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*Minor Prophecies* is an intellectual autobiography of Geoffrey Hartman, eminent Romanticist and Wordsworth scholar and the author of books associated with Yale deconstruction such as *Criticism in the Wilderness*. In *Minor Prophecies* Hartman records his admiration for critical writing that promotes ongoing interpretation, close attention to texts, and contextualization rather than judgment—what we might, borrowing Marshall McLuhan’s terms, call “cool” as opposed to “hot” (didactic or politically engaged) criticism. The book presents itself as a selective history of the literary essay, with special emphasis on Midrash (Judaic scriptural exegesis using parables and homilies), the eighteenth century (Addison and Steele), the 1930s and World War II, and the present moment. Relatively few passages refer to Hartman as someone other than a reader and critic, but the motivation behind *Minor Prophecies* peeps out in just such passages. Here is one example:

> Having been de Man’s colleague and friend for many years, I found the American reaction [to de Man’s wartime writings for a collaborationist newspaper], in its rush to judgment, as hard to take as the original revelations. That I was a refugee from Nazi Germany, a Jew targeted by the ideology that spoke from some of de Man’s articles, did not make my response easier. (124–25)

References to Nazi Germany and the Holocaust erupt frequently in the book; this passage comes as close as any to explaining why. Hartman knows that the Nazi era is an acute test case of the critic’s social responsibility. Was there anything, he seems to wonder, that criticism could or should have done differently—something that might have altered the course of events? Hartman mentions a number of critics in passing—Auerbach, Burke, Eliot, Woolf, and Leavis (these mostly admired); Lukács and Heidegger (these the subject of brief and quizzical remarks). But his highly allusive method allows him to remain tentative and uncertain in what he says. Clearly, the de Man controversy reopened the wounds of the war era and brought home to Yale the issue of criticism’s role in political processes. The real drama in *Minor Prophecies* then becomes Hartman’s need to defend cool criticism—given the discovery of de Man’s wartime writings and Hartman’s profound abhorrence of nazism.

If Hartman’s argument about criticism and World War II is oblique and repressed, his argument about criticism today is opaque and at times self-contradictory. It veers between polemic and the desire to be above the fray of the culture wars. Hartman describes contemporary criticism as characterized by “critical fundamentalism,” similar in its passions to religious fundamentalism. This “fundamentalist” criticism, Hartman believes, dreams a “dream of communication’ that looks not only towards the transparency of the text or the undistorted transmission of messages from the sender (writer) to receiver (reader) but also towards a social system that is supposed to create that language possibility instead of merely enforcing it” (68).

Hartman names no names and gives no examples of critical fundamentalism—such vagueness is a persistent feature of this book. Instead, he pits text-based approaches, and especially deconstruction, against critical fundamentalism. According to Hartman, fundamentalists ferret out a single meaning that supports their cause; deconstruction and other text-based approaches work toward the openness of meaning found in Midrash. Although deconstructive criticism is not always written in accessible style or aimed at a common reader, Hartman believes that it performs for society some of the same functions as Addison and Steele’s witty essays: a naturally cool medium, it defuses the heat of political passions by directing us back to language and to texts.

Hartman’s sympathies in this contemporary contest are clear enough. In his final chapter, he writes:

> Literary criticism is [read, “should be”] comparative and defamiliarizing, not prescriptive or prophetic. Its style remains in the mode of critique, where the object is not analyzed in order to be appropriated. “Knowing” the work means that we allow it to remain questionable. We disclose obstacles that impede a directer knowledge or thicken its text-milieu and historical layering. (185)

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Yet there’s a sleight of hand in this formation that begs the questions Hartman asks about criticism’s possible roles in cultural health or illness.

As Hartman surely knows, there has always been tension between writing (literary or critical) that addresses social issues and writing that does not. Either can be “comparative,” “defamiliarizing,” and thick with “text-milieu” and “historical layering.” Yet Hartman restrictively defines the role of criticism as burrowing ever more deeply into contradiction, forsaking all conclusions or gestures out of the text as “prescriptive” appropriation. In the end, Hartman remains committed to deconstruction. There is nothing really wrong or surprising about that—except that Hartman makes such a virtue of refusing to choose sides and consistently praises cool criticism, which eschews polemic.

Hartman is led into this false position by his ambivalence over the issues raised by the de Man controversy. In a central chapter (at its core), Minor Prophecies records Hartman’s struggle with public denunciations of de Man after the revelation that de Man had contributed to the collaborationist Belgian newspaper Le soir and the Flemish-language magazine Het Vlaamsche Lande. Much as he would like to do so, Hartman finds himself unable to separate the young de Man from the mature intellectual he knew. Hartman must thus wrestle with what he knows to be a naive and yet profound desire: that great critics (like great writers and great politicians) should lead exemplary lives. De Man was a great teacher and influential critic; he did not lead an exemplary life. As Hartman surely knows, there has always been tension between writing (literary or critical) that addresses social issues and writing that does not. Either can be “comparative,” “defamiliarizing,” and thick with “text-milieu” and “historical layering.” Yet Hartman restrictively defines the role of criticism as burrowing ever more deeply into contradiction, forsaking all conclusions or gestures out of the text as “prescriptive” appropriation. In the end, Hartman remains committed to deconstruction. There is nothing really wrong or surprising about that—except that Hartman makes such a virtue of refusing to choose sides and consistently praises cool criticism, which eschews polemic.

Hartman contextualizes the articles by identifying “symmetries” and “asymmetries” between the early and late work and suggests that de Man’s uncle strongly influenced his nephew’s youthful writings. Hartman predicts that the mature work will be more worth remembering and preserving than the early writings. I agree if the mature work is taken to include de Man’s teaching as well as his writing. For the thing most striking to me about the de Man controversy is the remarkable influence that de Man had on his students and colleagues. Whether or not they foreground it in their written pieces about him, people seem compelled by the effect of his personality in classroom and lecture hall and not just by his published work.

Throughout Minor Prophecies, Hartman presses his mind against the de Man controversy, searching for a position that will justify himself and his friend to the world—and be consistent with Hartman’s own loathing for nazism and the Holocaust. It’s a high-wire act with frequent missteps that have Hartman tottering awkwardly above the arena.

Here is one instance in which Hartman is unable to avoid praise or condemnation—to practice, as well as praise, cool criticism. In this passage, from the last chapter of Minor Prophecies, Hartman lambastes critical fundamentalism while also presenting himself as a modern-day version of Melville’s meek, mild Bartleby:

> Recently the demand for a didactic, ethical, action-oriented criticism has intensified. . . . Today a “labor of the negative,” though respecting dissent and argument and respecting particularly the weak force of Bartleby’s “I would prefer not to,” does not work in many circles unless, generating a fervor equivalent to religious faith, it prescribes explicitly for social ills. (207)

With the Bartleby image, Hartman appears to put himself on a shelf: he is out of it, he says, out of tune with the “fervors” of the time. He can only look out, saying, “I would prefer not to,” like Melville’s humble, passive clerk—and write this book. Hartman tries to deny that the book might be powerful: the title Minor Prophecies announces a perceived sense of its own impotence. But a book is a book—not so very humble a thing—and Hartman’s refusal to accept his power annoys me.

The Bartleby image also embarrasses me and makes me sad because I sense that Hartman sincerely believes it. Filled with the example of Nazi Germany and a vague sense of some new impending apocalypse, Hartman claims to feel the impotence and frustration of a Bartleby. He flirts with the possibility that criticism could have made—could make again—a difference. But he begs off in the end. I wonder, Is there no course that would be true to his beliefs and yet active? What is the action-oriented
criticism Hartman so deplors? Is it really as dangerous to critic and culture as Hartman maintains? Is it as dangerous, perhaps, as deconstruction is, according to deconstruction's detractors? Without specifics, how can we judge—or even, for that matter, ponder the issues Hartman raises?

For the most curious thing about this book is the absence of named specific opposition, even though it frequently invokes the opposition en masse. If I had to guess—and on the basis of Minor Prophecies, I do—literary critics from the political Left are Hartman's special target, particularly those who have attacked de Man. But all literary critics who address cultural issues or who express opinions on social questions (Marxists, feminists, gay critics, cultural critics, and others) might qualify as critical fundamentalists for Hartman.

At times, Hartman seems aware that he is writing a polemic and needs an opposition. “My argument is with a certain kind of rhetoric whose idealism is as hollow as it is grand,” he says (181). Yet he begs the question of what rhetoric is that “certain kind”—what is worth defending and what is “hollow.” On the next-to-last page of his book, Hartman says (and I was relieved to hear him say it), “It must be clear by now that I have a personal difficulty with assertions that rely on names and summaries rather than on specific source texts accompanied by close reading—a difficulty even greater when it comes to cultural history and drawing lessons from it” (207). If pressed, Hartman would probably claim that the book’s refusal to name names and the abstractness of its polemic is his point. His ideal is based, I suspect, on Keatsian negativity and a dangerous, even reprehensible, delusion? How does one discriminate between a necessary enthusiasm and a dangerous, even reprehensible, delusion? How does one distinguish wisdom from wit and sort out experts who have latched onto a theory from critics who cannot cease from mental fight?

The answer, I should think, is case by case, on one’s pulses and in one’s mind, informed by a lifetime of experience, religious belief, philosophy, feeling, and training. With reference to de Man, Hartman warns that either the describer sees things quite differently from the way that you do but does not seem to recognize that any differences are possible. It’s like watching half of Rashomon, expecting that the other point of view is coming, but not getting it.

Near the end of Minor Prophecies, after once again raising the example of Nazi Germany, Hartman pronounces himself “puzzled” by these questions:

> How does one discriminate between a necessary enthusiasm and a dangerous, even reprehensible, delusion? How does one distinguish wisdom from wit and sort out experts who have latched onto a theory from critics who cannot cease from mental fight? (184)

The answer, I should think, is case by case, on one’s pulses and in one’s mind, informed by a lifetime of experience, religious belief, philosophy, feeling, and training. With reference to de Man, Hartman warns that every judgment can become a judgment on its maker. Critically speaking, this warning is a “Let him who is without sin cast the first stone” move—always powerful. The countermove, though, is to point out that, for a writer, every failure to judge can also become a judgment on the abstainer. Dante’s Inferno contains not just great sinners committed to the wrong causes but also those who refused to commit themselves at all or refrained from moral action. Hartman writes as an eminent member of the critical profession—a position I am entirely willing to grant him and to honor. Yet he declines the responsibilities that go with the role. It is as if someone in a position of power were to issue a policy statement focusing solely on the difficulties of arriving at a policy or to decline doing anything because any action might, in certain instances, be doctrinaire.

Hartman’s peculiar mode of equivocation does, indeed, doom criticism to minor prophecies. Afraid to pronounce, hemmed in by reservations and qualifications, Hartman ends by resembling Bartleby or Prufrock, and needlessly so. For his is a powerful mind that is obviously committed to certain things, like Judaism and the resourcefulness of language; a mind that has lived through fearful times; a mind capable of likes and dislikes, admiration and friendship. I wish Hartman had made his case without a shadow opposition; I wish he had written the book as a personal statement rather than as a putative exercise in literary theory.

For me, the strict opposition between deconstruction and what Hartman sees as political or engaged criticism does not ring true. (I want to avoid using the term fundamentalists, which, I believe, entirely prejudges the case, raising as it does the specter of Khomeinism.) Nor does Hartman’s occasional linkage of a clear, conversational style and political criticism. As I see it, what we have today are not two opposed modes but multiple complex possibilities, any cluster of which can be activated in a given work of criticism. A great deal of political criticism relies on the technical language of theory and is not written in a conversational style. Such criticism may dream “a dream of communication,” but much of it neither premises the transparency of texts nor appeals to the common reader.

In the same way, many political critics do precisely the kind of close reading, attentive to multiple and slippery meanings, that Hartman advocates. For most critics, deconstruction has become a mode, usable as one of a range of critical approaches. For many practicing critics, deconstruction is no longer a separate movement; it is a critical tool that does not inspire either devout faith or great outrage.
I do not see criticism as necessarily making minor prophecies. I can name lots of examples of criticism that has fostered women's rights, enabled gay people to come out of the closet, changed exhibition policies at museums, and so on. Movements in literary and cultural criticism have affected both the institutions of culture and the daily lives of numerous people. The critic need not, then, feel like the utterer of minor prophecies or like a mumbling Bartleby. Nor need a committed critic eschew what Hartman considers “literary” choices and the richness of language.

Read as a statement about "the literary essay in the culture wars," *Minor Prophecies* seems to me entirely too partial, tentative, and, yes, self-defeated (the Bartleby image). That is why I prefer to read it, more positively, as a statement of intellectual faith and position. In this striking passage, for example, Hartman makes an overt confession of the critical passion that motivates *Minor Prophecies*:

Reading literature for me is a deliberate blinding. I stumble about, sometimes hedonistically, in that word-world; I let myself be abused by sense or sensation and forget the drive towards a single all-conquering truth; and I unravel the text only as it is simultaneously rethreaded on the spool of commentary. (207)

You may love it or hate it, but at least this honest passage exposes Hartman’s commitment to and passion for language and has, in itself, a lavishness and openness of style that reveal the man behind this book. Here is someone truly captivated by language and driven by metaphors such as “blindness,” used so effectively by his friend and colleague de Man. A passage like this makes me understand the immense influence Hartman has exerted on generations of students—an influence that creates fierce loyalties and profound intellectual debts, like those de Man himself created at Yale.

There is a curious and almost emblematic moment in *Minor Prophecies*, in which Hartman seems to recognize and welcome what one might call the biographical imperative. He quotes a passage from Virginia Woolf’s “Sketch of the Past” in which Woolf describes how she heard of an acquaintance’s suicide after experiencing in her garden a revelation of the order that resides in nature. Henceforth, by the merest accident of proximity in time, the image of the suicide’s body was linked to “being in the garden at night and walking on the path by the apple tree” (qtd. in Hartman 161); death had become associated with the ecstatic experience of nature. Commenting that “work on these few lines of prose has barely started,” Hartman praises Woolf’s love of language (161). I think Hartman lights upon this moment in Woolf for another reason. He is moved by Woolf’s attraction to language—sure. But the moment speaks to him because, as he writes *Minor Prophecies*, he too is experiencing the pathos of unexpected conjunctions around a dead body—that of his friend de Man. A Europe changed forever; the culture of European Jewry—his culture—destroyed; a new country where success has been full; a dead friend who turned out, against all the odds, to have once worn the uncaring face of the enemy. In *Minor Prophecies*, Hartman needs to reaffirm his faith in his life’s medium, the literary essay, which that dead friend wrote so well. He espouses a position so pure that it cannot recognize itself as a position. That is the submerged drama in *Minor Prophecies*. That is Hartman’s dilemma.

Notes

1. Hartman’s major books are *Wordsworth’s Poetry, Psychoanalysis and the Question of Text, Criticism in the Wilderness: The Study of Literature Today, Saving the Text: Literature, Derrida, Philosophy, and Midrash and Literature.*

2. Hartman first wrote on the de Man controversy for the *New Republic* in March 1988, expanding this essay for *Reading de Man Reading, Minor Prophecies* is thus Hartman’s third publication on the de Man affair.

3. These charges appeared on the front page of the *New York Times Book Review* in an article by David Lehman, which will be the afterword to a paperback edition of Lehman’s earlier book, *Signs of the Times: Deconstruction and the Fall of Paul de Man.*

4. Alice Yaeger Kaplan compellingly re-creates de Man in the classroom in “Guy, de Man, and Me,” a chapter from her forthcoming book. Mark Edmundsen’s *Harper’s* article begins by situating Edmundsen as de Man’s former pupil. In fact, many participants in the debate are former students or colleagues of de Man.

5. This reference appears in a letter from Keats to his brothers George and Thomas.


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