

## "TELE-VISIONING" THE COMIC CYCLICITY OF WESTERN CRITICISM

Iftikhar Shafi

### Abstract

*The paper evaluates contemporary Western literary academics by viewing the dynamics of some of its most apparently formidable critical paradigms in terms of a cat-and-mouse game. Nevertheless, the critique remains oblique, as the possibility of saving itself from complicity with what it critiques remains only in the margins for now. Although this strategy at times may distract the reader from the principal theme of the essay, which is to bring out the ironic cyclicity of the Western critical paradigms, it has been adopted herein to differentiate it from its deconstructive counterparts in Western criticism. The Western critiques of Western criticism, such as deconstruction, predominantly reflect a hopelessness in the face of the ubiquity of the Western classical categories, and thus stop short of coming up with the possibility of any alternate critical discourse.*

**Key Words:** Critical "tele-visioning", Western criticism, Comic cyclicity

### Prescript

Whenever the mouse gets the upper hand, no cat is there,  
or (at least) there is (only) the (unreal) form of a cat.

What cat? The faith-regarding reason which is in the body  
is the lion that overthrows the lions.<sup>1</sup>

Jalal al-Din Rumi, *The Mathnawi*

There are two ways that an antagonistic relationship can  
be carried out. I'll call one **static** and the other **dynamic**.  
Static antagonism always keeps the struggle between them  
stable, meaning they are always enemies, and one is

---

<sup>1</sup> Jalal al-Din Rumi, *The Mathnawi of Jalalu'ddin Rumi*, trans. Reynold A. Nicholson (Karachi: Darul Ishaat, 2003).

always the winner.... Tom and Jerry have a more dynamic relationship.... While Tom, the cat, never gets to eat Jerry, he sometimes surprises the mouse, and gets the upper hand. Jerry, on the other hand, can go on the offensive with the cat simply to irritate him. They can also set aside their conflict if an opportunity arises where it is mutually beneficial to live peacefully.... Tom even hugs and kisses Jerry after he narrowly avoids being cast into hell for being a bad cat. A dynamic relationship is a more fluid arrangement that allows for more surprise. The chase can take unexpected turns. The prey can appear momentarily to have lost the battle, only to escape, and defeat the enemy.<sup>2</sup>

The title of an essay may sound to some readers rather *too* rhetorical – and perhaps to an extent mocking, demeaning, and ridiculing the dialectic of the Western critical history. In fact, it intends none of the above. It may indeed be rhetorical, but it is elaborated in the following pages. This rhetoricity with all its various *topoi* is already present within the language of the criticism that the author intends to “tele”-vision. In that sense, firstly, this rhetoricity should not be accused of being *too* rhetorical, that is, over-stretching the domain of the rhetorical to the extent of distorting the actual, logical picture. Secondly, since the insistence on the “comic” (instead of the “comical”) nature of the cyclicity intend to trace in the Western critical tradition, so that this attempt should be taken as more expository than that of disputation. Can I. A. Richards and Derrida be put into the same category? One represents what T.S. Eliot called the lemon squeezer school of literary criticism and the latter deconstructionist, which, one may think are not the same. Can they be not different and same simultaneously? It has now been quite some time that deconstruction has come to be seen in many Western critical quarters as a somewhat benign threat to the earlier modes of criticism. For instance, as early as 1990, Brian McCrea predicted that “the central question in critical theory for the next decade will be the relationship of deconstruction to earlier critical methods, most particularly New Criticism,” and refers to the writers who

---

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Lyons, *Comedy for Animators* (CRC Press, 2015).

see deconstruction "as merely New Criticism in a new guise."<sup>3</sup> The Tom and Jerry Show runs through the argument as a *motif*, but since the tropes of the cat, the mouse, and the dog have been borrowed from within the text of the Western criticism itself, the author's intention should be taken as more expository than that of disputation, at least in this writing, and any sense of mocking, demeaning or vulgarizing should not be considered a necessary part of that intention.

Thirdly, apart from re-visioning the dynamics of Western criticism in terms of a popular television cartoon show, the intention at "tele-visioning" the Western critical "show" also implies on my part a claim to having achieved a certain distance (suggested by the prefix "tele") from that "show" (the use of the word "show" instead of more sober ones of "tradition" or "debate" intending to suggest a certain commercial, industrial, and business orientation of modern academic criticism) – to not being "implicated in the game," to use Derrida's words– being "implicated in the game" for Derrida being a necessary condition of reading any text. I understand that given the apparent ubiquity of globalization worldwide and postcoloniality in the specific South Asian condition, such a claim to having distanced myself from the object of my criticism would sound critically untenable, would be against the prescripts of criticism. It would perhaps be too much for me to ask my reader at this stage to have "faith" in me to "believe" that the present essay is part of a more ambitious project, in which I may attempt a more extended justification of such a claim to imagining a possibility of distancing from the Western critical "show".<sup>4</sup> But that requires at least a book length treatment for its fuller articulation, and for the purpose of this particular essay I would have to leave my reader only with a few (re)marks appearing in the "unconscious" of my essay, I mean the marginal, paratextual notes, occasionally, like the Freudian parapraxis, that give only an indication of what I had to "repress"

---

<sup>3</sup> Brian McCrea, *Addison and Steel are Dead, the English Department, Its Canon, and the Professionalization of Literary Criticism*, (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1990), 171.

<sup>4</sup> No matter how much "uncritical" they may apparently seem, both faith and belief have historically been a part of the critical debates as making an integral part of the critical appreciation. See for instance William J. J. Rooney, *The Problem of 'Poetry and Belief' in Contemporary Criticism* (Washington D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1949). See also Mary Gerhart, *The Question of Belief in Literary Criticism* (Stuttgart: Akademischer Verlag Hans-Dieter Heinz, 1979), 298, for her argument that "belief is both essential to and existentially present in literary criticism".

here for the limitations of length, that is, the distant location of my possible refuge from the Western critical tradition. Let us have the first of those marginal notes *here!*<sup>5</sup>

### Freeze frame

A scene is stopped in mid-action so that the audience can have a proper look at something special that is being shown. For example, Tom plants a bomb for Jerry, who discovers it and hides it underneath Tom's bottom in a *Tom & Jerry* cartoon. In the next shot, the bomb explodes and a burnt-out Tom is shown from in time for about two or three seconds till the next shot cuts to Jerry fleeing at top speed.<sup>6</sup>

Broadly speaking, a bird's eye view of the Western critical canon may present us with three kinds of characters (which may be stretched a little later to analogically correspond with the Tom-Jerry-Spike trinity mentioned above) roughly corresponding with the three broad historical divisions of the classical, the modern, and the postmodern phases of this tradition. The classical period is generally represented by the philosopher-critic, beginning with Plato and Aristotle, and, with the exception of the poet-critics like Horace, and coming down to the medieval theologians like Augustine and Aquinas who have made their way into the critical anthologies. Then the modern period is seen to be largely dominated by the poet-critic, especially since the bloom of the Renaissance through Philip Sidney coming down all the way to T. S. Eliot, and going back to its earliest germinations in the times of Boccaccio and, by some stretch, even Dante. Finally, since the late nineteenth century till the contemporary (often designated as the postmodern) times, criticism enters its academic phase and sees the emergence and domination of the professor-critic exemplified by the likes of I. A. Richards, F. R. Leavis, Harold Bloom, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Lacan and many more. I am alive to the distaste such a snug "boxing" of a complex and porous history might evoke in some

---

<sup>5</sup> "By God, if you go into a mouse-hole, You will be afflicted by someone who has the claws of a cat. No corner is without wild beasts; There is no rest but in the place where you are alone with God." Jalal al-Din Rumi, *The Mathnawi of Jalalu'ddin Rumi*, vol. II, 593 and 591.

<sup>6</sup> Kruti Shah and Alan D'Souza, *Advertising and Promotions: An IMC Perspective* (New Delhi: Tata McGraw-Hill, 2009).

readers, and my very argument *is* to highlight the complex complicity among the various critical trends in this history, especially in its latest phase, which are designated by these critics themselves. These trends like the classical, the romantic, the humanist, the theoretical (cultural criticism), and the "theoretical" (deconstructive) all seem to be meshed up in a struggle to overcome and come over to each other simultaneously, to reverse and to reserve each other in the same moment, much like the game among Tom, Jerry, and Spike who look to asunder each other apart, but in the end just stop short of that for the necessity of the game to go on.

I will focus on the latest phase of this history mentioned above – the era of the professor-critic, for I presume myself to be one, and this is where my implicit claim to "tele"-vision should be best questioned. Whitehead's characterization of the Western philosophical and critical history as "a series of footnotes to Plato" seems to be particularly vindicated in the contemporary professorial phase of this history when we find a Tom-Jerry-Spike kind of a complicity in arguably one of the most powerful attempts in the Western critical history to overthrow Platonism. Let us tune in.

Let us begin with some modern Western critiques generally thought to be responsible for a contemporary "reversal of Platonism" in the West, especially those of Derrida and Deleuze, who sophisticatedly, and even sophistically, undo Platonism with a simultaneous oedipal respect for Plato, and who would themselves acknowledge for their anti-Platonism "a profound alliance with Plato."<sup>7</sup> "Was it not Plato himself", Deleuze rhetorically asks, "Who pointed out the direction for the reversal of Platonism?"<sup>8</sup>

Tracing these modern theoretical takes on Platonism, one may feel inclined to answer Paul de Man's call "to call the cat a cat and to document the contemporary version,"<sup>9</sup> not in this case of the resistance to theory, but of the resistance the contemporary theory has shown towards Platonism. These critiques (let me call them *feline maneuvers*), as de Man elaborates, capitalize mainly upon "the modalities of production", rather than meaning

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Routledge, 1978), 385.

<sup>8</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense* (London: Continuum, 1990, First South Asian Edition, 2005), 294.

<sup>9</sup> Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 16.

or value of the text.<sup>10</sup> “Textual harassments”, as such strategies have often been thought to be, they seek to “dissimulate the woven texture”, looking for textual fissures to penetrate, for “discontinuities” and “the “fault lines” as Peter Barry points towards the geological metaphor referring to breaks in rock formations. In other words, the text does not *enact* what it says, is “at war with itself,” in the words of Peter Barry, “it is a house divided and disunified.”<sup>11</sup>

Looking at the critiques of Deleuze and Derrida one feels that neither Plato appears even as an “unfledged bird” (that might at least offer a *potential* to fly), nor these deconstructive cats look as much rapacious as to “torment.”<sup>12</sup> Although critics like Christopher Norris consider deconstruction as a “revenge” of literary theory on the tradition that can be traced back to Plato,<sup>13</sup> I will argue that at the most, the deconstructive take on Plato can be taken as a cat and mouse game: deconstructive Toms chasing Platonic Jerries, a game of complicity never to end. From such a perspective, one could see Deleuze’s account of “reversing” Platonism more as an account of “reserving” it, this avowed subversion as actually a sub-version of the Platonic strategies. This is perhaps why Deleuze himself calls this postmodern “destruction of Platonism” as “the most innocent of all destructions,”<sup>14</sup> especially if one keeps in mind Heidegger’s sense of *destruktion* as an “adoption and transformation of what has been handed down to us.”<sup>15</sup>

Deleuze’s project seems to be to track down the “motivation” behind the Platonic project of dividing things between essences and appearances, between pure and impure, between authentic and inauthentic. The question of “motivation” relates to the question of “why”. The question of “why”, in turn, as Derrida would have it, is concealed within the question of “how”. Therefore, in order to track down the motivation of the Platonic

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 72.

<sup>12</sup> “When an unfledged bird begins to fly”, Rumi writes in the *Mathnawi*, “it becomes a mouthful for any rapacious cat” (vol.I), 583.

<sup>13</sup> Christopher Norris, *The Deconstructive Turn, Essays in the Rhetoric of Philosophy* (London: Methuen, 1983), 3.

<sup>14</sup> Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 303.

<sup>15</sup> Martin Heidegger, *What is Philosophy*, trans. Jean T. Wilde and William Kluback (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 71.

project Deleuze focuses upon "the method of division", that is, *how* Plato divides, distinguishes, and screens the claims. It is here in tracing the method of division that Plato's claim that "it is right for only the philosopher's mind to have wings"<sup>16</sup> may seriously come into question for as Deleuze points out, it is basically myth, something that the Platonic dialectics pronouncedly seek to exclude, that through Plato's method of division comes out as "an integral element of division."<sup>17</sup> Thus for Deleuze, the *irony* gives it away for Plato when myth, something by definition foundationless "constructs the immanent model or the foundation-test according to which the pretenders should be judged and their pretensions measured."<sup>18</sup> This irony, Deleuze argues, is pushed to extreme in a paradoxical way when we find no such founding myth in the *Sophist*, one of the dialogues along with the *Phaedrus* and the *Statesman* that deal with the theme of division. The reason for the absence of any myth in the *Sophist* Deleuze provides is that the *Sophist* has identification rather than distinguishing as its main task: "[T]he final definition of the sophist leads us to the point where we can no longer distinguish him from Socrates himself --- the ironist working in private by means of brief arguments."<sup>19</sup> Within the tone and the tenor in which Plato would claim a distinction for himself from the sophist, within the style of philosophical writing, within dialectics as it reveals itself in Plato, such claim for distinction is untenable: "how could he (Socrates) still distinguish himself from the sophist?"<sup>20</sup>

One could still feel while reading Deleuze that he really leaves the question of motivation in its implication of "why" largely untouched. If one goes by what Deleuze means by motivation as a "will to select and choose", then by this definition the motivation of Platonism is in no significant way different from the motivation of the "reversal of Platonism itself", which, according to Deleuze, is "still selective" and "makes a difference, but not at all in the manner of Plato."<sup>21</sup> But since Deleuze has already pointed out the use of myth in this "manner of Plato", posed him already as a sophist, a simulacrum man, one wonders how Deleuze himself would distinguish

---

<sup>16</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. W. C. Helmbold and W. G. Rabinowitz (London: Macmillan, 1956), 32.

<sup>17</sup> Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 292.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 293.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 300.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 302.

between the two manners of distinguishing. If we agree with Deleuze that “Platonism founds the entire domain of philosophy,”<sup>22</sup> it becomes difficult for us to agree with him again that “Platonism happened only once, and Socrates fell under the blade.”<sup>23</sup> If motivation is to be exposed through the method of division, and as Deleuze says, “the essence of division” is in “the selection of lineage,”<sup>24</sup> then Platonism and its reversal both have an identical motivation, that is, “to select lineages.” Both proceed by means of a similar irony, that of identifying with each other while manifestly trying to exclude themselves from each other at the same time. In the reversal of Platonism, that exerts the power of simulacrum over copy-icons, “there is no longer any possible selection.”<sup>25</sup> But Deleuze insists that “it is still selective ... but not at all in the manner of Plato. What is selected are all the procedures opposed to selection; what is excluded ... is that which presupposes the Same and the Similar, that which pretends to correct divergence.”<sup>26</sup> The irony is that in this *different manner* of selecting the lineage, Socrates appears as a “founding”-father.

Given such ironic complicity between Platonism and its deconstructive reversal, one wonders then what is the need to reverse Platonism at all in the first place. What is the need “to make the simulacra rise and to affirm their rights among icons and copies?”<sup>27</sup> Its task of exposing the unfoundedness of Platonism aside, what this reversal of Platonism “recognizes and respects”, in the words of Derrida, are “all its classical exigencies.” This reversal proceeds with and pushes Socratic irony itself to its inevitable extreme. The deconstructive questioning of Plato’s claims is somewhat like the sophists winning over Socrates to their own side, and this procedure of winning over becomes possible by pointing out of the ironic discrepancy between *what* Plato claims and *how* he actually puts this claim to the reader. If myth, as Derrida points out, is the “major sign” of Platonic irony, then Deleuze would accuse Plato of the “utilization and survival of the myth in an ideology which no longer supports it, and which has lost its secret.”<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 296.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 302.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 292.

<sup>25</sup> Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 300.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 302.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 299.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 301.

The foregoing argument about a deconstructive overturning of Platonism as an ironic turning over to it is certainly a foregone thesis, especially in the case of Deleuze, put with admirable critical and philosophical cogency by Alain Badiou, with a possible difference that I argue that this anti-Platonism is ironically well aware of the ineluctable irony inherent in any attempt at overturning Platonism. Badiou writes:

As far as philosophical genealogy is concerned, there is no doubting the validity of the proverb "Tell me what you think of Plato, and I will tell you who you are". ... Platonism would never cease to be overturned, because it has, from the very beginning, been overturned. Deleuze is the contemporary point of passage for the return of this overturning.

But perhaps the imperative is completely different: that it is not Platonism that has to be overturned, but the anti-Platonism taken as evident throughout the entire century. Platonism has to be *restored*, and first of all by the deconstruction of "Platonism" – that common figure, montage of opinion, or configuration that circulates from Heidegger to Deleuze, from Nietzsche to Bergson, but also from Marxists to Positivists, and which is still used by the counterrevolutionary New Philosophers... as well as by neo-Kantian moralists. "Platonism" is the great fallacious construction of modernity and post-modernity alike. It serves as a type of general negative prop: it only exists to legitimate the "new" under the heading of an anti-Platonism.... All that Deleuze lacked was to finish with anti-Platonism itself.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> Alain Badiou, "Deleuze, the Clamor of Being," in Sandra Buckley, Michael Hardt, Brian Massumi (eds.), *Theory Out of Bounds* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 100.1-101.2. Badiou's comment on anti-Platonism's ironic return to Platonism reminds me of what Rumi makes the Caliph Umar say to the old harper, who having repented from harping still remains belatedly conscious of his sins: "O thou whose knowledge is without knowledge of the Giver of knowledge, thy repentance is worse than thy sin. / O thou that sleekest to repent of a state that is past, say, when wilt thou repent of this repentance?" (*The Mathnawi*, vol.I, 2205-2206). Set in the times of the Caliph Umar, the story is that of an artist, a harper, who is shown to be broken-hearted at the

Wlad Godzich, on the blurb of Badiou's mentioned work, considers Badiou's take on Deleuze in exposing Deleuze as "an aristocrat of thought, much dedicated to rehabilitating the metaphysical project in our day" a "180° turn in the interpretation of Deleuze's work" and predicts that "it will have the effect of a bomb" and also that it will put those readers of Deleuze who think him to be an anarchist in "apoplexy." It reminds me of certain action maneuvering in animations that is called "Freeze Frame." Kruti Shah and Alan D'Souza explain:

A scene is stopped in mid-action so that the audience can have a proper look at something special that is being shown. For example, Tom plants a bomb for Jerry, who discovers it and hides it underneath Tom's bottom in a *Tom & Jerry* cartoon. In the next shot, the bomb explodes and a burnt-out Tom is shown from in time for about two or three seconds till the next shot cuts to Jerry fleeing at top speed.<sup>30</sup>

### Liminalities

Where traditional story telling requires a **resolution**, cartoons don't necessarily need an absolute end to the story. Some shorts, such as certain Tom and Jerry cartoons, will have a climax and a brief pause, but then go right back to the chase as the iris closes on the screen.<sup>31</sup>

Derrida's pseudo-poetic, melodramatic "play" (he calls his writing on Plato an extension "by force of play") *Plato's Pharmacy* ends with a cryptic "soliloquy" that might be taken as a confession of the unending complicity between Plato and his postmodern over turners.

---

decline of his art with his own declining years, and realizes that he has wasted his years in playing the harp only for the worldly gains of appreciation and sustenance. Repenting, and having lost all the hope in the world, he goes into a graveyard, deciding to play that day only for God, playing the harp and weeping, goes to sleep. Umar, on the other hand, is instructed by a divine voice in his dream to find and deliver the old harper, materially and spiritually.

<sup>30</sup> Kruti Shah and Alan D'Souza, *Advertising and Promotions, An IMC Perspective*, 504.

<sup>31</sup> Jonathan Lyons, *Comedy for Animators*.

Plato gags his ears... the better to hear-himself-speak, the better to see, the better to analyze.

He listens, means to distinguish, between two repetitions....

One ought to distinguish, between two repetitions.

— But they repeat each other, still; they substitute for each other...

— Nonsense: they don't repeat each other, since they are added...

— Precisely...

The night passes. In the morning, knocks are heard at the door. They seem to be coming from outside, this time...

Two knocks... four...

— But maybe it's just a residue, a dream, a bit of dream left over, an echo of the night... that other theatre, those knocks from without...<sup>32</sup>

The "other theatre" is "just a residue" and "a bit of dream left over" that is bound to corrupt any attempt at overturning Platonism. Derrida's reading of Plato, according to Derrida himself, is more of an "addition of some new thread" to Plato's text, an addition that can only be made by taking the risk of "getting a few fingers caught" in the Platonic web.<sup>33</sup> Elsewhere Derrida confesses to a certain "hypocrisy" that characterizes the postmodern thought and the ultimate futility of even "the most daring way of making the beginnings of a step outside of philosophy."<sup>34</sup> He talks about the philosophical attempt at doing away with Plato as "philosophy's theatrical fiction": "The Greek father who still holds us under his sway must be killed; and this is what a Greek – Plato – could never resolve to do, deferring the act into a hallucinatory murder . . . . But will a non-Greek ever succeed in doing what a Greek in this case could not do, except by disguising himself as a Greek . . . ." <sup>35</sup> Like Deleuze, Derrida chases Plato only to find out that

<sup>32</sup> Derrida, *Disseminations*, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: Continuum, 2004), 168.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>34</sup> Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 259.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 110. The prospect of "deconstructing" Plato that Derrida puts here in a never-ending ironic deferral reminds me the claim of Shams-e-Tabriz, the famous mystical poet Jalal al-Din Rumi's spiritual master, that "A single one of God's servants can empty Plato of all those sciences. He can do it in a moment. However, he will show consideration toward him and enter little by little. Thus he will say that this man was clever and a philosopher,

he has been chasing his own tail, only to find out that postmodern anti-Platonism has “a profound alliance with Plato.”<sup>36</sup> Deleuze on his own part acknowledges that the “task of modern philosophy has been defined: to overturn Platonism. That this overturning should conserve many Platonic characteristics is not only inevitable but desirable” – for Deleuze as well, “division” is simultaneously the measure of both Platonism and the possibility of overturning Platonism.”<sup>37</sup>

These postmodern “textual quakes” that are deconstructive strategies of reading seem to be “engineered” not to destroy, but actually to celebrate the rubble of the Platonic edifice that one may call the Western critical tradition. These strategies actually respect and recognize “all the instruments of classical criticism.”<sup>38</sup> The risk they take against moving away from the Platonic patronizing is a calculated one, one that shrewdly stops short of “developing in any direction at all and authorize itself to say almost anything.”<sup>39</sup>

---

for he was a philosopher and knowing. After all, trading punches with these prophets is no idle task.” *Me and Rumi*, trans. William C. Chittick (Lahore: Sohail Academy, 2005).

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 385.

<sup>37</sup> Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (London: Continuum, 1994), 71.

<sup>38</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 158.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. As for the risk of the critical discourse to develop “in any direction at all and authorize itself to say almost anything” that even Derrida is not ready to take, and the allowance for not recognizing and respecting all the “classical exigencies,” in the *Mathnawi* Rumi imagines the condition that legitimizes the development of any discourse in such a manner. “Do not seek any rules or method,” Rumi shows Moses relieving a lover of God (a shepherd in the story) of “the recognition and respect... of all the classical exigencies,” “say whatsoever your distressful heart desires” (vol.II, 1784). Rumi tells us that once on his way Moses came across a shepherd who was addressing God in a manner that was to Moses “babble”, “blasphemy, and raving,” (1728). A revelation of rebuke from God came to Moses for having “parted My servant from Me,” (1750), for the shepherd was a lover who was in a particular state of absorption in which faulty speech should not be called faulty (1766). Moses immediately went after the shepherd, who after being admonished by Moses had closed his mouth and with a soul “burnt with repentance” had “rent his garment . . . and turned his head towards the desert.” Moses ultimately found him, through his footsteps, that were “in any direction at all”: The footsteps of a man distraught is, in truth, distinct from the footsteps of others: (At) one step, (he moves) like the rook (straight) from top to bottom (of the chessboard) ; (at) one step he goes crossways, like the bishop; Now lifting his crest like a wave ; now going on his belly like a fish; Now writing (a description of) his state on some dust, like a geomancer who takes an omen by drawing lines (on earth of sand). (II / 1779-1782)

Such postmodern testimonies on the contradictoriness and hypocrisy of Platonism, despite their apparent radicalism, I call "threshold" or "liminal" testimonies. The "threshold" aptly metaphorizes the postmodern theoretical positioning. The "threshold" represents a certain paradoxical postmodern commitment to, one could say, a certain "non-commitment." Ebrahim Moosa, while forcing a postmodern reading on Ghazali, theorizes the "threshold," or what he calls the *dihliz*, as "a liminal space between the inside and the outside."<sup>40</sup> Moosa's appropriation of this metaphor for the "in-between-ness of being and the torn-ness of human existence" expresses, to recall Derrida's words, the "force of a desire", in Moosa's case, "the desire to live in a polycentric world."<sup>41</sup> The *dihliz* for Moosa, is "a new locus of epistemic and political enunciation." It is:

A liminal space. The *dihliz* signifies the space as well as the action of two entries: entry from the *outside* and entry into the *inside*. It is the critical intermediate space between outside and inside, between exoteric (*zahir*) and esoteric (*batin*). And it is also the space that one has to traverse in order to enter or to exit, which is the real function of a threshold area. The *dihliz*-ian space constitutes a bounded space, a threshold between door (*bab*) and house (*dar*). It is not a useless space, but one that can be used for multiple purposes. Viewed from the house proper, the *dihliz* is located on the outside. But viewed from the door leading to the street, the *dihliz* is on the inside.<sup>42</sup>

Although contemporary critics like Moosa in their attempt to use their threshold position for soliciting authoritative critical "productions that are from neither the inside nor the outside"<sup>43</sup> fall prey to the fallacy of still managing to speak on both the inside and the outside, a more realistic acknowledgement of the necessities of being on the threshold is found in the major philosophers like Derrida and Heidegger. From the threshold position of such philosophers, if the claims to truth of discourse in the Platonic tradition are contradictory, the possibility of the validity of such

---

<sup>40</sup> Ibrahim Moosa, *Ghazali and the Poetics of Imagination* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2005), 29.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 30.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 48.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, 67.

claims in other traditions can neither be asserted nor be denied. That area is left vacant in silence. That is why Derrida, while acknowledging his “threshold” position, refuses to speak on, for example, the mystical tradition in Islam directly, prefers to *apophatically* “leave this immense place empty”, rhetorically asking himself the question: “Concerning that about which one cannot speak, isn’t it best to remain silent?”<sup>44</sup>

It can be plausibly argued that these dynamics of the liminal, more generally associated with the postmodern paradigm in the Western critical tradition, are traceable back to Plato himself. The editors of *Mapping Liminalities* note that “[T]he term ‘liminal’ is much older than some recent criticism might suggest, and its use in the philosophical concepts such as the sublime and the subliminal reveals a rich and a varied historical development which attests to the roles such terms have played as essential components of aesthetic and philosophical thinking since their use in the works of classical thinkers such as Plato and Longinus”<sup>45</sup>

Mihai Spariosu goes to the extent of universalizing the dynamics of liminality on the basis of examples from the Buddhist, the Christian and the Platonic traditions:

.... Liminality is a universal anthropological element. This universality is acknowledged, for example, in such Buddhist texts as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, where liminality appears under the name of *bardo*. According to the commentary of Chogyam Trungpa, Rinpoche, *bardo* signifies ‘gap’; the word is made up of *bar*, which means ‘in-between,’ and *do*, which means ‘island’ or ‘mark.’ *Bardo* is thus a ‘sort of land mark that stands between two things.’ It is rather an island in the midst of a lake. The concept of *bardo* is based on the period between sanity and insanity, or the period between confusion and the confusion just about to be transformed into wisdom; and of course it could be said of the experience which stands

---

<sup>44</sup> Derrida, “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials,” in *Language of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory*, eds. Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 53.

<sup>45</sup> Lucy Kay et al. (eds.), *Mapping Liminalities, Thresholds in Cultural and Literary Texts* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), 7.

between death and birth. The past situation has just occurred and the future situation has not yet manifested itself so there is a gap between the two. The bardo experience concludes the Rinpoche 'is part of our basic psychological makeup.' Likewise, in his *Republic*, Plato employs the Pythagorean doctrine of metempsychosis in the myth of Er, referring to the middle station between heaven and earth, where souls meet to choose their next lot. Christian dogma equally acknowledges the concept of liminality when it posits 'limbo' (a word that shares its Latin roots with *limen*) as a place between heaven and hell, where certain souls are in an intermediate or transitional state.<sup>46</sup>

In the Western context, the liminal designates an intellectual positioning that considerably restricts the epistemic possibilities to analytical reason. The postmodern critiques of Plato share this liminal space with him, and in that, do not challenge Platonism in any significant way, being merely the residual echoes of Platonism itself.

### Theory's nine lives

There is a famous saying in show business: "Always leave them laughing."<sup>47</sup>

The Western critical theory has nine lives. This is how Jane Eliot and Derek Attridge have characterized the tenaciousness of the Western critical project.<sup>48</sup> The metaphorization of Western criticism and theory in feline terms is neither amiss nor without a history. Precisely this feline code was

<sup>46</sup> Mihai I. Spariosu, *The Wreath of Wild Olive, Play, Liminality and the Study of Literature* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1997), 37. Spariosu interestingly leaves out the Islamic mystical tradition from his account. Rumi, for instance, associates liminality as the domain of the analytical reason, the Western critical tradition that could be called "a series of footnotes to Plato": *Bedānkezīraki-ye aqljumeħdilizast / agar be 'ilm-e-falātūnbawadbarūn-e-sarāst* ("Know that the cleverness of the intellect all belongs to the threshold / Even if it be with the knowledge of Plato, it is (still) outside the palace"). See Badiuzzaman Faruzanfar (ed.), *Kulliyat-e-Shams* (Tehran, 1344 H), 281.

<sup>47</sup> Jonathan Lyons, *Comedy of Animators*.

<sup>48</sup> Jane Elliot and Derek Attridge (eds.), See the introduction "Theory's Nine Lives" in *Theory after 'Theory'* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 1.

used by Paul de Man in 1981, with a call for “call(ing) the cat a cat and to document . . . the contemporary version of the resistance to theory” in America. One reason why this version of the Western critical effort mainly in the post-1960s era, and now often remembered as “theory” (distinguished by the theoretical and critical effort that either preceded or followed it by being put under quotes), was resisted by some other critical quarters (especially by the so-called cultural critics) is that with deconstruction at their helm, the theoretical affairs in the 1970s took almost a parasitical stance, the “theory” parasite feeding upon its theory host, dividing theory against itself. Criticism was actually equated with the notion of crisis, with true criticism for de Man occurring only “in the mode of crisis.”<sup>49</sup> These theoretical gestures verge on stalking, almost annulling, the Western critical project by “asking whether it is necessary for the act of criticism to take place.”<sup>50</sup> Such being the ultimate question worth posing for what de Man calls “authentic criticism,” apparently posing a dire threat to the existing modes of criticism in the West, actually turns out to be little more than ironically romancing with what it seeks to annihilate, the cat eating its own tail, the theory Toms now chasing humanist Jerries, never to end the game of complicity. Romancing has really been the hallmark of the Western criticism especially since the 1960s. Be it de Man’s reference to Rousseau’s romantic longings at the end of “Criticism and Crisis,” or Bloom’s romantic revisionism and its oedipal implications, a certain cyclicity marks even some of the most radical and avant-garde critical stances of “theory.”<sup>51</sup> For theory to step outside theory or vice versa, to use the words of Derrida with a slight contextual modification, “is much more difficult to conceive than is generally imagined by those who think they made it long ago with cavalier ease, and who in general are swallowed up in metaphysics in the entire body of discourse which they claim to have

---

<sup>49</sup> Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight*, 8.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 18. De Man quotes Rousseau: “If all my dreams had turned into reality, I would still remain unsatisfied: I would have kept on dreaming, imagining, desiring. In myself, I found an unexplainable void that nothing could have fulfilled . . .” This romantic consciousness of “the presence of nothingness” can perhaps be applied to the critical effort as well that goes on being never fully satisfied by the insights it produces. Harold Bloom also considers the Romantic consciousness as “a central form in modern literature” by virtue of being “appalled by its own overt continuities, and vainly but perpetually fantasiz(ing) some end to repetitions.” *A Map of Misreading* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 36.

disengaged from."<sup>52</sup> Slavoj Žižek analogizes, again in feline terms, this critical circularity, this Rousseauistic desire of criticism of perpetuating desire: "While dancing, the cat jumps into the air and turns around its own axis; however, instead of falling back down towards the earth's surface in accordance with the normal laws of gravity, it remains for some time suspended in the air, turning around in the levitated position as if caught in a loop of time, repeating the same circular movement on and on."<sup>53</sup> The modern (the time since when academic concerns become, implicitly or explicitly, a necessary part of literary debates) history of Western criticism and theory sounds oedipal notes: theory begets "theory" begets theory, one emerging after the other's death that, in Freudian terms, actually remains always in abeyance – through a gesture of feline cannibalism, cats eating up their own kittens – only to prepare to beget again in a few months (the frequency with which a new critical "ism" appears as the older one is (in)undated on the Western critical scene is remarkable). A relatively recent book on the state of the affairs of theory, titled *Theory after 'Theory'*, reminds Peter Barry's "Theory before Theory", in his introduction to literary and cultural theory a few years back, named *Beginning Theory*. Now the slogan goes: "Theory is dead; long live theory."<sup>54</sup>

But, again, what was it after all that deconstruction said about language that threatened to indefinitely delay the critical project? I think it was mainly that language is self-referential, that it points to itself only and nothing outside itself. Language is only about itself. Thus the most authentic task of criticism, in a gesture of extreme self-consciousness, could only be to question itself, as earlier posed through de Man's question. It remains an open question still whether the post-"theory" theory has proceeded after having squarely faced and settled this self-threatening self-reflection, or even that "theory" with its definitional non-assertiveness had in the very first place ever posed this threat in all earnest, thus saving itself from the accusation of being nothing more than a philosophical scandal. Did humanism really offend post-humanism? Did the rat actually bite poor Jeoffry's throat? "For when he takes his prey,"

---

<sup>52</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 359.

<sup>53</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2006), 63.

<sup>54</sup> Elliot and Attridge (eds.), *Theory after 'Theory'*, 14.

Christopher Smart said about his cat Jeoffry, “he plays with it to give it a chance.”<sup>55</sup>

It is, indeed, not easy to get rid of these cats, to think differently and go beyond these feline critical maneuvers, to use the words of Derrida quoted earlier, “to conceive than is generally imagined by those who think they made it long ago with cavalier ease, and who in general are swallowed up in metaphysics in the entire body of discourse which they claim to have disengaged from.” F. R. Leavis, perhaps the last of the greats in the Jerry dynasty, did try to run into his humanist mouse-hole long time ago, being chased by a Tom (who himself later realized that Spike, the dog in the show, still sleeping in his dog-house, is on Jerry’s side), when Leavis refused to defend his critical position in theoretical terms in response to Rene Wellek’s demand of him to this effect. “Dr. Wellek is a philosopher,” wrote Leavis, “and my reply to him in the first place is that I myself am not a philosopher, and that I doubt whether in any case I could elaborate a theory that he would find satisfactory...”<sup>56</sup> Leavis was certainly more concerned with what he called “the complete reader” and “a peculiar completeness of response.” Actually he seems to be obsessed with the idea of “completeness” in his letter to Wellek (using the word nine times, as though trying to give it nine lives in a brief span of three and a half pages). But Jerry seems to know, playfully, that the dog is on his side. Leavis also seems to know, playfully, that theory is on his side, when he modestly acknowledges towards the end of his letter that he “may in this way (of staying away from a theoretical defense of his critical practice) have advanced theory, even if (he hasn’t) done the theorizing” (my parentheses).<sup>57</sup> John Casey, as Newton points out, later seems to have “dogged” those who demanded a theoretical spelling out of Leavis’ critical position when he theoretically justified it as “both innovative and cogent.”<sup>58</sup>

---

<sup>55</sup> See Christopher Smart (1722-1771), *Jubilate Agno*, hailed by many as one the most extraordinary and “extremely religious” poems written in English.

<sup>56</sup> F. R. Leavis, “Literary Criticism and Philosophy,” in K. M. Newton (ed.) *Twentieth Century Literary Theory*, (London: Macmillan, 1988), 66.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, 69.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, 65.

The sleeping dog was actually on Jerry's side. Tom accidentally kicked him up. Rene Wellek later regretted invoking "theory" in this game of playful chasing:

Long before, in 1937, I got involved in a controversy with F. R. Leavis whom I had criticized for his boastful empiricism, for being suspicious of any theory . . . I sometimes feel guilty of having helped to propagate the theory of literature. Since my book theory has triumphed in this country and has, possibly, triumphed with a vengeance.<sup>59</sup>

From Freud we know what returns with a vengeance, in this case a canine theory, now often indicated by the canine teeth on both its sides (imagine: "Theory") that was always lurking in the unconscious of Western criticism. But it looks as if Tom, Jerry, and Spike the dog, are actually three-in-one. This critical trinity is one "complete cat," that is both the mouse, and the dog, all integral for and integrated in the critical show that has to run, that has to go on, that is the most popular show on the literary academic screen: the show of criticism, theory, and "theory". Rene Wellek was aware of this critical trinity, but despite knowing and acknowledging that the dog is an "insider", preferred to keep it out of this complete cat:

One can distinguish between three main branches of literary study. First, there is theory, which is concerned with the principles, categories, functions, and criteria of literature in general. Theory is the term now preferred to the older "poetics," since "poetics" seems limited to writing in verse and has not shed the implication of prescriptive rules. Second, there is the study of the concrete works of literature, which is sometimes identified with criticism or called "practical criticism" and which attempts to describe, analyze, characterize, interpret, and evaluate individual works of literature or group of works, for example, one author or in one genre. Interpretation is only one step in this process of criticism, though it has developed an enormous debate about its theory, for which the old theological term *hermeneutics* has been revived.

---

<sup>59</sup> Rene Wellek, "Destroying Literary Studies," in *Theory's Empire, An Anthology of Dissent*, eds. Daphne Patai and Will H. Corral (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 50.

And third, there is literary history, seen more frequently in the setting of political, social, and intellectual history. Literary biography is an established subgenre within literary history. *These three branches of literary study implicate each other.*<sup>60</sup>

But within this complicit game of the cats and the rats, the “theory” dog, who most problematically seems to be an insider, is the real worry. “Today,” Wellek shares his apprehensions, “this whole edifice of literary study has come under an attack that is not merely the normal criticism of certain aspects of a changing discipline but an attempt to destroy literary studies *from the inside.*”<sup>61</sup> What author is relating here actually happened quite some time ago in the Western critical history, back in 1983, when the dog was still barking loudly and the Toms and the mouse-holed Jerries did not really know whether it would actually bite or not, whether Derrida’s promises of “being implicated in the game, of being caught by the game, of being... at stake in the game from the outset,” despite his threats of “rupturing” – or whether Paul de Man’s insistence that the dog is actually a part of “the complete cat” and that we should “call the cat a cat” (and not a dog, it only looks like one) were really genuine or not. As late as 2006 critics like Geoffrey Hartman could still point out that “today our problem is more with the critics of critics: with those that bite or bark at their own kind...”<sup>62</sup> Since then, “theory,” or more specifically “deconstruction” seems to have had a quaint room of its own in the house of Western criticism and culture – all those earlier apprehensions are settled and the playfulness of the deconstructive gestures has been duly acknowledged, gamely accommodated and glibly put to rest within the critical and cultural matrix in the West – the stray dog finally domesticated. This chunk from an editor’s preface to his recent book on deconstruction may tell the story:

There was this one occasion while I was at work on it (the book on Christopher Norris’ interviews) when I felt the need to keep my mind momentarily off the texts of Norris as well as those standard con-texts of his deconstructive discourse which I was cross-referencing: excellent works by

<sup>60</sup> Wellek, “Destroying Literary Studies,” in *Theory’s Empire*, 41. Last italics mine.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 42. Author’s Italics.

<sup>62</sup> Geoffrey Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 211.

Derek Attridge, Catherine Belsey, J. Hillis Miller, and Julian Wolfreys, among others. That was when I found myself craving a different sort of nourishment, one quite distinct from the richly flavored scholarly diet I had relished so far. I decided to go *out there* and search for other possible ways of packaging deconstruction that might actually be helpful to my presentation of Norris' case. I went to Google and typed "deconstruction." I was astonished to find included in the list of sites that came up an onscreen selection of appealing images of colorful salads presented in a counter of boxed classified under "deconstructed salad"! <sup>63</sup>

Christopher Smart seems to have known this long time back:

For I will consider my Cat Jeoffry.  
 For he is the servant of the Living God, duly and daily  
 serving him.  
 For at the first glance of the glory of God in the East he  
 worships in his way.  
 For he is of the Lord's poor, and so indeed is he called by  
 benevolence perpetually – Poor Jeoffry!  
 Poor Jeoffry! the rat has bit thy throat.  
 For I bless the name of the Lord Jesus that Jeoffry is better.  
 For the divine spirit comes about his body to sustain it in  
 complete cat. <sup>64</sup>

Humanism, theory, and "theory," all look to be complicit in presenting the Western critical show. It is indeed not easy to escape this "complete cat." No mouse-hole, no humanist resort, is going to give refuge from this ever-pursuing cat, or to bring about a transformation of this cat into a lion (Smart himself pins his hopes in the name of the Lord Jesus). But that assertion leads us to the overwhelming question – and unlike Eliot's Prufrock, I won't stop my reader from asking 'What is it?' It is whether *one really feels the need to escape the cat!* But this is a question that, as it is said in the prescript of this essay, I have kept at the frontiers of this essay.

<sup>63</sup> David Jonathan Y. Bayot (ed.), *Deconstruction after all: Reflections and Conversations by Christopher Norris* (Eastbourne: De La Salle University Publishing, 2015).

<sup>64</sup> Christopher Smart, *Jubilate Agno* (poem written in 1578), available at <https://www.poetryarchive.org/poem/my-cat-jeoffry>.

Indeed I might sound a bit Prufrockian in saying this – ‘here will be time...’  
– there will be time to address it.

### Postscript

This essay, to recall the words of T. S. Eliot at the end of “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” “proposes to halt at the frontier of metaphysics or mysticism, and confine itself to such practical conclusions as can be applied by the responsible person interested in poetry”<sup>65</sup> – and for my purpose, in literary theory and criticism. The statement may suggest that for Eliot, the domains of metaphysics or mysticism may have remained somewhat different from those of poetry and literary criticism and theory. While putting the question of escaping the cat in abeyance for now, I feel a promise in Rumi, whom I have cited through the marginalia, of a combination of metaphysics, mysticism, poetry, and also literary criticism and theory that may perhaps open a prospect of escaping from the cat, that I have said, I hope to find time later to explore. I leave my reader, and myself, with this promise.

By God, if you go into a mouse-hole,  
You will be afflicted by someone who has the claws of a  
cat.  
No corner is without wild beasts;  
There is no rest but in the place where you are alone with  
God.<sup>66</sup>

---

<sup>65</sup> T. S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” in T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1921).

<sup>66</sup> Rumi, *The Mathnawi*, II, 593-91.