of the theory, and a place like North Korea is still feeling the direct effect of turning theory into a system. Yet, as will be seen later, if one attempts to redeem the theory by claiming that only the practice was misguided, wrong or fallen, then the theory will have the same potential for violence as before, if a new, “improved” practice arises.

In his “Letter to a Japanese Friend,” Derrida recalls the time when he selected this word, deconstruction, and explains that he specifically avoided words that would have suggested annihilation (such as “destruction”). It is

not as revolutionary a concept as many have wished it to be, especially as Derrida warned against limiting the scope of deconstruction by either limiting it to linguistics, or by turning it into a mechanical model. To him, such models lead to a misunderstanding of what his, and others' theories are in fact meant for, which is "deconstructive questioning."⁵ It is not even an anti-structuralist urge, even though the term popular in the United States, "poststructuralism," may seem to indicate that. What I think is the simplest, most crystal-clear definition of purpose that Derrida has to offer is this: "Rather than destroying, it was ... necessary to understand how an 'ensemble' was constituted and to reconstruct it to this end."⁶ The end, he insists, is "undoing, decomposing, desedimenting" in a way that is not a negative operation but rather a genealogical restoration. It is, he also points out, not merely a (Kantian) critique or an analysis (in the sense of taking apart to find an origin). It is not even a method. Seeing it as a simple tool to be used in university classrooms can lead to wrong turns and misguided seductions. He sees it as an "event" that continues to take place, cannot be pinpointed, taught as a theme or object, or a destination. His own essays, in his mind, are "modest symptoms of it, quite as much as tentative interpretations."⁷ Even as everyone sees him as an originator of such an event, he only sees himself as its observer, and also the one who tried to describe it in repeated attempts. If that is the case, the event is still taking place, and students of students of those who observed it can continue to observe what it does in the world, not to the world, and most of all what it has to tell us about ourselves.

Lacan, before Derrida, already warned about seeing transference as an end or a "termination of analysis."⁸ He, too, vehemently opposed seeing analysis as an end goal (he meant, in the psychoanalyst's cabinet, but we can also say the same about the classroom). In a 1974 interview, he saw his brand of psychoanalysis (which later became foundational to poststructuralism) as "the symptom that reveals the malaise of the society in which we live." In trying to conceive of it as a practice, he admitted that using it that way "is a terrible difficulty because it claims to introduce the impossible, the imaginary, into everyday life."⁹ Psychoanalysis can remain useful as a teaching "method" if it is seen as the event that continues to happen. Lacanian psychoanalysis is, of course, not to be confused with Lacan's own clinical purposes for creating it. It is, for our purposes, strictly a "theory" that can be given much larger purposes, especially since the field of mental health has already rejected it following the rise of chemical psychotherapy.

The fact that Lacan and Derrida are dead, and that “theory is dead,” is irrelevant, as long as the events they triggered in the realm of thought are still taking place, spilling over into real life. I suggest, therefore, that it is precisely *thought* that we need to continue deconstructing. Literature is, of course, a constructed reality, but one derivative of the constructed self, or selves, of an author, an age, and of humans by and large. Identity is at the core of what one seeks when one signs up to get an education, and there are many ways in which one confronts identity while sifting through and trying to internalize various “knowledges” that quantify and explicate the layers of reality. But how can literary studies continue to be event-ful and not a depository of static toolboxes at a time when we are told we should return to meaning and stop bothering students with signifying chains with no origin? In truth, there is no reassurance in a toolbox, since most of the time it is shut as soon as class is over. Then we are back to the question: is there any value in teaching literature itself, if there’s nothing to be taken at the end into the real world? One may think that “identity” that has been built upon (with added knowledge) is the purpose of education, and whatever field has the least to offer that is quantifiable and accountable for, that is the field no student in his or her right mind would aspire to major in, or even tangentially have anything to do with.

We have to persist, and we have to insist: as one “builds” this educated identity with skills and tools to show at a job interview, one also needs a way to rearrange, renegotiate this coveted new identity in order to make sense of its place in the world, not to mention its usefulness in the world. We are not computers, to place chips and wiring in the right spot and turn on the engine of thought. Thought and its processes have to be continuously at stake as a dynamic space, and the more information is internalized, the bigger the need for stepping back and, yes, deconstructing identity and reassessing its history and its relationality, as well as its impact on self and Other.

Literary studies is a field with the privilege of direct access to identities, selves, from near and far, from the beginning of time, or rather from the time when the very quest for an origin and for signification allowed itself to be traced, and all the way forward, to the end of signification and the death desire of culture, in apocalyptic imaginings. Literature gives access to a database of questions that have been asked before. Identity is not an understanding, a satisfied closure, but it can only be seen in a continuum, which is why one has to be immersed into this questioning, not simply

expect the vision to be embodied by the ideal professor who has never even claimed to exist.

Postructuralist analysis has been endlessly criticized for not being a shortcut to knowledge, but this is not its purpose. In analyzing a literary text this way, deconstructing it, digging for the spaces where identity is and is not, that is what can still be done, whether “theory” is out of fashion or not. A narrow definition of “theory” may be out of fashion, but its symptomatic, rather than axiomatic engine of questioning keeps running past the words chosen to name it, words that, of course, sooner or later lose their adherents.

The task of this book is to offer one way to revive (or return to) the engine of questioning, and it is precisely at the level of identity that the book seeks to produce a new demonstration of practice, without being practical. I have selected one concept to work with in this book, for the purpose of interrogating identity. In fact, I examine the lacks in the concept of identity, rather than its fullness, and I explain why it is impossible to isolate it as an untouched, incorruptible and fully meaningful entity. In order to make sense of why there are so many issues with identity as soon as we attempt to understand it, I will use fallenness as my concept of choice, to shed new light on identity formation. Befitting to the “fall of theory,” my revival of theory starts from the place of falling, from the fall that traces signification through various contortions of mythological proportion, and through it I make the claim that, ultimately, the violence of the fall (whether it is seen as origin or as corruption of origin) cannot be reversed unless we acknowledge why we insist in seeing ourselves and others as fallen.

The event of the fall, if we may call it that—a fall that, naturally, is still taking place—has never not been part of identity, especially in Western thought. After all, one still popular metaphor for our origin is that of Adam and Eve, conceived of as fallen (dragging us into the fall along with them). In the Application in Part Two of this study, I use five American literary books (and a few others tangentially) to scrutinize this concept, along with a host of “theorists.” Through a poststructuralist analysis I show not only how distinct literary periods have placed identity in that space of fallenness, but also how, through deconstructing this concept (with the help of those texts) we can begin to glimpse at how destructive it truly is. As I set this task for myself, I also acknowledge that poststructuralism/deconstruction are not quite sufficient in such an analysis, so in the end