Jacques Derrida's phrase "Il n'y a pas de hors-texte"[1] builds upon the central theme in

post-structuralist work of de-centering theoretical systems. By delimiting a particular set of

information as part of the text, and excluding from analysis everything that is outside of this set,

we are essentially creating a center for the system. This goes against Derrida's fundamental

principle of post-structuralism, which is that a system should have no positive, centering terms.

Rather, a system is defined by a set of purely differential relationships which can be used to

explore meaning in a text. The idea that there should be no outside text severely weakens the

basic premises of New Criticism, American Reader-Response Theory and Structuralism. While

each of these movements changed and expanded the definition of the text, they all fall short of

Derrida's ideal: a theory in which there truly is no outside-text.

The idea that there is no outside-text is easily applied in a critique of New Criticism. The

basic premise of New Criticism is that one should study the text as an isolated entity, cut off

from any affective reader response and from any discussion of what the author intended. A New

Critical reading is automatically centered on the entity that a particular critic has chosen to

delimit as the literary text's body. A major weakness of this approach is that it continuously runs

into the practical challenge of how to frame a text, as many texts can be reinterpreted to include,

for example, the author's footnotes or a preceding work by the author. Wimsatt and Beardsley

(342-343) provide an instance of such a challenge in their discussion of T.S. Eliot's notes to his

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[1] "There is no ~~outside-text.~~"

own poems.[2] They conclude that it is acceptable to include those notes in an analysis of the

poetry; however, another critic could justify excluding these notes as separate from the poem.

The issue of framing also comes up in studying a collection of poetry. The critic can choose to

analyze each poem as a separate body of work, or could look for meaning in the entire set of

poems and their relationships to one another. If one chooses to consider the volume as a whole,

then it begs the question as to whether or not previous and subsequent works by the same author

should also be considered. Thus, the frame can be expanded by a simple reworking of the

definition of a literary text. Such definitional challenges expose one of the major weaknesses of

New Criticism: the seemingly trivial issue of framing the text can easily become a complex

problem with many ramifications for how meaning is derived from a text. Derrida hits on the

core of this problem with his assertion that there is nothing outside of the text, since there are a

seemingly limitless number of possible definitions of the text. Ultimately, it would be impossible

to define exhaustively what constituted the text for every literary work. Moreover, any possible

definition inherently leaves the situation vulnerable to a critical omission that would render an

analysis incomplete or flawed.

American Reader-Response theory presents a new frame in which one can analyze a

literary text. This frame sets out to consider not only the written work itself, but the reader's

responses to the work as well. Together, these two elements make up the metaphorical "text" in

Reader-Response Theory. Stanley Fish, a proponent of this theory, emphasizes how sentences

are constructed to evoke certain reader reactions.[3] He then analyzes what insights these reactions

reveal about the meaning of the text. These allowances for a reader's reaction seem at first to be

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[2] W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy" from W.K. Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (1954).
[3] Stanley Fish, "Literature in the Reader" from *Is There a Text in This Class?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980): 23-25.

an incorporation of something outside of the text; however, Derrida has reminded us that there is no outside-text. Perhaps the reader's response is best interpreted as something which is part of the text itself; i.e. the text is written to evoke a particular response and so it is not important that the reader is collaboratively establishing meaning in the text, but rather that the text itself creates the possibility for this action. This blurs the line between New Criticism and Reader-Response theory, because now anything that was considered to be the reader's reaction is simply re-interpreted as a part of the text, and the distinction between the theories is lost. This extends the notion that there is no outside-text, since it demonstrates how something that seems to be beyond the text (the reader's reaction) can be interpreted as a part of the text itself.

Structuralism took a large step towards the Derridan notion that there is no outside text by embracing the relationships between various elements in a text and stressing the commonalities of structure between literary works. This emphasis expands the notion of a text, so that it can be analyzed in the context of other, similar works instead of strictly limiting oneself to one work. Claude Levi-Strauss's "The Structural Study of Myth" provides a good example of this type of analysis. Levi-Strauss explains that his analysis of the structural laws of myths can and should consider all variants of a myth. However, Levi-Strauss recognizes that "the task is impossible to perform since we can only work with known versions."[4] He justifies this omission in his work by saying that the need to study all variants of a myth "becomes theoretical as soon as a reasonably large number [of myths] have been recorded."[5] Placing Levi-Strauss's ideas in the context of Derrida's theory, Levi-Strauss seems to assert that while there may be no theoretical notion of an outside-text, there is a practical requirement for one. Furthermore, this

[4] Claude Levi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth" from *Structural Anthropology* (New York: Anchor Books): 214.
[5] Claude Levi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth": 214.

practical limitation is not an important weakness of the theory, because an analysis of myths could be sufficient even if it fails to include every myth.

Derrida expands upon and contradicts Levi-Strauss's theory by arguing that not only is there no theoretical notion of an outside-text, the practical requirement for one *is* a critical weakness. Derrida proceeds to evaluate many structuralist works based on what they failed to include, and what these omissions of the theory reveal about the theory itself. A prime example of this technique is Derrida's critique of Levi-Strauss's theory of incest.[6] Levi-Strauss begins by presenting two opposing concepts: nature, which contains anything universal and spontaneous, and culture, which depends on a system of norms regulating society and varies from one social structure to another. Next, Levi-Strauss introduces incest as a scandal because it defies definition under one of the nature/culture categories. It seems to be part of nature *and* culture. Levi-Strauss resolves this by interpreting incest as something which lies on the border between nature and culture. He sees the limitations of the nature/culture opposition, yet he persists in using it as a useful, though imperfect, tool.[7]

Derrida points out that "there is no scandal except in the *interior* of a system of concepts sanctioning the difference between nature and culture."[8] This reveals a basic tenet of Derrida's philosophy of criticism. First, one must identify the limits of the system, the items that initially seems to be outside the text because they do not fit into the framework presented by the text. Levi-Strauss did this when he presented incest. Second, Derrida recommends that the critique undertake a systematic questioning of the history of the concepts that incest seems to contradict. Levi-Strauss fails to take this second step, and instead he cobbles together his theory by asserting

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[6] Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" from Macksey and Donato ed., *The Structuralist Controversy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970): 499-501.
[7] Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966): 3.
[8] Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences": 500.

that incest is the link between nature and culture. Essentially, Levi-Strauss has found something which is outside of the usual nature/culture "text" and re-interpreted it by grafting it onto the previous structure. This movement is not radical enough for Derrida. It has recognized the need to eliminate the outside-text, but it has not found a robust way of doing so. Instead, Derrida argues that the fact that incest is impossible to define within the nature/culture opposition is indicative of a weakness in the system. It is not enough merely to ignore incest as an unimportant outlier or to try to graft it on to the current system. Rather, one must challenge the very concepts that constructed incest as an outlier. By not allowing for the existence of something which is truly outside of the text, Derrida forces the deconstruction of theories such as the nature/culture opposition Levi-Strauss presented us with.

Having followed through with Derrida's instruction that there is no outside-text, we are left with a serious critique of many major movements in literary theory: New Criticism, American Reader-Response Theory and Structuralism. The question remains, having criticized these movements as poor theoretical frameworks, how can we construct a theory that is immune to Derrida's attack? Derrida's answer to this question is far from clear. What we are left with is "freeplay,"[9] but what freeplay looks like is difficult to define. A purely de-centered, deconstructed system for which there truly is no outside-text is difficult, if not impossible, to imagine. As Levi-Strauss pointed out, it would have been an empirical impossibility to fully analyze all possible myths in the construction of his theory; there seems to be some practical limit to what can be a part of one's "text."[10] Perhaps then the value of Derrida's idea that there is no "outside-text" is in its critique of other works. Derrida has demonstrated time and again that what is neglected as unimportant or inconsistent with a system is critical to understanding the

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[9] Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences": 508.
[10] Claude Levi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth": 214.

limitations of a system. By looking at what has been constructed as outside of a text, one can see the weaknesses of a theory; this is because in a perfect textual analysis, there would be no outside-text. The theory would be limitless in its applicability. Until such a theory is concretely conceived of, Derrida has left us with a tool for understanding the shortcomings of the imperfect frameworks literary theorists have employed to find meaning in texts.

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