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Missiles and missives: Toward a Nuclear Criticism, or How I learned to stop worrying and love this dangerous writing

Abstract
Generically unstable as it shifts between literary criticism, writing memoir, and frustrated meta-theoretical conflagration, this paper advances a workable description of nuclear criticism, obliquely responding to Derrida's 'The Time of a Thesis'. It charts an uneasy course through an array of material related directly or tenuously to the author's critical-creative PhD thesis. Presented as a series of possibly apocalyptic imagistic missiles and missives, performative post-critical experiments written dangerously otherwise, it ventures to inhabit the critical institution in a certain way to question notions of acceptability and legitimacy, asking just what it is to be submittable when faced with the nuclear non-event and writing's unbounded potentialities.
Keywords: Critical-creative writing; deconstruction; literary criticism; nuclear war; post-criticism

> I am thus choosing, as you have already observed, the genre or rhetorical form of tiny atomic nuclei (in the process of fission or division in an uninterruptible chain)
> which I shall arrange or rather which I shall project toward you, like tiny inoffensive
> missiles: in a discontinuous, more or less haphazard fashion.
> – Derrida (1984: 21)

I

What is nuclear criticism?

What if I were writing it now?

II

The uneasy inaugurating scene is the darkened living room of a modest house in outer suburban Melbourne. A lone figure lounges on an oversized L-shaped couch. Obliquely, he ponders the role critical-creative writing plays in his PhD thesis, a post-critical study examining the often fraught textual relationships and intellectual homologies between Irish novelist James Joyce and French continental philosopher Jacques Derrida, performed as a sequence of frustrated correspondences, missed encounters and abortive dialogues. It is framed by a

belief in the irreducibility and unconditionality of literature (defined by Derrida as 'the right to say everything publicly, or to keep it a secret, if only in the form of fiction' [Derrida 2002a: 205]), and grapples with subsequent issues these notions present for a critic in search of interpretive certitude, hoping to exhaust the text's semantic resources. Much later, too late, this figure will stumble, by chance, upon the term 'quantum narratives', employed by novelist China Miéville in reference to detective novels to describe a literature of potentiality: the power of these quantum narratives

> isn't in their final acts, but in the profusion of superpositions before them, the could-bes, what-ifs and never-knows. Until that final chapter, each of those is as real and true as all the others, jostling realities all dreamed up by the crime, none trapped in vulgar facticity. (Miéville 2009)

But by the end of most detective narratives, as the crime is solved, the puzzle pieces fitted neatly together, the reader has been 'banished from an Eden of oscillation'. The decisiveness of a conclusion, quashing possibilities, means, counter-intuitively, that we remain desperately disappointed, frustrated, unfulfilled. The potential for knowledge is far more exhilarating than knowledge itself. Postponement, anticipation, is desirable, even pleasurable. Irresolution must reign. This is precisely the quantum form the figure desires to achieve for his thesis, but at the time is unable to properly enunciate. He envisions a wild, mad, unruly text composed of a strange series of polyphonic polysemic polysystemic pyrotechnic performances, presenting a profusion of unresolved and irresolvable superpositions, meanings which cannot be made manifest and which are never presented, but which remain undetermined, pure potential to be decided upon by the wary reader. But this semantically experimental approach, and the consequent manner the thesis *performs* rather than *states* its scattered argumentative contentions, remains a bane of contention with his supervisor, and a potentially unsubmittable species of scholarship about which he is still hesitant. Short of furnishing a 'How to Read this Thesis' guidebook (a thought that horrifies him), framing the reception of the thesis is becoming a significant problem; too much, they say, is left too open to the probably-errant interpretations of his unknowable future readers.

The figure is also half-watching an old film on the brazenly outsized high-definition digital television screen before him. The film is in black and white, the vision grainy, striking him as strangely incongruous, anachronistic alongside the hypermodern technologies now required to watch it. Anachronism definitely plays a part here.

III

We cannot progress causally. The notion of an argument and an argumentative contention, any clear statement of meanings or intentions made with the certainty of a singular and stable author claiming to authoritatively *know*, must be abandoned. 'The terrain militates against a straightforward trajectory' (Miéville 2011), and, 'at the risk of never arriving' (Derrida 1983: 36), meaning wanders, errs: 'There is no destination, my sweet destiny' (Derrida 1980: 29). But, lacking direction and destination, we do not lack purpose, nor do these missiles and missives lose their rhetorical impact.

IV

First missile: I read Laurence Sterne's splendidly digressive meta-novel *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, in which he writes: 'Shall we forever make new books, as apothecaries make new mixtures, by pouring only out of one vessel into another? Are we forever to be twisting and untwisting the same rope?' (Sterne 1760-7: 174). Second missile: I read Samuel Beckett's essay 'Dante … Bruno. Vico … Joyce', in which he asserts that 'the danger is in the neatness of identifications' (Beckett 1929: 3), declaring that 'literary criticism is not book-keeping' (4). What, then, could literary criticism be? Third missile: I read the brash literary experimentalist BS Johnson, polemically proclaiming that 'literary forms do become exhausted, clapped out' (Johnson 1973: 2), and I realise that critical forms also become exhausted, clapped out. Realism in literature ceased to be the leading – avant-garde – aesthetic over a century ago, but persists even after proof of its anachronism. Similarly, representational realism continues to dominate literary criticism, not only as a style but as an embedded diachronic thought-process dependent on notions of 'argument', 'causality', 'logos', narrative progress, and so forth. Fourth missile: I hear an indistinct echo of Ezra Pound's desperate provocative futurist exhortation, too soon, but too late, always already anachronistic, to 'make it new!' (Pound 1934).

V

In the autobiographical essay 'Circumfession', an outraged Derrida launches a fifth missile, quoting Marcel Proust on the relationship between art and theory: 'A work in which there are theories is like an object on which one has left the price tag' (in Derrida 1991: 62). Derrida describes such an attitude as 'the grimace of a good taste naïve enough to believe one can efface the labour of theory' (63). We cannot efface the labour of theory – nor should we. Earlier, Derrida asked the question 'What is literature?', and detailed an interest in the literary stretching back to the time of his own thesis, tentatively titled 'The Ideality of the Literary Object': 'And first of all what is it "to write"? How is it that the fact of writing can disturb the very question "what is?" and even "what does it mean?' (Derrida 1983: 37). He will have been testing the limits of the literary – its impossible distancing from the non-fictional, critical, theoretical, philosophical – from the beginning. The borderlines bleed as 'the categories of literature and criticism … [can] no longer be kept apart' (Ulmer 1985: 86), and the work of criticism becomes literary, rejects mere mimesis (imitation, repetition) for production (original and unrepeatable, unprecedented, but also unforeseeable, unpredictable), adopting – reforming, transforming – literature's aesthetic, hermeneutic, epistemological and ontological modes, styles, genres, forms, etc. We cannot ignore the artifice – the *literariness* – of those magnificently dissimilar texts gathered beneath the heading 'theory'. (How does this knowledge affect our interpretive approaches to the missiles and missives projected toward us by Derrida, this untimely epochal philosopher writing more-than-philosophy?)

VI

It is evident I should learn to 'write otherwise' (Derrida 1972b: xxiv), and you, dear reader, should consequently learn to read otherwise. To 'write otherwise': is this a definition of nuclear criticism?

VII

They are perched on a precipice, and a military madman threatens to destroy the world. It is not his strict intention, but the consequences of this cold warrior's irreversible actions, incited by his hallucinatory paranoid psychosis, are inescapable. The choice between destruction and survival rests on the smallest of deeds, the split-second pushing of a button. Yet, paralysed by anachronistic thought processes and ideological prejudices, this heady nuclear aporia, those gathered in the War Room cannot decide how to prevent the end of the world.

This is the narrative impetus of Stanley Kubrick's fantastic black comedy *Dr Strangelove, or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964). Here is a literally earth-shattering event, embodied most fully in the figure of Sterling Hayden's Brigadier-General Jack D Ripper as he propels the film towards its nuclear finale via the cowboy-pilot Major TJ Kong (Slim Pickens) straddling a falling bomb, and a resolution which resolves everything and nothing: footage of nuclear explosions blossoming beautifully across the screen to the ironically soothing strains of Vera Lynn's already outdated 'We'll Meet Again' (1939). *We'll meet again, don't know where, don't know when, but I know we'll meet again, some sunny day.* Ripper represents the vital point at which the structure breaks down, the politico-military-industrial institution pushed to its very limit, then over the edge. The men occupying the War Room – American President Merkin Muffley (Peter Sellers), General Buck Turgidson (George C Scott), and the eponymous Dr Strangelove (Sellers again), amongst others – are incapable of making the decision to save humanity, presented with a decision they cannot make as their anachronistic institutional hyper-rational decision-making structures fail to accommodate or assimilate the insane figure of Ripper operating so far outside of their pre-conceived frames of reference. As madness intervenes, all previously maintained limits are threatened. 'Among the acts of observing, revealing, knowing, promising, acting, simulating, giving orders, and so on', writes Derrida, 'the limits have never been so precarious, so undecidable' (Derrida 1984: 22). All such acts are on edge, and in the conflict between obsessive madness and cold logic, the latter has no rational foundation or clearly defined parameters upon which to base its decision. And then: the end, as the bomb falls. *We'll meet again …*

Whoops, apocalypse.

VIII

Nuclear criticism is dangerous, dangerously on edge, akin to the dangerous writing of flux and change described by Joyce as he attempts to represent in literature the specific artistic, cultural and political milieu he observed and confronted in the early twentieth century (grappling vicariously with its unprecedented hermeneutic, epistemological and ontological challenges), between two world wars and on the eve of the nuclear age:

> In writing one must create an endlessly changing surface, dictated by the mood and current impulse in contrast to the fixed mood of the classical style… In other words, we must write dangerously: everything is inclined to flux and change nowadays and modern literature, to be valid, must reflect that flux. (Power 1974: 75)

But how can one reflect this flux in literature? And how can one reflect this flux in criticism? What is it to write criticism dangerously? How can one confront these unbounded nuclear potentialities of writing – literary or critical,

fictional or non-fictional – in the wake of (to oversimplify and employ a problematically reductive term) literary modernism?

IX

Learning to stop worrying and love the bomb is about the acknowledgement of the potential for destruction, in every moment and with every action. It is to live on edge and on the edge, *sur le bord*, and to accept your placement on the brink, always already, of a fiery apocalyptic finale. The end is nigh. Perhaps. But it only remains potential. Despite the terrifyingly amusing thought that Ripper might have a real-world counterpart, nuclear war has not taken place. It remains unprecedented, and the world continues, surviving, living-on, *le sur-vivre*. Life, in the nuclear age, is not living, but surviving. We live in the time of the survivor, a present and presence that is only here and now. Perhaps nuclear war, the potential for nuclear war, but our endless stepping back from the brink, represents what Derrida would call 'an unconditional affirmation of life' (Derrida 2005: 52), as we become structurally, by necessity but also by chance, survivors of an apocalyptic conflagration that might never (have) take(n) place.

X

Before the end of the Cold War, when tensions were cooling but the patently inhuman disaster of nuclear war must still have felt a pressing possibility, Derrida writes, in an uncharacteristically straightforward present tense: 'Nuclear war has no precedent. It has never occurred, itself; it is a non-event' (Derrida 1984: 23). Today, nearly three decades later, it still has no precedent. It remains a non-event, and not only because it will not (yet) have taken place; it remains a non-event because its 'terrifying reality … can only be the signified referent, never the real referent (present or past) of a discourse or a text'. It can never be our present reality; it can only ever signify something terrible that is yet to come. Derrida continues:

> For the moment, today, one may say that a non-localisable nuclear war has not occurred; it has existence only through what is said of it, only where it is talked about. Some might call it a fable, then, a pure invention: in the sense in which it is said that a myth, an image, a fiction, a utopia, a rhetorical figure, a fantasy, a phantasm, are inventions. It may also be called a speculation, even a fabulous specularisation. (Derrida 1984: 23)

The nuclear future 'can only be anticipated in the form of an absolute danger', breaking 'absolutely with constituted normality', only declarable, *presentable*, 'as a sort of monstrosity' (Derrida 1967: 5). Pure invention and fabulous specularisation, but never unthinkable (if we understand 'thought' not as that which has been resolved, but instead as a continual aporetic process of deciding, movement toward but never achievement of resolution), nuclear war is only ever conjecture over its monstrous future occurrence; its discourse represents an uneasy instance of attempting to make 'the future present', reducing 'the future to the form of manifest presence' (Derrida 1972a: 7). Yet it remains incapable of occurring within the constraints of a nuclear discourse that would be annihilated by its presentation, its occurrence in the present. 'There is nothing unthinkable about the nuclear threat' (De Kerckhove 1984: 71) – and there is nothing unthinkable about nuclear criticism. Extremely, but

simply, the nuclear is nothing but thought. 'There is nothing but *doxa*, opinion, "belief"' (Derrida 1984: 24), and this invention which 'does not exist', the existence of which 'would be a grand premiere appearance', remains pure speculation, fantasy, and belief, faith or trust, but not truth, never truth because truth requires the certainty of the present. 'No truth' writes Derrida: 'no apocalypse'.

No apocalypse, not yet.

XI

Nuclear criticism is sublime. 'We call sublime what is absolutely [*schlechthin*] large' (Kant 1790: §25), greater and more immense than any individual, more powerful, more threatening, and also, often, incomprehensible, unknowable, ineffable, always already disturbed by the 'exhibition of an indeterminate concept of reason' (§23). 'Found in a formless object', the sublime is a certain 'boundlessness' encountered only in the 'wildest and most rule-less disarray and devastation', the infinite found in the chaotic, the potentially apocalyptic. But the trick with the sublime, as with the nuclear, 'is that we live to tell the tale of our encounters with it … because it never proves to be quite as deadly in experience as it had in thought' (Ferguson 1984: 6). We fear the sublime, as we fear the nuclear; we fear their indeterminacy, their refusal of ready definitions; we fear them as speculative possibilities, *thought*, but never ontological or discursive realities.

XII

Like nuclear war, nuclear criticism – which is not a positive science – must also be a non-event, nothing but signification, unprecedented, without present and without truth, remaining *sur le bord*, truly between art and theory, literature and criticism, unrecognisable and un-locatable as either, always already something else, otherwise.

XIII

Is critical-creative writing the bomb?

No; it is the moment before the bomb falls, the potential detonation of the bomb.

XIV

Step back from the brink, away from the edge. But not too far back. That is the point, the purpose, of this essay, and *the* essay*, sui generis*, literary criticism, nuclear criticism, after the potential end of the world, on the eve of the apocalypse, as the clock approaches four minutes to midnight. Operating from within the institution, inhabiting it in a certain way to question its hegemony, but without precedent, having not (yet) taken place, nuclear criticism remains pure invention and fabulous specularisation, and conjecture over its future occurrence, incapable of occurring within the constraints of a discourse that would be annihilated by its occurrence in the present. My belief in its possible

existence in this present, right here and now, does not translate into truth. ‘No truth’, writes Derrida: ‘no apocalypse’, no nuclear criticism, not yet.

XV

This is all a matter of time. In 1980, out of time, Derrida was finally called upon to give a thesis defence (based on published works – he never did complete his early work on the ideality of the literary object). His opening presentation was later published beneath the heading ‘The Time of a Thesis: Punctuations’. He begins, typically, disjointedly, by questioning the very nature of the work he has presented for examination, a thesis (which is, strictly speaking, to be pedantic, not what he has presented at all):

> Should one speak of an epoch of the thesis? Of a thesis which would require time, sometimes a great deal of time? Of a thesis whose time would belong to the past? In short, is there a time of the thesis? And even, should one speak of an age of the thesis, of an age for the thesis? (Derrida 1983: 34)

He talks about time, the punctuality of the thesis (the unpunctuality of his own uncompleted, undelivered thesis), and a feeling he describes as an ‘anachrony of oneself, anachrony in oneself’ over the time of this thesis, an ‘indecisiveness of age’ which refers, in this ‘more or less well-regulated life of a university teacher’, to ‘an end and a beginning which do not coincide and in which there is involved once again no doubt a certain gap of an alternative between the delight of pleasure and fecundity’ (34-5). It is, he continues, ‘as if a rendezvous had forever been set for me with what should above all and with the utmost punctuality never come at its appointed hour, but always, rather, too early or too late’ (35). This rendezvous is with a thesis that never comes, or came too early and too late, at the same time, and in doing so could never have arrived. Derrida knows, better than anyone else, that non-arrival, the failure to reach a narrative or conceptual destination, and a consequent sense of irresolution, the critical nuclear potentiality that the entire meaning-making edifice might collapse, that it is always already on the verge of collapse, is vital to any hermeneutic process that, striding ever onward into that unknowable future of his thesis, strives toward – but can never achieve – interpretive certitude.

XVI

What troubles Derrida about his research, this undecidable nuclear body of work constituting his thesis, but also those texts excluded and self-censored, is what it means to be acceptable to the critical institution (the University, the Humanities, Literature, Philosophy, etc), submittable within the strict confines of its immense figurative walls:

> It was already clear to me that the general turn that any research was taking could no longer conform to the traditional classical norms of the thesis. This “research” called not only for a different mode of writing but also for a work of transformation applied to the rhetoric, the staging and the particular discursive procedures, which, historically determined as they very much are, dominate university discourse, in particular the type of text that is called the “thesis”; and we know how all these scholarly and university models likewise provide the laws regulating so many prestigious discourses,

> even those of literary works or of eloquent political speeches which shine outside the university. And then, too, the direction I had taken, the nature and the diversity of the corpora, the labyrinthian geography of the itineraries drawing me on towards relatively unacademic areas, all of this persuaded me that the time was now past, that it was, in truth, no longer possible, even if I wanted to, to make what I was writing conform to the size and form then required for a thesis. The very idea of a thetic presentation, of positional or oppositional logic, the idea of position, of *Setzung* or *Stellung*, that which I called at the beginning the *epoch* of the thesis, was one of the essential parts of the system that was under deconstructive questioning. (Derrida 1983: 42)

Acting against these historically determined discursive procedures, deconstructing the Law of the institution, Derrida's 'thesis' not only forecasts but marches boldly toward the end of the time of the thesis. Writing – 'not only the physical gestures of literal pictographic or ideographic inscription, but also the totality of what makes it possible; and also, beyond the signifying face, the signified face itself' (Derrida 1967: 9); not just words on a page, but the entire meaning-making apparatus of inscriptions and erasures – can no longer conform to the ideological form of the thesis. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida declares the end of the epoch of the book, defined simply as the 'idea of a totality, finite or infinite' that is 'profoundly alien to the sense of writing' (18). This book, analogous to the thesis, is not only an actual material form, but also the discursive practices staged within: the authoritarian diachronic structure, the dependence on narrative causality, the relentless linearity as the words rush from beginning to end through sentences, paragraphs, pages, and chapters; as well as the antiquated realist devotion to interpretive certitude suggested by such formal and discursive constraints. So Derrida finds himself writing (up) against – 'To be against (opposed to) is also to be against (close to, in proximity to) or, in other words, up against' (Dollimore 1991: 229) – the institution's continually antediluvian preference for the thesis.

XVII

Speaking at the Ninth International James Joyce Symposium, the Augmented Ninth, in Frankfurt, Germany in 1984, Derrida utters these words, (up) against the institution:

> All of you are experts and you belong to the most remarkable of institutions. It bears the name of a man who did everything, and admitted it, to make this institution indispensible, to keep it busy for centuries… But … it is an institution for which he did everything he could to make it impossible and improbable in its very principle, to deconstruct it in advance, even going as far as to undermine the very concept of competence, upon which one day an institutional legitimacy might be founded. (Derrida 1988: 37)

Observing that 'the classical concept of competence supposes that one can rigorously disassociate knowledge … from the event that one is dealing with', that it wrongly 'implies a meta-discourse is possible, neutral and univocal with regard to a field of objectivity', he declares that there can be 'no Joycean foundation … no Joycean legitimacy' (49), and no Joycean expert: 'But when it comes to Joyce, what is an expert?' (35). Stephen Heath notes something

similar, writing of a 'fundamental incompletion' generating Joyce's texts as undecidable, caught in the 'ambiviolent' play of writing and erasure whereby 'the text produces a derisive hesitation of sense, the final revelation of meaning being always for "later"' (Heath 1984: 31), denying the expert the certainty they crave. This is what the reader, desiring expertise, faces as they read Joyce.

Incapable of reaching back to the origin of an objective truth from which to build interpretive certitude, the institution must instead be re-founded on the promise of a legitimacy-to-come, an ideal towards which it should endlessly strive even as it will always already have fallen short. If 'nothing is beyond question' (Derrida 2002a: 205), and the university is without condition, then the very nature of the institution itself – along with these concepts of legitimacy, competency, acceptability, and submittability – must be repeatedly and incessantly called into question. This unconditionality simultaneously exposes the institution's strengths and weaknesses, displaying its 'vulnerability' to that which is 'outside' its boundaries (206). This double reading opens a space within this institution for the possibility of its weakening, its destabilisation: 'In order to identify itself, to be what it is, to delimit itself and recognise itself in its own name, it must espouse the very outlines of its adversary' (Derrida 2002b: 5). The common deconstructive 'principle of unconditional resistance' (Derrida 2002a: 204), Derrida's unprecedented nuclear threat, which impels us toward the ideal of an institution without condition, will always already have produced this institution as potentially inadequate, incompetent, and illegitimate.

XVIII

Writing (up) against the institution, Derrida wages a guerrilla war (with a nuclear arsenal?) against the thesis, necessarily from within the walls of the institution, employing the form of the thesis. This is precisely how deconstruction will always already have been operating:

> The movements of deconstruction do not destroy structures from the outside. They are not possible and effective, nor can they take accurate aim, except by inhabiting those structures. Inhabiting them in *a certain way*, because one always inhabits, and all the more when one does not suspect it. Operating necessarily from the inside, borrowing all the strategic and economic resources of subversion from the old structure, borrowing them structurally, that is to say without being able to isolate their elements and atoms, the enterprise of deconstruction always in a certain way falls prey to its own work. (Derrida 1967: 24)

This critique of the institution cannot take place except by inhabiting the institution 'in a certain way', fully aware not just that it might but that it *must* fall prey to its own work. It is not possible for Derrida to operate without or outside of the institution to which he is submitting this thesis. John Caputo explains that 'deconstruction is in fact a philosophy – and practice – of institutions' (Caputo 1997: 49), respectful of institutions even as its forthright critique attempts to transform them, make them 'liveable':

> As a philosophy of institutions, deconstruction is, while suspicious of institutional power, intent on making institutions liveable – open-ended, porous, and on the *qui vive* – and

> structured around programs that do not try to program everything. (1997: 50)

Deconstruction must follow the rules of the system in order to reinvent and reinvigorate the system: 'at the same time, you have to follow the rule and to invent the new rule, a new norm, a new criterion, a new law' (Derrida in Caputo 1997: 6). Deconstruction is not anti-institution, and Derrida goes so far as to declare his love of institutions: 'I love institutions … At the same time, I try to dismantle not institutions but some structures in the given institutions which are too rigid or are dogmatic or which work as an obstacle to future research' (8). What Derrida hopes to reveal is the potential for the institution's acceptance of the unacceptable, for that which might critically subvert its own power-structure – testing its viability in the wake of deconstruction.

XIX

Citing an array of mostly modernist writers in the interview 'This Strange Institution Called Literature' (Mallarmé, Joyce, Célan, Bataille, Artaud, Blanchot, and elsewhere referencing Faulkner, Ponge, Jabés, Kafka and Borges), Derrida expresses an interest in how so many of their texts are 'inscribed in a *critical* experience of literature' (Derrida 1992: 41), questioning their own status as literature, and the status of the institution conceived for the purpose of their studious explication:

> They bear witness to themselves, or we could also say in their literary act they put to work, a question, the same one, but each time singular and put to work otherwise: "What is literature?" or "Where does literature come from?" "What should we do with literature?" These texts operate a sort of turning back, they *are* themselves a sort of turning back on the literary institution. (Derrida 1992: 41)

Bearing witness to themselves as works of literature, 'no longer simply, or no longer only, literary', critiquing 'the act of a literary performativity and a critical performativity (or even a performativity in crisis)', these texts express a desire 'to question, analyse, transform this strange contradiction, this institution-less institution' (42), reflecting the improbability that any such institution might ever have adequately been able to define, hold onto or contain literature. Facing this performativity in crisis in both his literary readings and critical writings, Derrida pushed his work

> towards textual configurations that were less and less linear, logical and topical forms, even typographical forms that were more daring, the intersection of corpora, mixtures of genera or of modes, changes of tone, … satire, rerouting, grafting, etc, to the extent that even today, although these texts have been published for years, I do not believe them to be simply presentable or acceptable to the university and I have not dared, have not judged it opportune, to include them here among the works to be defended. (Derrida 1983: 46)

What makes such textual configurations unsubmittable is not 'the multiplicity of their contents, conclusions and demonstrative positions', but instead

> the acts of writing and the performative stage to which they ought to give rise and from which they … remain inseparable

> and hence not easily capable of being represented, transported and translated to another form. (47)

Irreducible and intensely performative – literary – these texts, which the institution attempts to classify as 'theory' or 'criticism', are 'inscribed in a space that one could no longer … identify or classify under the heading of philosophy *or* of non-fiction, etc', but are something otherwise.

XX

'When you discover a new object, an object that up until now has not been identified as such, or has no legitimacy in terms of academic fields, then you have to invent a new competency, a new type of research, a new discipline' (Derrida in Caputo 1997: 7-8).

XXI

A decade after provocatively declaring his thesis to be unsubmittable (but submitting something for consideration nonetheless – expressing an endearing desire for acceptance and legitimisation), Derrida proclaims that we must find a new name 'for those "critical inventions" which belong to literature while deforming its limits' (Derrida 1992: 52). But he does not offer a proper name, a heading, beneath which to gather these critical-nuclear inventions.

XXII

Responding to this Derridean declaration, Stephen Muecke proposes a species of limit-deforming writing he names 'ficto-criticism': 'The name we would have given him was ficto-criticism, but he went on anyway to write, and perform, critically, and sometimes fictionally, for instance by telling stories while making his philosophical arguments' (Muecke 2002: 108). Ficto-criticism crosses borders, refusing to maintain the purity and linearity of the frontiers separating art from criticism:

> When criticism is well-written, and fiction has more ideas than usual, the distinction between the two starts to break down. It is a little crisis because criticism can't be relied upon to "keep its distance", and fiction can't be relied upon to stay in its imaginary and sometimes politically irrelevant worlds. The whole artifice of literary criticism was built up in order to do one thing really; to unmask the secrets of art. And the fiction was always there re-enchanting the world by putting on the beautiful masks again and again. (Muecke 2002: 108)

Geoffrey Hartman observes this edgy tendency in *Saving the Text*, claiming Derrida 'blurs genres or engages in so interminable a mode of analysis that the sanity of writing – its indebtedness to evolved conventions, as well as its apparent realism – is threatened' (Hartman 1981: xv). Writing takes flight, incapable of keeping its distance, unable to resist immersion in its own literariness – and all that 'literature' entails, before and after Derrida. Defying the authority of the Law (from within the Law) and the institution, it is an outlaw writing (occurring within the Law). It is based on 'the graft, the hybridisation, the migration, the genetic mutation' (Derrida 2003: 19), and, as

it adopts so many unprecedented modes, styles, genres, forms, etc, we are forced 'to read without model or map, neither critical, theoretical, or by literary precedent' (McQuillan in Derrida 2003: 112), without convention and without the possibility of mastery. This writing asks its reader to embrace rather than explain literature's ineffable qualities, to revel in rather than anxiously fret over the apophatic secrets arising from a literature by definition unconditional in its resounding right to say everything, or to not say anything at all.

XXIII

After the thesis, we are post-critical. Theorised by Gregory Ulmer, post-criticism is a 'hybrid of literature and criticism, art and science' (1985: 94) which breaks with representational realism and instead applies 'the devices of modernist art to critical representations' (83). Ulmer cites a passage from *The Post Card*, referring to what he translates as 'de-monstration', to define this criticism characterised by a 'shift away from commentary and explanation', working 'instead by means of examples' (90):

> De-monstration proves without showing, without evidencing any conclusion, without entailing anything, without an available thesis. It proves according to a different mode, but proceeding with its step of demonstration or non-demonstration. It transforms, it transforms itself, in its process rather than advancing a signifiable object of discourse. (Derrida trans Ulmer 1985: 93-4)

Post-criticism never states its case (refusing, provocatively, to advance a signifiable object of discourse), but instead shows it, performs it. Without an available thesis, working 'beyond the closure of knowledge' (Derrida 1967: 4), (up) against interpretive certitude, it produces its meanings in strange ways: 'As the form which criticism takes when it is art, the essay maintains a distinctive relationship with knowledge – it *mentions* without asserting knowledge' (Ulmer 1982: 558). Between demonstration and non-demonstration, art and criticism, literature and philosophy, fiction and non-fiction, I write essayistic texts which – like so many of Derrida's – only really allude to their argumentative contentions, without making a clear statement of these intentions, embracing arguments only to discard them and move on and on, sideways and all ways, forever dangerously close to proposing an axiom, but never doing so for fear of dangerously misstepping, stumbling, falling. These texts work by example, critically and creatively performing a series of chance theoretical encounters, faced with the dangerously expansive unconditionality and ineffability of literature. Meaning – a realist critic's interpretive certitude, as he Quixotically tilts at windmills – remains elusive, just over there, out of reach, never here and now, never present or presented. It is as though I threaten, by this unprecedented critical nuclear action, the death of the institution. (But I do not, and cannot. Not yet. I love the institution. So each time, just in time, I step back from the brink.)

XXIV

But what *is* nuclear criticism? A monstrous but unprecedented non-event, 'pure invention and fabulous specularisation', fantasy, nuclear criticism *isn't*. No apocalypse, not yet.

XXV

This is not nuclear criticism.

XXVI

Now, years later, long after I lounged on the couch watching *Dr Strangelove*, in this unprecedented present, after I have submitted my unsubmittable thesis, after it has been accepted, legitimised by the institution, after this institution has decreed that I am an expert in this improbable field, too late but too soon, I feel I have resolved nothing. On another monstrously hypermodern television screen, I again watch the anachronistic footage of mushroom clouds cheerfully promising a nuclear devastation that has never eventuated. (*We'll meet again, don't know where, don't know when, but I know we'll meet again, some sunny day* – a time that is past, and future, but not present.) I watch the DVD extras too, which include what was originally planned to be the film's final scene, before Kubrick decided it was too much of a farce, inconsistent with the film's blackly satiric tone: the vast and shadowy War Room spectacularly devolving into a cream pie fight. The difference is stark.

I ponder the time of *my* thesis, which is past but also future, as it awaits its prospective reader, places so much confidence in one so utterly unknowable. I also ponder the time of *the* thesis, which comes to an end with the death of the book and the beginning of writing, but which cannot end as I find myself compelled to compose and submit a thesis – even if it is, like Derrida's, really no thesis at all. (I should have titled it, I realise now in retrospect, in the style of René Magritte, *This is Not a Thesis*.) I am still uneasy with my strange textual compositions, with my patent, painful incapacity to simply and straightforwardly say what I mean, to offer my reader something by way of interpretive certitude, anything to hold onto, some conclusion which might finally draw so many madly scattered, haphazard, discontinuous narrative strands together from these twenty-eight tiny atomic nuclei, projected toward you, dear reader, tiny inoffensive missiles and missives, and present something with even a thin veneer of reason, order and coherence. I am on (the) edge, still hesitating to offer even as much as I do (it is not much at all, and I can only apologise), for fear I might betray this sublimely post-critical unprecedented spectacular nuclear non-event, present something in the present and with a presence that, promising interpretive certitude, belies the untimely time of the thesis.

XXVII

Whoops, apocalypse.

XXVIII

Or is this just a cream pie fight?

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