

IMITATION AND THE IMAGE OF MAN

**CULTURA LUDENS:
IMITATION AND PLAY IN WESTERN CULTURE**

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James S. Hans

Imitation and the Image of Man

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by

James S. Hans

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To My Parents

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PREFACE

Over the past fifteen years several new ideas about the nature of language and literature have generated a considerable degree of controversy in the United States, and most of them can be attributed to what has come to be called "The French Invasion." In literary criticism and theory, the names of writers like Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, and Kristeva come immediately to mind, while others from Deleuze and Guattari to Genette, Todorov, Serres and Girard have also affected the ways we conceive of our writerly activities. This "invasion" has not been entirely restricted to French thinkers, as the influence of Gadamer and Jauss would attest, but for the most part we have come to think of the changes in our practices as deriving chiefly from French theorists. Although the controversies that have occurred in the process have tended to focus on some writers more than others, the effects of their ideas remain difficult to determine at this point.

If we look simply at the names that are used as debating instruments, though, Jacques Derrida's more than anyone else's seems to symbolize the new ways of doing things, for his name is familiar to many who have never investigated any of the French writers but who still have an opinion one way or another on their virtues. "Deconstruction" has come to be a catchword in our lexicon for radically good or radically harmful thinking, and even if Derrida's work is not finally as important as the ubiquity of his name would suggest, the argument around it demonstrates the volatile nature of the dialogue. Given the relative superficiality of such rhetorical games, though, we need to ask how much the French and German writers have affected the ways in which we conceive of our activity. Once we get beyond the heated arguments, what in fact has changed?

At a superficial level, certain irrevocable changes seem to have occurred, as we can see if we look at the recent book lists of university presses. There is now, for example, a whole series of texts devoted to the critical assessment of the virtues and limitations of deconstruction. Another series consists of what can only be called instruction manuals, from "An Introduc-

tion to Deconstructionism” to “Deconstruction for the Experts,” and yet another provides examples of the practice of deconstruction through works which employ the method and demonstrate how this or that canonical text is indeed man-centered and nostalgic for origins. Similar lists could be compiled for semiotics, structuralism, Lacanian psychoanalysis, marxism, feminism, and reader-response theory. The sheer number of books devoted to new perspectives would lead us to conclude that a great many things have changed in our ways of conceiving texts and that one of the effects of these changes is an increasing fragmentation of the disciplines, with each particular camp devoted to its own ways of doing things and showing little interest in how other areas of the discipline work. The tendency toward fragmentation — some call it specialization — was already present before continental writers made their appearance, but the controversies surrounding their work have clearly exacerbated the trend.

Beyond these changes, though, little seems to have occurred, and inasmuch as the “theory boom” seems to have abated somewhat, we might even surmise that these alterations in our habits will die out or become more muted in time. One might well conclude that the brouhaha was about relatively little in the end, and that its effects have been minor at best. The “radical ideas” have been all too easily tamed — at least in the United States — and they have consequently already lost much of their sting. When we consider what hasn’t changed we can, I think, see that the invasion of ideas was contained relatively early on and little damage was done.

Consider, for example, how concepts like “deconstruction” have been constrained by our disciplinary structures. Critics have already pointed out that many of those who are devoted to “radical” ideas like deconstruction tend not to be very radical in most respects. They may be committed to deconstruction, but their application of its values takes place in a limited field, as if it were simply one method among many that can be used to do things with texts. In part because it has little to do with political concerns, it has shown no tendency to move outside the narrow confines of literary studies. When its practitioners use the method, they do so in traditional ways, for the most part analyzing canonical texts — even though the concept of canonicity is “deconstructed” by the theory itself. In the end their efforts are largely confined to overturning New-Critical readings of these texts. Where a New Critic would seek to arrive at the essence of a poem or novel, a deconstructionist would simply show how there is finally nothing where something was supposed to be. Deconstruction, like semiotics or

most of the other recent innovations, has become for the most part little more than a new procedure with different techniques, practiced upon the same old texts.

There are other critical currents as well, but their effects have remained muted for one reason or another. Some theorists deny the concept of canonicity, for example, and deal with sign systems that would previously have been considered too insignificant for serious academic or literary work. Others argue — true to the French background — that there really is no such thing as literature anymore, so we are free to do what we want with whatever we find at hand. In general, though, these writers make their moves from ideological positions that are best served by such tactics. There are, if you will, two schools. Some writers working from post-structuralist premises act as if nothing much has changed — literature still exists, great texts still exist, literary critics still exist — while there are others who see all writing as an ideological instrument designed to support the status quo via the insidious nature of its system of signs. But even these camps are simply two more variations on older positions toward literature, the one grounded in aesthetics, the other arguing that texts have a social and political role as well, or rather that they have *only* a social and political role. The literary disciplines remain intact, and the values that underlie them have not been significantly changed.

Our new ideas, then, are for the most part really new tools. We have appropriated some different instruments for the dissemination and dissection of texts, but we have maintained most of our traditional critical practices and have also held on to our traditional conceptions of the kinds of writing that ought to be studied. We have not seriously questioned how these new tools might also lead to revisions in the manner in which critical frameworks are put to use, nor whether they make new kinds of writing possible, desirable or appropriate. They have simply been taken up and employed with little in question beyond the virtues of a given method — how well does the deconstructionist tool work? What new things can be found in a text when one looks at it as a semiotic system? What does this or that text tell us about the sociopolitical context that produced it? These are changes of a sort, but in the end they make all too little of the implications of recent theories.

Another way of stating the problem is to say that the new theories have for the most part simply been accepted and employed without question, or else they have not been put to use at all. While writers like Edward Said or

Fredric Jameson have sought to make use of the new theoretical ideas in different ways, as a rule a deconstructionist is a deconstructionist, and that means he takes over the entire apparatus of deconstructionism without seriously calling into question any of it or seeking to adapt it to the changed context. As a result one becomes quite adept at discerning nostalgia in this or that text, this or that statement, and equally adept at manipulating the jargon of the trade, but one does not seriously ask about the changes that accrue from the method or about the viability of Derrida's ideas. Apparently they constitute a package that must either be taken over entire or else abandoned. Again, there are exceptions to this, but for the most part one either is or is not a deconstructionist, a marxist, a semiotician, and that's the end of it. Whatever evolves from becoming a deconstructionist or a semiotician comes from the different texts that are investigated via the method and not through a serious questioning of the ideas underlying the approach.

In part, the following work arose from a concern for these problems, and while it clearly places itself within the network the continental writers have articulated, it also seeks to establish a somewhat different itinerary through that terrain. Although there are not a great many references to European theorists in the text itself, for example, the ideas in it are heavily influenced by Derrida's work in general, by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*, by René Girard's *Violence and the Sacred*, and by Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method*. While this might seem a rather strange mixture of perspectives to some, I can only say that these are the works that have had the most influence on my ways of thinking about the issues with which the text deals, and while I don't totally accept the views of any of these writers, nevertheless some amalgam of all of them has led to the concepts that dominate *Imitation and the Image of Man*. As the relative absence of footnotes to their work would suggest, though, I have not felt compelled to offer a critique of their individual positions, for my goal was not to assess their value in that way. Rather, I sought to develop a theory of imitation that, while clearly based on the work of Derrida, Girard, et. al., nevertheless reflected my own use of their ideas. As I argue at one point in the text, I have imitated their activities in many respects, but inasmuch as my context differs significantly from theirs, their constructs are altered through my use of them. The effect of this process is a somewhat unorthodox text that eschews recurrent references to specific sections of other texts whenever possible.

The form of *Imitation and the Image of Man* is the result of my reading

of these writers, but the changes it suggests also call into question some of their ideas. Much of the work of the past two decades, for example, argues that it is impossible finally to separate the literary from other domains, and in a fundamental sense this is clearly true. In spite of this, though, studies still tend to confine themselves either to the literary or the non-literary, as though no such change had occurred. Either the “literariness” of texts is denied altogether — at which point they become nothing more than ideological constructs — or else the assumption of literariness remains, tacit or otherwise. My discussion does not confine itself to literary texts, though it does make use of them; rather, it involves a melange of materials, and it does so because I don’t think we can continue to separate the literary from the other aspects of our lives. Indeed, one of the virtues of post-structuralist thought is that it puts an end to the Kantian notion of an aesthetic domain separate and discrete from everyday life. Literature is involved in the contexts of our lives rather than separated from them, and its value is diminished when we confine our discussion of it to one kind of textual framework. Instead, we need to concentrate on the manner in which different kinds of textual materials interact with one another, as I have attempted to do here.

For the same reason I have not quoted extensively from the secondary literature on the texts I discuss. Certainly much of this work has great value, but to pursue my own discourse through the traditional route, putting it in the context of everything significant that has already been written about the poems and novels I deal with, would undercut the notion that such studies are as rarefied and discrete as the literature they seek to keep from contamination. My engagement with the texts is thus direct rather than implicit, not because the novels and poems I deal with are unworthy of literary commentary but because I seek instead to place them within contexts that include the everyday, the social and the political. They were originally generated out of such a framework, so I see no reason not to consider them in a similar way. If the boundaries between contexts have at the very least loosened, our practice ought to demonstrate that fact.

In contrast to those who would argue that literature no longer exists, however, I assume that it is indeed alive and well, albeit in altered form. If it is no longer contained within a discrete Kantian domain, there is still a valuable distinction to be made between literature and other kinds of writing, even if the difference does not inhere in any special kind of “literary” language. The language of literary texts is the same as that of newspapers or oral discourse and gains no special privilege from being placed within a

form called a novel or a poem. But it does not follow from this that everything — and hence nothing — becomes literature as a result. Far from it. One of the crucial elements of post-structuralist thought — derived from Nietzsche — is that the whole world becomes an aesthetic domain, and with this I have no quarrel. This change in perspective has put an end to the discrete domain of the literary, and that alone should make Nietzsche's work worth reading. But if the world is fundamentally aesthetic, there are nevertheless some aesthetic contexts that we value above others. What the post-structuralists leave out — and what Nietzsche was careful to include — is our need for valuation, the most inevitable of human activities. As we value the contexts of our lives, some necessarily come to have more importance than others, and literature is usually among those contexts. Many of our traditional conceptions of the literary no longer suffice, but there is a great difference between reconsidering the value of the literary and abandoning it altogether. One of my chief arguments — particularly in the first chapter — is that the form of the essay is as literarily valuable as any of the canonical forms. It has simply been excluded as a result of the rarefaction of texts that took place over the past century or so, leaving all but lyric poetry, drama, epic and fiction more or less outside of the context of "great" literature. This is nothing more than narrowmindedness, not a valid literary distinction, and we diminish ourselves by failing to include such forms as the essay within the literary. But if our conception of the literary needs to be broadened considerably, and if its terrain must be more flexibly assessed, it is still a valuable category to maintain, and I seek to do so here.

There are, of course, other aspects of the literary that need to be reconsidered, from the idea of canonicity to the question of literary language to our notions of exclusivity, privilege and priority, but it is not my goal here to reassess these issues. That has been accomplished well enough by writers like Derrida and Foucault. Our present discourse does, however, give rise to a central and unavoidable dilemma, for one must either deny the literary altogether or else embrace it as a privileged domain apart from everyday life. Neither of those positions is applicable to the way literature actually inserts itself into our life, so I have tried to stake out a middle ground simply because that is where I think we ought to be.

My differences from my imitative lineages will be apparent throughout the text, so I need not enumerate them here. Many of the concepts I employ find their antecedents elsewhere, from my idea of the process of interpretation, to the use of specific terms like "grafting" and "multiplic-

ity,” to concern for the non-linearity of our experience. I simply make use of these concepts in my own way in order to develop an imitative model that will better account for our activity in the world. In so doing, I rely upon the traditional notions of imitation to provide contrast. I show how — in my opinion — these notions no longer work and argue that we need to focus on them only so we can move on to a more appropriate kind of imitative activity, which I call non-linear imitation. Given my theoretical lineage, it is not surprising that I trace this view of imitation through a number of post-structuralist concepts, from the groundlessness of our activities to the elimination of man as a centralized figure, ending finally with a notion of man-as-bricoleur that seems appropriate to our non-linear imitative activities. Here again I mark my difference from some of my predecessors. Writers from Heidegger to Foucault to Derrida have argued for the “end of man,” and although I believe we must indeed dispense with our traditional conceptions of the human, we also inevitably construe our activity in terms of some kind of model, even if it is a decentered one. Like the elimination of the literary, “the end of man” strikes me as both meaningful and totally absurd, for if we need to dispense with our godlike aspirations, we need equally to have ways of construing our places in the world. For this, a conception of man-as-bricoleur works well enough, as it does not carry with it any belief in our central importance or in our ability to dominate the world around us.

The crucial conception upon which my commentary rests is the inextricable connection between non-linear imitation and play. Ever since Kant we have thought of imitation in linear terms and have conceived of its goal as the reduplication of some objective or subjective state. In turn we have associated it with the “representational” depiction of an external or internal world, and when we began to question the ontological status of these worlds, we convinced ourselves that literature was no longer devoted to imitation at all. Increasingly we turned toward a “playful” view of texts, one which emphasized the play between signs in a seemingly non-mimetic way. This playful emphasis on processes and activities rather than subjects and objects, however, does not eliminate mimetic principles. It relies instead on a non-linear kind of imitation that is articulated through the play between differences, that is dialectical and recursive rather than objective and linear. Although we have chosen not to see the playful as mimetic, it remains so for all that, and it is the imitative impulse upon which most of twentieth-century literature and thought rely.

My conception of the mimetic, then, while based on a number of the