11th Lecture (Oct. 8): Derrida, de Man, Bloom and Hartman

0. I'll read a bit of old exam to give you the idea, and will put the text in Bowers. There will be one or two compulsory questions on Foucault on the exam. The one thing not to do is to parrot back lecture notes.

1. Has anybody read the New Critics? Or are they forgotten, so that nobody knows what the Yale School of 1975–84 was?

2. New Critical assumptions: "Organic unity or bust". The Romantics couldn't produce organic unities, well wrought urns, so they got down-graded. Jews probably couldn't read Milton, and tended toward enthusiasm and fanaticism and non-Hellenism, etc. As with Leavis, philosophy was down-graded--set aside as unnecessary for the study of poetry, just as anal. phil. kept philosophy pure by putting history and Hegel to one side.

3. The Yale School was an even more extraordinary constellation of genius than Kenyon College in the old days. It had a lot of Jews, and put the Romantics back in the center of poetics. But there was an element of self-parody in "presence of a nothingness, complete auto-deconstruction, or bust".

4. The fierce opposition to the Yale School was the feeling that texts like Glas should not be celebrated but rather deplored--that the mixture of genres, the refusal to accept the assumption that poets create and philosophers and critics know, was a danger to culture.

5. It is precisely this breakdown of the creating-knowing, or making-finding distinctions which ensues if you believe Derrida on the claim that context can change everything, that nothing remains the same when recontextualized, that relationality is all, etc.

6. Much of Derrida can be seen as saying: if you stop being logocentric you will stop asking "have I gotten it right?" and start asking "have I made it useful?" "have I gotten what I want to out of it?" "have I made it new?" "can I use it in the poem which is my life?"

   In short, the more Derridean you are in philosophy, the more you will admire the Romantics' willingness to cross limits and boundaries, and the less you will admire organic form, the classical unities, well-wrought urns, etc. The less interested you will be in the question "is lit. crit. a cognitive discipline, aiming at truth about literary texts?" (with Hirsch) and the more interested in "is lit. crit. living up to the first-rate poems it discusses?"

7. Quote p. 107: "Peirce goes very far...The thing itself is a sign" This can be interpreted, using Dennett, as saying that things are
centers of descriptive gravity, rather than things to be gotten right, just as selves are centers of narrative gravity rather than things to be Socratically known.

To say "the end of the book and the beginning of writing" is also to say "the end of the self-knowledge and the beginning of self-creation" or, better, the end of the quarrel between philosophy and poetry because the end of the quarrel between the knowers and the creators. There are no knowers, there are no creators, there are just writers.

8. Quote p. 108: "We think only in signs...which amounts to ruining the notion of the sign...One could call play the absence of the trans. signified [the thing to be gotten right, accurately represented, or the thought to be properly expressed] as limitlessness of play, that is to say as the descturiong of ontotheology and the metaphysics of presence."

9. Two more bits before I stop and ask if there are further questions about Derrida:

(a) Quote p. 97: "It as sometimes been contested that speech clothed thought. Husserl, Saussure (p. 649), Lavelle have all questioned it. But has it ever been doubted that writing was the clothing of speech?"--that writing was still further removed than speech from the originay logos in the soul?

Derrida's thesis of the priority of writing to speech: this is just reversing Plato's point (quote Aristotle from p. 94 and Plato at p. 97) and saying that writing is a better indication of what things are like than speech, because less self-contained, more trailing off at the edge.

(b) arche-writing, trace, differance--three words for what takes the place of logos, three words to express the idea that there is nothing behind or beneath or beyond the play of signifiers--no way for thought to escape language, no way for language to remain caught by rules, etc.
10. Bloom and Davidson:

"Death is the most proper or literal of meanings, and literal meaning partakes of death" (p. 335); "Imagination is the faculty of self-preservatino" (p. 342); the ultimate horror of finding oneself to be only a replica, only a well-programmed machine running a program written by somebody else.

Bloom and pragmatism: "For the ultimate question a strong reading asks of a poem is: Why? Why should it have been written? What must we read it...?" (p. 333) As opposed to "does it tell me something true?" "Does it get something (e.g., "human experience") right?"

Bloom and Derrida: "Something in nearly every reader... Any poem is an inter-poem" (p. 332)

Bloom and Derrida again: "Negative theology..." (p. 337)

Bloom and Hartman: "The reading of strong poetry is just as much a poetic fact as is the writing of such poetry" (p. 333)

To say that the literal kills and the metaphor gives life, and that the strength of a human being is the strength of his or her metaphors is to say that Davidson is right: if had no metaphor, or if metaphorical meanings were "there" in the language to be discovered rather than being invitations to play around, we would not be human beings, but machines playing out our programs.

Bloom is interested in substituting the strong poet for the knower as the archetypal, paradigmatic, human being. Reversing the priority which, in the Ion, Plato gave to Socrates over the rhapsode and over Homer himself.

11. The contrast between mere inspiration, and hard, solid knowledge, which Plato set up, thereby founding logocentrism, is the contrast which Bloom reverses by talking about breath, spirare, pneuma--what giveth life, whether as the letter, the literal meanings of words, what das Man says, killeth.