

Barbara Johnson

Barbara Johnson | b. 1947–d. 2009

Barbara Johnson is known as a translator in various senses of the word. She is the celebrated translator of Jacques Derrida's *Dissemination* (1972; trans. 1981), and she is also one of the earliest and most interesting translators of structuralist and poststructuralist theory into literary insights. Often praised for her "lucidity" and "clarity," she has nevertheless emphasized, again and again, the unavailability and necessity of linguistic complexity and difficulty in formulating intractable problems. For her, language cannot be extricated from what is problematic; language is not simply *about* problems, it *participates in* them.

Born in 1947 near Boston, she was the first of four children. Her father was a school principal and her mother a librarian. She attended Oberlin College (1965–69), majoring in French, and completed a Ph.D. in French at Yale University in 1977. Her studies at Yale took place at a complicated intersection of politics and criticism: while the effects of the 1969 student strike against the Vietnam War and the trial of Black Panther Bobby Seale in New Haven lingered, the "Yale School" of academic literary theory was developing, and, around 1968, there had exploded onto the scene "French Theory"—a shorthand designation for structuralism and poststructuralism in many fields. The "Yale School" was the label by which the academic and popular press referred to a group of male literary critics (Paul de Man, Harold Bloom, Geoffrey Hartman, J. Hillis Miller) who were all interested in Romanticism and who often incorporated structuralist and poststructuralist perspectives in their work. At the same time, the works of Derrida, Jacques Lacan, and

other French theorists were gaining recognition, but because most had not yet been translated into English, French departments provided one of the first points of entry into the American academy for their revolutionary ideas. The challenge of translating between one context and another thus itself became part of the theoretical enterprise.

Johnson's work has been profoundly engaged with and by the work of a number of teachers and colleagues, both at Yale, where she taught French and comparative literature from 1977 to 1983, and at Harvard University, where she has taught French, comparative literature, and English since 1983: in particular, Paul de Man (her thesis director at Yale) and colleagues Shoshana Felman (at Yale), Henry Louis Gates Jr. (at both Yale and Harvard), and Marjorie Garber (at Harvard). Her first book, published in France in 1979, examined the prose poems of the nineteenth-century French writers Charles Baudelaire and Stéphane Mallarmé. Titled *Défigurations du langage poétique: la seconde révolution baudelairienne* (*Disfigurations of Poetic Language: The Second Baudelairean Revolution*), it analyzed the significance of Baudelaire's turn to prose after the publication of his one book of lyric verse, *Les Fleurs du mal* (*Flowers of Evil*). Johnson's second book, *The Critical Difference: Essays in the Contemporary Rhetoric of Reading* (1980), which ranged more widely over theory, quickly followed. The word *difference* in the title is meant to name two different conceptions of difference and the tension between them: binary difference in its traditional sense (prose and poetry, male and female, etc.), and Derridean *différance*, a nonidentity within each term that is concealed or repressed in the process of establishing opposition. Johnson named these "the difference between" and "the difference within," terms that have entered the critical lexicon.

The Critical Difference collected what might be called Johnson's first "allegories of theory": the essays focused on the process of finding in literary texts preoccupations that have become newly readable through new theoretical perspectives. Rather than viewing theory as something applied to the text, she contends that theoretical questions already inhabit the text. The theory can draw them out, and, perhaps, provide the means of analyzing the text's resistances to the very theory that illuminates it. Theory thus becomes a subset of literature: a process of formulating a knowledge the literary text is presumed to store. The key words of the theory are themselves *words*; they are therefore subject to the same play, seriousness, and instability that literary texts can give to all words. What constitutes "literature," however, is not fixed but constantly changing, a function of the kinds of questions asked of it: what

is “stored” in the text both is and isn’t in it. As the text and the theory interact, the two constantly shift ground. Johnson’s reading of Herman Melville’s *Billy Budd* sees Melville’s short novel as deeply preoccupied by the same issues about language that occupied Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) and J. L. Austin (1911–60). *Billy Budd* is a particularly good example of a text fissured by conflicting assumptions about words: the final revision was never finished by Melville, and competing versions of it have been published posthumously. Another well-known essay from *The Critical Difference*, “The Frame of Reference,” examines the influential analyses, by Lacan and Derrida, of Edgar Allan Poe’s story “The Purloined Letter” (1844) and meditates explicitly on the structure of mutual framing between text and theory.

In 1981 Johnson published her translation of Derrida’s *Dissemination*, with a much-cited introduction. In 1982 she edited an issue of *Yale French Studies* titled *The Pedagogical Imperative: Teaching as a Literary Genre*. In this collection of essays, such authors as Derrida, de Man, Felman, Jane Gallop, and Jean-François Lyotard explored not how to teach literary texts but how literature depicts teaching, and how “the literary” and “the pedagogical” are linked.

In 1980 a student introduced Johnson to the work of Zora Neale Hurston (1891–1960); aided by a series of conversations with Henry Louis Gates Jr., Johnson became one of the first scholars to apply French literary theory to African American texts. Hurston was a particularly productive novelist for this enterprise, since her rhetorical virtuosity and folkloric imagination were at odds with the kinds of realist texts that dominated the canon of African American literature. Feminists, prompted by the writer Alice Walker’s essays of the mid-1970s about Hurston’s importance to the literary tradition of black women, were beginning to rethink both the canon and canonical aesthetics through Hurston’s novels and folktales. The resultant boom in Hurston studies contributed to a change in African American studies itself, epitomized by Gates’s *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (1988). Johnson’s two essays on Hurston appear in her collection *A World of Difference* (1987), a book in which she attempts to think deconstructively about a wide set of questions. For example, the often-reprinted essay “Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion,” which ends the book, brings together in striking ways literature (lyric poetry) and law (the abortion debates).

In 1991 Johnson coedited a volume titled *Consequences of Theory*, whose contributors attempted to refute the notorious assertion, made by Stanley

Fish in his *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies* (1989), that theory has no consequences. There followed in 1993 *Freedom and Interpretation*, Johnson's edited volume of the Oxford Amnesty Lectures of 1992, part of a project designed to raise money for Amnesty International. The lecturers invited to Oxford that year had been asked by the organizers to address what happens to the idea of "human rights" in an age of the "deconstruction of the subject." Johnson's introduction attempts to analyze what is at stake in the question, especially when its two elements are viewed as not simply opposed. This volume belongs to the larger investigation of the relations between deconstruction and politics, a topic hotly debated at the time.

Johnson's own lectures on literary theory given at Bucknell University yielded *The Wake of Deconstruction* (1994), in which she discusses the questions deconstruction had both awakened and left in its wake, especially after the double "death" of Paul de Man (his literal death in 1983, followed by the revelation in 1987 of his collaborationist journalism). The two lectures, "Double Mourning and the Public Sphere" and "Women and Allegory," analyze the conflation of deconstruction, political correctness, and identity politics, which had all become strangely and wrongly linked in the public mind.

In the late 1990s, a series of attacks on feminism and on women's studies programs led Johnson to write about the status of ambivalence within oppositional movements. She argues in the introduction to *The Feminist Difference* (1998) that the trap of unanimity, even when called forth by a common target, is ultimately impoverishing except on specific and strategic occasions. The debates within feminism—among black and white feminists, among lesbians and heterosexuals, among women from different classes or different countries—had revealed that the strength of the feminist movement lay not in unity but in the ability to face differences and conflicts and still go on, and that it was the continued functioning of the powers being contested (even *within* feminists themselves) that made going on so difficult. The essays in *The Feminist Difference* take up the issues raised in the book's subtitle—*Literature, Psychoanalysis, Race, and Gender*—and are loosely structured around paired texts.

In describing the processes by which forces of uncertainty are institutionalized as certainties—and thus, as theories—Johnson once lamented that "nothing fails like success" (*A World of Difference*). The "linguistic turn" in the human sciences during the twentieth century has in some ways been superseded and critiqued, but Johnson remains unconvinced that the proj-

ect of accounting for the role of language can ever really become outmoded. We need to find, she implies, not something “beyond the linguistic turn” but a way to keep being surprised by it.

At Harvard University, Johnson has been named the Fredric Wertham Professor of Law and Psychiatry in Society, a title reflective of her ongoing interdisciplinary work. Like Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *Ancient Mariner*, whom she cites as a model teacher, she seems determined to repeat the story of the importance of language in widely differing contexts. But the lesson she derives from the *Mariner* about pedagogy is not simple: “Teaching,” she writes in her introduction to *The Pedagogical Imperative*, “is a compulsion to repeat what one has not yet understood.”

NOTES

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This biographical account, which originally appeared as the headnote accompanying Johnson’s entry in the *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, was written by Johnson in collaboration with the other editors of that anthology.