Two Cheers for Paraphrase: The Confessions of a Synoptic Intellectual Historian

I strive not after exactness, but after a synoptic view.

Ludwig Wittgenstein

It may be a truism, but it nonetheless often true, that we rarely know what we are actually doing until someone else tells us. So it was with a genuine sense of discovery that I found my work cited in Dominick LaCapra’s penetrating essay “Rethinking Intellectual History and Reading Texts” as an example of what he calls “synoptic content analysis.” This method of reconstructing the past, he contends, adopts a “documentary approach” to texts rather than seeing them as “worklike” with all of the complexity we normally attribute to works of art. More specifically,

the documentary situates the text in terms of factual or literal dimensions involving reference to empirical reality and conveying information about it. The worklike supplements empirical reality by adding to, and subtracting from, it. It thereby involves dimensions of the text not reducible to the documentary, prominently including the roles of commitment, interpretation, and imagination. The worklike is critical and transformative for it deconstructs and reconstructs the given, in a sense repeating it but also bringing into the world something that did not exist before in that significant variation, alteration, or transformation. (pp. 52-53)

Because most intellectual historians tend to be trained like historians in general rather than literary critics, they lean toward a documentary rather than worklike method, avoiding particularly complex literary texts in favor of ones more easily reduced to a paraphrasable core of meaning, those straightforward “ideas” so often the heroes of their narratives. Even if the synoptic intellectual historian wants to go outside ideas or mental structures to the context in which they are situated, problems remain if the texts to be contextualized are simply assumed to contain arguments that are easily paraphrased, messages that are wholly independent of the medium through which they are conveyed. Furthermore, as LaCapra argues elsewhere, the context which is itself adduced to explain these allegedly unproblematic ideas must also be seen as a text of sorts. Its ‘reading’ and interpretation post problems as difficult as those posed by the most intricate written text. The relationship between text and context ought, therefore, to be conceptualized as another form of intertextuality rather than a relationship between ideas or mind and world.

Such arguments will, of course, be familiar to every contemporary literary critic, but LaCapra is certainly correct to emphasize how rarely they are articulated by historians, intellectual or otherwise. Certainly, when I wrote the book he singles out as an example of synoptic content analysis back in the early 1970s, I was blissfully unaware of their existence. At the time, it seemed a sufficiently challenging task merely to reconstruct the demandingly difficult arguments of the Frankfurt School and relate them to the life histories of its members without then proceeding to deconstruct them as well. Nor apparently had I learned the lesson by 1980, when I delivered a paper on the Jürgen Habermas-Hans-Georg Gadamer debate to a conference in part organized by LaCapra at Cornell University on methods in intellectual history. My failings in this regard were brought home a short time later when the literary critic Michael Ryan referred to the paper in his Marxism and Deconstruction. Now, however, the ante was much higher, as Ryan focused on what he saw as the more sinister political implications of synoptic intellectual history. Reflecting on his experience in the audience, he wrote,

I was struck by how faithfully the method of intellectual historiography followed the pattern of conceptualization as it is found in Western rationality. That method consists of giving a brief synopsis of the arguments of such thinkers. The synopsis in such historiography is analogous to a concept in that it abridges and reduces a complicated, heterogeneous mass to an abstract, homogeneous form. (p. 144)

What makes this method politically nefarious, Ryan argues, is its normative and hierarchical exclusion of everything that falls outside such a synopsis. Deconstruction, in contrast, valorizes heterogeneity and “criticizes the hubristic pretensions of reason to legislate the truth of the world as a synoptic rational concept that ‘corresponds’ ‘adequately’ to something in the world that has the same synoptic, abridged, isolated, crystallized, proper form” (p. 145).
Ryan then recalls that after the talk, he rose from the floor to ask me to comment on this fact, pointing out that my notion of rationality was probably connected to my being a first-world, white male—as was indeed virtually everyone else speaking at the conference. Reproducing his question, he continues:

I suggested that if a third-world feminist attacked his rational assumptions and the institutional rationality of the conference, using nonacademic obscenity, she would have appeared irrational in relation to his universal reason, simply because such individualist, legislative reason, committed as it is in its very practice to a norm of homogeneous synoptic continuity, uncritical, nonanalytic academic male equanimity, and a well-balanced ratio, cannot tolerate the dissonance and heterogeneity which such deliberately disequilibrating deconstructive criticism introduces. (p. 145)

Then, to show how true this diagnosis was, he remembers that “fittingly enough, perhaps, the speaker cut me off before I could finish my remarks . . . I felt the touch of the iron fist beneath the urbane glove of white male liberalism” (p. 145).

Now, I must admit that I am still unconvinced by the logic of Ryan’s argument—the thought of, say, Inmelda Marcos running down the aisle shouting curses does not strike me as a model of emancipatory political practice. Indeed, the very assumption that all that third-world women can do to assert their otherness is to hurl “nonacademic obscenities” seems to me demeaning to those who can and do engage in rational dialogue. But Ryan’s hyperbolic denunciation of the links between synoptic content analysis, reason, and the exclusion of difference does, I would concede, point to the deeper issues at stake in the debate over method raised with considerably more subtlety in LaCapra’s essay. For it is true that in the paper that so outraged Ryan in his guise as soi-disant spokesperson for third-world women, I did essentially defend a Habermasian notion of communicative rationality as an antidote to what I saw as the uncritical and irrationalist implications of Gadamer’s version of hermeneutics. Thus, there was perhaps a certain unintended fit between my synoptic method and what I was trying to defend in substantive terms, a fit which Ryan acutely noted.

Where, however, Ryan went astray was in his leap to the conclusion that my restricting his unlimited access to control the floor of the conference through an interminable “question” was a necessary effect of my bias for a reason that he claims must hierarchically exclude and marginalize what it cannot control. Here, ironically, his own recourse to a hasty synopsis of my method was the source of an unfortunate homogenization of different forms of reason. For communicative rationality, as Habermas describes it and as I was trying to explain, is an inherently intersubjective, symmetrically unhierarchical relationship. Under the conditions prevailing at a lecture, where it is assumed the audience has come to listen to and question the announced speaker rather than participate in a fully open discussion, communicative rationality is not really achieved.

The public sphere in which it may perhaps be institutionalized cannot be understood on the essentially pedagogical model of the lecture hall, for as Habermas once put it, “in a process of enlightenment there can only be participants.” Nor is the rationality it hopes to realize comparable to the “individual, legislative reason” attacked by Ryan as necessarily exclusivist; it is instead based on the creation of ever-widening speech communities in which monological rationality is replaced by a dialogical discursive alternative. Here too, of course, some exclusion may occur. In fact, it will necessarily be directed at those who claim a privileged right to suspend the procedures of the speech community in the name of a higher claim to truth, say that of nonacademic obscenity self-righteously defending itself as liberating otherness.

To pursue this point would, of course, take us too far afield from our more central concern with synoptic intellectual history. The slippage from one to the other is not, however, fortuitous, insofar as there are certain resonances in the very notion of synopsis that may account for the hostility it has aroused. Etymologically, the word derives from the image of a view of the whole, an image which implies a single, totalizing gaze that freezes what it sees into a synchronic and static picture. Like the panoptic gaze of the jailer in Jeremy Bentham’s model prison, of which Michel Foucault has made us all so aware, it can be construed as a subtle tool of discipline and domination. Synoptic content analysis can thus be understood as akin to the technological perspective that Martin Heidegger in his influential essay “The Age of the World View” condemned for turning reality into a picture to be seen by an allegedly distanced spectator. It is therefore not surprising to find that LaCapra acknowledges that his preference for a worklike rather than documentary approach to texts is explicitly indebted to Heidegger’s discussion in another, but related, essay, “The Origin of the Work of Art.”

Now, this is not the place to launch a critical examination of the Heideggerian-Derridean distrust of monologic vision, which is now, and not without some justification, so widely shared. Nor can we probe the implications of Heidegger’s alternative visual metaphor of Umsicht or circumspection, with its prereflexive, nonobjectifying, anti-representational implications. Instead, it will be more useful to pose the simpler question: Must synoptic intellectual history always be
is disclosed or resolved precisely in a critical paraphrase or philological comparison (in the widest sense of "philological") of the paraphrase with that which is paraphrased. This comparison is the beginning and the end of a whole process (reconstitution of a dialectic) of truth. (p. 133)

Once we acknowledge its central role, Della Volpe continues, we liberate

the paraphrase of poetry from the disreputable features (superfluity, indeed harmfulness) attributed to it by traditional post-romantic and decadent taste, which elects to ignore the discursive and dialectical nature of poetic truth revealed by critical paraphrase, and to confer a mythical and dogmatic character on it by endowing it with "intuitive" immediacy. Our account also avoids the uncritical equation of the paraphrase and the paraphrased poetic text into which abstract aesthetic rationalism falls. (p. 133)

Della Volpe’s argument is interesting for several reasons. First, it transcends the sterile alternative between those, on the one hand, who want to oppose original work and critical paraphrase as if they were totally antithetical and those, on the other hand, who naively assume an essential identity between the meaning of the first text, its univocal signification, and its paraphrastic double. The oxymoronic notion of a tauto-heterological unity, which Della Volpe uses throughout his work, captures the more complicated relationship between the text and its synopsis better than either of these extreme alternatives. His position is also suggestive because of its emphasis on what might be called the already always paraphrastic nature of the original texts. Thus, for example, when either the literary critic or the intellectual historian reads Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s Faust or G. W. F. Hegel’s Phenomenology, he or she must acknowledge that for all the irreducible uniqueness of each text, the language they depend on necessarily invokes what Della Volpe calls “dianoetic or discursive universals,” terms with the same homogenizing implications as those used later in second-order paraphrases. Or to put it in a way that reverses the now familiar deconstructionist argument that texts—whether literary or expository—are always calling themselves into question, both primary works and secondary accounts are alike in their reliance on signifiers that are, on at least one level, universalizing abstractions that inevitably yoke together heterogeneous particulars. The perpetual search by poets for a more imagistically concrete and nonconceptual language is thus always frustrated by the limits of language itself, at least insofar as it functions as a medium of intersubjective communic-
The language terrorists, to use Jean Paulhan's familiar opposition, never fully win their battle against the rhetoricians without giving up the semantically meaningful dimension of their work. The attempt made by certain modernists, most notably the Symbolists, Imagists, and Surrealists, to write a poetry that would defy all paraphrase ultimately misfired, as language resisted the effort to be turned into nonreferential music or abstract painting. What this all suggests for intellectual history is that the synoptic method cannot be seen simply as the betrayal of the irreducibly complex and uniquely heterogeneous nature of the texts whose meaning they seek to paraphrase. For those texts themselves, however worklike in Lacapra's sense, already contain at least a moment of paraphrasing, which allows them to be used in a documentary way as evidence of the ideas or concepts they express.

This is not, however, to argue that the intellectual historian should rest content with merely presenting what seems to be the paraphrasable content of a text or a writer's more general oeuvre. To do so would be to endorse what might be called the naive synoptic approach, which its critics justly pillory as simplistic. For as Della Volpe points out, what is most valuable in critical paraphrase is the return move of comparing it with what it purports to reproduce. Even the enemies of paraphrase like the American New Critic John Crowe Ransom have admitted the usefulness of this approach. In his famous essay "Criticism, Inc.," Ransom first attacks synopsis and paraphrase by condescendingly noting that "high-school classes and the women's clubs delight in these procedures, which are easiest of all the systematic exercises possible in the discussion of literary objects." But he then goes on to argue that even the sophisticated critic must analyze a poem into its paraphrasable and nonparaphrasable dimensions:

However the critic may spell them, the two terms are in his mind: the prose core to which he can violently reduce the total object, and the differencia, residue, or tissue, which keeps the object poetical or entire. The character of the poem resides for the good critic in its way of exhibiting the residuary character. (p. 238)

Poetry is not, therefore, simply what is lost in the translation; it should be understood instead as the creative tension between what can be translated into a prose core and what cannot.

It might, of course, be argued that the very search for a prose core behind or beneath the actual text is to fall prey to a faulty metaphysics of presence that fails to acknowledge the infinite regress in such a procedure. For as Friedrich Nietzsche pointed out in that early essay now so incessantly quoted, "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral

In other words, the very act of reading entails an anticipation of the pattern or structure that will appear when the entire work is finished. Whereas this anticipation is likely to produce mistakes in the first reading of a text, mistakes which are, as Fish contends, part of the meaningful experience of aesthetic reception, on subsequent readings, synoptic memories will function to weed out the most unsupportable of these false anticipations. They may, be sure, themselves be undermined by those later readings and require further adjustment. But if anything, the role of anticipatory and retrospective synopsis will continue to grow as we return to the "same" text on different occasions. The same might be said, a fortiori, of even later attempts to reconstruct the text's meaning through a written account.

Even if we do not presuppose a fixed core of prosaic meaning in an original text or claim that such a meaning is the result of an authorial intention that can be recaptured whole, paraphrase is still, therefore,
an essential part of our intercourse as historians or critics with cultural artifacts. Indeed, it might be argued that it is a central element in the hermeneutic process of dialogue that Gadamer persuasively claims is essential to historical self-consciousness itself. For it is the capacity of texts to be paraphrased and rephrased that allows what he calls the "fusion of horizon" between past and present, however provisional, to occur. Because of the dialogic nature of this process, the linguistic give and take between the original text and its parallel restatement in our terms, any purely visual and therefore monologic rendering of synopsis is misguided.

Put even more strongly, what inclines it toward the kind of communicative rationality that is so different from the coercive, totalizing reason rejected by Ryan and other deconstructionists, is the telos of achieving an intersubjective consensus implied in the very act of seeking a common ground—or better put, arriving at a fused horizon—between past and present. That circular process of beginning with texts and returning to them after a mediating paraphrase, in Della Volpe's sense, or beginning with synoptic expectations and correcting them through new readings that return us again and again to a never-quite-the-same original, postulated by Fish, suggests a refinement of understanding that in some genuine sense can be called progressive. Without the paraphrastic moment in this hermeneutic process there can be no regulative ideal of perfect communicability, which Habermas sees as inherent in the illocutionary dimension of speech acts per se. The hope that at some state of the process the original author, were he still alive, might be able to say to the historian, "yes, that is exactly what I meant," is counterbalanced by the complementary hope that such an author might also be able to admit, after being presented with a new interpretative reconstruction of his work and its place in a larger pattern of meaning, "now I can see what my work really signifies." These are, to be sure, no more than regulative ideals, which provide a counterfactual standard by which we can imaginatively measure the inadequacies of our actual efforts. But as the unarticulated teleological premises of our synoptic reconstruction of the past, they function in a way that links paraphrastic intellectual history with communicative rationality.

The practical implications of all of this came home to me with special urgency when I was asked to write a short study of Theodor Adorno's outspoke opponent of mere synopsis, often arguing that genuine philosophy is precisely that which eludes paraphrase. His emphasis on the objects they purport to represent might easily be construed as compatible with the deconstructionist attack on logocentrism. In fact, in his Marxism and Deconstruction, Ryan claims that "the primary target of each is the logos or ratio, the principle of rational identity whose operation denies dialectical mediation and differentiation" (p. 75). Although this homogenizing of their two positions underestimates the still powerful bias for reason in Adorno in comparison with Jacques Derrida—reason understood as more than merely conceptual identity—it correctly expresses the suspicion Adorno harbored toward any synthesizing, synoptic reproduction of his thought.

It was therefore obvious to me that trying to encompass that thought in the narrow confines of a series like the Modern Masters would be betraying one of Adorno's own deepest taboos. Although I found myself unable to avoid all of the guilt pangs engendered by this realization, I finally gained a measure of relief by trying to thematize the whole issue as explicitly as possible. Pointing out the taboo at the very beginning of my introduction, I defended the legitimacy of breaking it by invoking the now familiar argument that an author's intentionality is not the sole or even primary repository of his texts' meaning for his readers. Thus, although Adorno may have wanted to control the reception of his work by warning against paraphrasing its content, any reception must inevitably entail a certain amount of domestication and familiarization on the part of his readers and a fortiori of anyone who tries to write about it, paraphrastically or otherwise. There was therefore no difference in kind between the most faithful reproduction of the ideas in as close to their original form as possible and an exercise like mine, which made no pretense of doing so. If, as I have been arguing above, all readings contain a synoptic moment, then a frankly synoptic account such as that suitable for a Modern Masters volume was not so radically different from other types of reception, which self-consciously eschewed paraphrase. Or to put it in somewhat different terms, the transgression of Adorno's taboo was as necessary as it was inevitable in any reading—or, as Gadamer would put it, application—of his texts.

Beyond this general argument, I also attempted two other ploys that were designed to complicate the way in which my own particular reception would avoid the pitfalls of what I have called above naive paraphrase. First, I tried to apply Adorno's central idea of a force-field or constellation to his own intellectual career. Adorno had used these terms to indicate the kind of method that avoids reducing the tensions in a work or an oeuvre through an essentializing synopsis of their allegedly unified meaning. The force-field or constellation registered instead the untotaled, still conflicting energies that resisted such a reduction. Without falling back into a mere catalogue of unrelated elements or factors, such a method was true to the nonidentical impulse of negative dialectics. By turning it on Adorno's intellectual
production and isolating what I saw as the five main forces in his own field or stars in his constellation—Western Marxism, aesthetic modernism, mandarin cultural despair, Jewish theology and, in a teleological rather than generative sense, proto-deconstructionism—I attempted what might be called a methodological or formal paraphrase of his work in order to illuminate its substantive tensions. In so doing, I hoped both to offer the reader a concrete illustration of Adorno’s own approach and to go beyond his self-understanding by applying the approach, in ways he never did, back to his own work.

And secondly, I tried to employ different levels of paraphrase at different distances from his texts in separate chapters. In most cases, I drew on a wide variety of different texts from throughout his career to extract a coherent pattern that could be identified as Adorno’s basic position on certain issues, a practice that was abetted by his frequent repetition of arguments in new contexts. In fact, at the end of the book, I invoked the observation made by several critics that Adorno’s antisystematic intentions were belied by his tendency to make the same point again and again no matter the object of his scrutiny, a charge also often leveled at deconstructionists who homogenize every text they treat into an example of the same difference. But against the assumption that all of his texts merely repeated the same pattern in a kind of infinite self-paraphrase, I reminded my readers of the detotalizing energies unleashed by the unreconciled tensions in his own force-field. These I tried to illustrate through a close examination of a single text in the chapter I devoted to the philosophical underpinnings of his general position, his negative dialectics. The text I chose was the fourteen-page essay he wrote shortly before his death on “Subject-Object.” Rather than offering a synoptic overview of his philosophy as a whole, I worked my way through this densely argued and often elliptical essay, deliberately following the paratactic and chiasmic logic of its organization as best as I could. But to illuminate rather than merely reproduce the often underdeveloped and cryptic arguments of “Subject-Object,” I found it also necessary to depart from the text’s own level of discourse and introduce explanations that drew on implicit paraphrases of Adorno’s general position, as I understood it from reading his œuvre as a whole. This was not so much an exercise in intertextuality in the manner of certain deconstructionist writings as an interplay of close reading and generalizing paraphrase, somewhat akin to what, as I mentioned above, Della Volpe argues is necessary even for understanding poetic texts.

In varying the types of approach I used in this little book, I sought to make as problematic as possible the naive paraphrastic assumptions that often underlie popularizations without, however, abandoning the necessary tool of synopsis in presenting Adorno to readers who may have little or no direct knowledge of his work. My hope, as I expressly emphasized in the book’s introduction, was to induce my readers to turn to the original texts rather than to lull them into the false conclusion that now they really had Adorno’s essential meaning and therefore could spare themselves the pain of finding it out for themselves. Whether or not the book will be successful in this regard remains, of course, very much to be seen.

Let me finish by returning to my point of origin with a consideration of LaCapra’s critique of paraphrastic intellectual history. All along I have felt somewhat uneasy about caricaturing his position, especially by linking it associatively with Ryan’s. For in the footnote in “Rethinking Intellectual History and Reading Texts” where LaCapra cites my work as an example of synoptic content analysis, he in fact calls that method “both necessary and limited as a method of analyzing complex texts” (p. 55). In my preceding remarks, I have been dwelling on the necessity and indeed the virtues of that method, in its sophisticated rather than naive form, and thus have had little to say about its limitations. But I would now want to agree with LaCapra that even at its most sophisticated, paraphrase by itself is not enough. The great contribution of critics who have exhorted intellectual historians to pay more attention to the materiality of texts is to remind us of the inevitable obstacles in any attempt to render or reproduce a thought transparently without linguistic mediation. And by stressing the worklike rather than merely documentary quality of every written record of the past, they have alerted us to the active role we as historians must more self-consciously assume in our reconstruction of a lost reality that can never be simply repeated.

But having admitted this insufficiency, the reason for my raising only two cheers for paraphrase rather than the normal three, I want to emphasize nonetheless that to be insufficient does not mean to be unnecessary, as the more extreme deconstructionist position exemplified by Ryan implies. In fact, I want to go further and warn against the dangers latent in the wholesale abandonment of a method whose links with communicative rationality are, as I have tried briefly to demonstrate, so strong. In the past few years, we have become increasingly sensitive to the ways in which language erodes meaning, disperses intentionality, and frustrates understanding. It is perhaps time to be equally open to those aspects of it that preserve hope for a very different kind of human solidarity. In its very modest way, synoptic content analysis, in its sophisticated rather than naive form, may justifiably be defended as a prefiguration of such an outcome.

27. Ryan, p. 203.

28. Ibid., p. 136.

29. To take just one example, he argues against Althusser that “for Marx, at least, communism meant human control over human life” (p. 99), but elsewhere admits that “it is easy to see how [Derrida’s] emphasis on the passivity of the subject could undermine a conservative traditionalism” (p. 37). He tries to explain away what he admits is Derrida’s exaggerated writing off of the subjective factor by saying it was an understandable reaction against the “excessively subjectivist humanism of the various phenomenologies and existentialisms” (p. 36) which preceded deconstruction on the French intellectual scene. The result is to trivialize the very fundamental challenge to humanism presented in Derrida’s philosophy.

30. Ibid., p. 8.

31. Ibid., p. 140.


33. Ryan, p. 121.

34. Ibid., p. 172. Ryan is fond of these kinds of linkages. Thus, for example, he talks of “the circuit that leads from John Searle’s reactionary philosohic study to David Rockefeller’s bank office, to the torture chambers of Santiago de Chile” (p. 46).


36. Ryan, p. 23.

37. Ibid., p. 62.

38. Ibid., p. 99. Yet another example of his conflation of two categories in his argument that the personal should be “seen as already being public, as a social text” (p. 220).

39. Ibid., p. 221.


44. Michel Foucault, “The Discourse on Language,” in The Archaeology of Knowledge, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York, 1972). For a discussion of Foucault’s tacit emphasis on the trope of catechresis, which recognizes the ambiguous meanings of all signifiers, see Hayden White, “Michel Foucault,” in Structuralism and Since: From Lévi-Strauss to Derrida, ed. John Sturrock (Oxford, 1979). In his more recent work, it should be noted, Foucault emphasized power relations more than linguistically.


46. Ryan, p. 10. See also his argument against Althusser that “the determination in the last instance of the economic is itself a determined effect of a metaphysical and patriarchal culture, which institutionalizes both philosophical and sociopolitical points of authority” (pp. 101–102). Whether or not this causal hierarchy is true, it demonstrates Ryan’s inability to escape thinking in hierarchical terms.

47. That it may also lead to nihilism has been argued by Stanley Rosen. Nihilism: A Philosophical Essay (New Haven, 1969). Rosen’s targets are Nietzsche, Heidegger, and, to some extent, Wittgenstein, but his arguments can just as easily be applied to post-structuralism.

48. An excellent example of Ryan’s inability to grasp this possibility is his treatment of reason. “The homology, correspondence, adequation and compatibility between rational knowledge and the rationalized world is not likely to promote anything but an acceptance of that world as ‘reasonable’” (pp. 149–150). He bases this argument on the belief that “logocentric reason... is by nature asocial. It privileges the individual mind and the individual actor” (p. 154). What Ryan thus ignores is the variety of rationalities that compete in the modern world: substantive, formal, instrumental, functionalist, communicative, etc. That some of these may be in tension with the way in which the world has been rationalized eludes him, as his inadequate discussion of Habermas illustrates. For the latter’s distinction among forms of rationality, see Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns, 2 vols. (Frankfurt, 1981).

49. For a good summary of the debate, see Eugene Lunn, Marxism and Modernism: An Historical Study of Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin and Adorno (Berkeley, 1982).


4. The Confessions of a Synoptic Intellectual Historian


6. Ryan discusses Habermas’s model of communicative rationality in Marxism and Deconstruction, but gets it fundamentally wrong when he claims that “ideal speech is Deconstruction, but gets it fundamentally wrong when he claims that “ideal speech is Deconstruction, but gets it fundamentally wrong when he claims that “ideal speech is
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restored. Instead, he posits it as a counter-factual telos in speech acts that has only a regulative and not constitutive function. To say, moreover, as Ryan does, that Habermas begins with the assumption of fully integrated egos who then communicate with one another is to miss the stress on the intersubjective construction of such egos in his work, which very deliberately abandoned the construction of consciousness philosophy underlying traditional German Idealism. When Ryan asks, "what if Habermas’s starting point, the human subject conceived as the conscious, self-identical ego or cogito, is itself possible only as an effect of other structures, other networks of events and relations?" (113), he is merely repeating Habermas’s own objection to monological theories of isolated consciousness. Although it is true that Habermas posits the ultimate formation of a strong ego as a concomitant of an emancipated society in ways that deconstructionists would not, he does not assume that such egos precede the socialization process, a process which in fact is not conducive under present circumstances to producing really mature egos. The inevitable deconstructionist riposte that even the goal is mistaken leaves its defenders with no real standard by which to distinguish between different forms of social relations, which tend to be reduced to variants of the same, unchangeable reality. Ryan’s dubious attempt to derive a liberating politics from deconstruction is not a very encouraging sign of its power to generate anything that goes beyond a vague celebration of difference, marginality, and otherness for their own sakes.


14. It is, I would suggest, for this reason that a philosopher as linguistically oriented as Wittgenstein could call his own position synoptic, as in the remark from Zettel, tr. G. E. M. Anscombe (Berkeley, 1970), p. 83c, which is cited as the epigraph to this paper. For an interesting comparison of Wittgenstein’s Übersicht with Heidegger’s Umsicht, see Nicholas F. Gier, Wittgenstein and Phenomenology: A Comparative Study of the Later Wittgenstein, Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty (Albany, 1981), p. 80ff.
