The problem of genre in Beowulf has long been subject to intense scholarly debate. The remarkable diversity of the poem’s generic makeup allows for a wide range of interpretations, which argue both for and against the traditional definition of Beowulf as heroic epic. The generic aspects to which the critics assign primary importance in the poem include fairy tale, elegy, heroic lay, oral-formulaic poetry, historical and legendary narrative, and Christian allegory (Tolkien 28; Irving 7; Earl 134; Greenfield 126; Klein 141). This essay will discuss the possibility of reading Beowulf as a romance.

Besides providing new insights into the relationship between modern critical approaches to interpretation and medieval texts, reading Beowulf as a romance also has practical significance for current genre scholarship. First, it questions the assumption that genre is a uniform category. This means questioning the validity of analyzing a work of literature in terms of its predominant generic component alone, as the traditional definition of Beowulf as epic implies. Second, it calls for reconsideration of literary genre as a category inextricably tied to a particular historical period, since the romance aspects of Beowulf predate the emergence of continental romance by at least two centuries.1 The claim that genre is a flexible category both in terms of historical period and formal features has an important consequence for the practice of literary interpretation: it allows critical approaches traditionally conceived of as modern to be used, with some modifications, for reading medieval texts.

If epic can be described as a narrative of society, then romance is a
narrative of the individual. The plot of *Beowulf* presents a fictive history of a nation and is in this sense “epic.” However, the plot also resembles an archetypal quest story, of the sort that reaches its apogee in the courtly literature of the High Middle Ages—a story with elements of fantasy. The motif of adventure in which the protagonist fights monsters as well as human opponents and performs other deeds of valor is widespread in medieval romance.

Another characteristic feature of romance that we find in *Beowulf* is the internalization of the adventure. The narrative action focuses not just on the protagonist’s exploits but also on his state of mind, his motivation and the moral implications of his actions. The evidence from other literary works typically defined as “epic” shows less moral ambiguity than their romance counterparts. For example, in the *Iliad* the primary purpose of representing fighting is to reflect remarkable legendary events, not to pass a value judgment on them (this does not mean that these events stand outside moral categories, however). In the *gestes*, the connection is more explicit in that the line of division between the fighting parties lies in their religious or political beliefs—yet the fighters still represent unquestionably good or evil causes. Roland slaughters his opponents and his actions are always regarded as meritorious because they are enemies of the king and the faith, whereas the view of warfare in *Beowulf* is not nearly as unambiguous and clear-cut.

In this regard my reading of *Beowulf* as romance agrees with Michael Lapidge’s view of the poem as a work distinctly separate from heroic narrative. He argues that this separation is achieved through ambiguity of meaning as a narrative device—the principle that I will refer to as interpretive plurality.

If it is the first concern of heroic poetry to tell of action, to make its primary appeal through story and to avoid symbolic language, then I submit that Beowulf is in no sense a heroic poem . . . On the contrary, *Beowulf* is very much taken up with reflection—on human activity and conduct, on the transience of human life—and it is couched throughout in language that is characteristically oblique and allusive. (Lapidge 373–74)

The high level of subjectivity, however, and the author’s pronounced interest in the characters’ psychology entail more than the superficial resemblance *Beowulf* bears to romance in terms of content. These two features generate a frame of reference that differs significantly from that of the epic—the frame of reference defined by the narrator’s
consciousness of the creative process. The distinction between epic and romance is thus here conceived of not as the “more realistic and logical vs. more abstract and artificial” distinction that W. P. Ker posits in his book *Epic and Romance* (Ker 29–30), but in terms of the function of literary representation in the public vs. private sphere. Our analysis will therefore focus on issues of writing/composing, and reading and interpretation as crucial to the theme of *Beowulf* and vital to the romance sensibility in general.

In romance the hero’s character is central. To understand this character it is crucial to read and interpret the hero’s words and actions. Furthermore, being aware of the fictional nature of his work, the author of romance attaches particular importance to the act of composition and writing—to such an extent that he allows his characters to share in the creative aspect of this process. Romance represents the individual as both the object and the subject of literary production: he is the hero and the creator of his own story, as well as a contributor to the larger narrative of his culture. As a consequence, romance characters are often found listening to and telling stories—stories about themselves and others. (Examples of such stories can be found in Arthurian romances, such as Wolfram’s *Parzival*; the narratives of Orgeluse or Trevrizent; Chrétien’s *Yvain*: the narratives of Calogrenant, Lunete, etc.) It can be noted that *Beowulf* abounds with such stories, from the protagonist’s monologue accounts of his exploits to extended legendary narratives.

It is also more typical of romance than of epic of the Middle Ages to concern itself with the critical appreciation of literary production. Hence the explicit valuation in medieval romance of the aesthetic quality of a narrative, as well as emphasis on the art of narration and expressing oneself in general (see, for example, the authorial digressions on literature in *Parzival* and *Tristan*). A number of examples can be found in *Beowulf*. The narrator praises the bard who performs the Song of Creation at the feast in Hrothgar’s hall. More elaborate is the poet’s characterization of the courtier’s story of Beowulf and Sigemund (866–73). This characterization is in effect a piece of literary criticism of a kind that would later emerge more fully in works like Gottfried’s *Tristan*. The criteria by which the narrative is evaluated are similar in both instances: clarity, eloquence, stylistic precision and narrative authority. The recognition of a narrative as a work of art is reflected in the language that the *Beowulf* poet uses to describe the process of poetic composition. According to some critics, the metaphor “wordum wrixlan” that appears in reference to
the courtier’s manner of presentation is reminiscent of the ornaments found on many Anglo-Saxon artifacts of that period. This analogy, as well as similar metaphorical evidence, led to the suggestion that Anglo-Saxon poetics recapitulates the decorative technique of interlace, typical of contemporary early medieval art (Leyerle 146–58; Overing xv). This parallel between literary and visual arts implies that the stories told by the characters of *Beowulf* function not just as historical accounts or legendary tales. In addition to fulfilling an edifying or ideological purpose, they are understood as examples of individualized artistic expression.

Compared to most narratives preserved from the oral-formulaic and epic stage, the individuality of authorship in the stories of *Beowulf*, as mentioned above, is an innovation. The narratives of *Beowulf*, *Hrothgar*, and a number of others break with the convention of epic anonymity by establishing the authorial or critical “I” and by mediating the story through an interpreter or creator. In medieval fiction this individuality is introduced by, and is essential to, the romance genre. In romance the narrator often announces himself in the beginning of the story and reminds the audience of his presence by comments and digressions in the course of the action. Highly subjective interpretations of stories—and sometimes the same story—by various narrators is a characteristic of *Beowulf*. The narratives that emerge as a result of these interpretations serve as portraits of the narrators.

The scene of Beowulf’s appearance at Hrothgar’s court is a case in point. Beowulf’s address to Hrothgar (405–55) can be read as an adventure story. The action of this story takes place in the past, present, and future, and the chronological frame calls for the story’s division into a prologue, main part, and epilogue. In the introduction, to establish his credentials in the king’s eyes, Beowulf briefly recounts his military accomplishments. However, with the transition from the past to the present, the tone of his narrative changes abruptly: pride and confidence yield to humility and discretion. Although his exploits are impressive, and he understands the desperate plight of the Danes, Beowulf suddenly humbles himself and asks Hrothgar the favor to allow him to fight Grendel. Beowulf is careful not to injure the prestige of Hrothgar and the honor of the Danes, who hitherto have been incapable of defending themselves. He reinforces this diplomatic stance by entrusting his fate to God’s judgment, thus diminishing his prospective merit in the event of victory and attributing it to the divine intervention. The progress of
the narrative from the present to the future is marked by yet another change of tone. The language of the epilogue becomes particularly intense and dramatic: Beowulf concludes his narrative with a graphic description of his possible demise at Grendel’s hands and gives Hrothgar detailed instructions regarding the burial of his body. As a whole, Beowulf’s speech recapitulates the structure of a heroic lay similar to those sung in Hrothgar’s hall: it includes the enumeration of the character’s exploits, the tale of his most famous deed, and the account of his heroic death. Beowulf’s narrative address to Hrothgar differs, however, from these lays in that the main character is also the narrator who outlines the story that he wishes to be told about himself in the future, a story that will occupy its place among the narratives of his culture, and, according to the metaphor discussed above, be integrated into the larger narrative of his people.

Hrothgar’s reply to Beowulf (455–90) is indicative of the same conception of authorship. His formal welcome of Beowulf largely amounts to a narrative of his own life. He briefly recounts the history of his reign and the relations between the Danes and the Geats in which he himself played a prominent role by settling the feud of Beowulf’s father.

Beowulf’s descriptions of his fight with Grendel, which he gives first at Hrothgar’s court (955–79) and then at Hygelac’s (2070–150), become suspenseful tales in which the author is also the main character. By relating his own heroic deeds, Beowulf creates an especially vivid personal account of these exploits, thus assuring the attention of his audience. As Seth Lerer shows in his discussion of Beowulf’s report to Hygelac, the making of an adventure story demands a considerable stylization of the narrative material (Lerer 721–51). Beowulf’s descent into the haunted mere where Grendel and his mother live is reminiscent of a similar motif in Arthurian literature: the knight’s journey on his errand to a *terra dissimilitudinis*, a journey from the center of civilization to its margins. The discrepancy between the dangerous and often terrifying aspects of the journey and the appeal of this journey story to the audience is resolved through fictionalization. Incorporated into a story, the perilous aspects of the journey become too far removed from the immediate reality, so that the effect they produce is that of fascination, not terror. Beowulf thus “decontextualizes” the gory details of his fight with Grendel in order to transform them into a lively tale of adventure, appropriate to the courtly setting. Seth Lerer compares Beowulf to a romance storyteller further in his essay:
Beowulf’s speech at Hygelac’s court represents a species of social entertain-
ment: an attempt to turn heroic action and horrific violence into humor
and self-deprecation, much like the self-accounts presented by the heroes
of romance, who, in turning past actions into present words, transfer a
physical ordeal into conventions of poetic eloquence and thereby signal
their return to civilization from the wilderness. (Lerer 722)

This interpretation is consistent with the Foucauldian view of epic
as a narrative of destruction, and romance as one of restoration, of
the body. Beowulf’s account of his adventure is an “edited and
adapted” fictional counterpart to the tragic reality of Grendel’s
attacks on Heorot. He thus counterbalances the actual destruction
and loss of lives that Grendel causes by providing a “playful” narrative
relief (Lerer 737).

A similar shift of focus, in which physical violence becomes
replaced by its verbal counterpart and tension becomes concentrated
in the exchange of words rather than blows, takes place during the
altercation between Beowulf and Unferth (500–606). In her analysis
of the structure and style of this episode, Carol Clover defines the
confrontation between Beowulf and Unferth as a classic example of
Germanic flyting. The art of verbal argument is crucial to the genre
of flyting, in which success depends solely on the opponents’ rhetori-
cal skills and the accuracy of their statements:

Far from being ‘unfounded taunts,’ flyting charges are . . . deadly accurate:
the art of the boast lies in creating, within the limitations of the facts, the
best possible version of the event; and the art of the insult lies in creating,
within the limitations of the facts, the worst possible version of the event.
This particular kind of wrangling, with its use of miniature stories from the
past, its contest form, and its almost legalistic method, is a defining
characteristic of the flyting and distinguishes Germanic practice from
similar traditions. (Clover 459)

The flyting episode is central to the understanding of the poem as
a romance in two respects. First, it demonstrates subjectivity of
interpretation in action and illustrates the idea of individualized
authorship. Each of the opponents has his own story to tell regarding
the same event, and these two stories are strikingly different. Second,
the conflict is devoid of physical violence. The peaceful resolution is
reconfirmed by Unferth’s lending Beowulf his sword for the battle
with Grendel’s mother. Thus the poem diverges from a typically epic
narrative pattern in which the confrontation between the protagonist
and a challenger who accuses him of being cowardly or arrogant leads
to violence or produces a situation where violence has to be suppressed by the interference of an authority figure: Thersites is upbraided and beaten by Odysseus in the *Iliad* (2: 211–77); Siegfried’s brawl with Ortwin in the *Nibelungenlied* would have ended in a fight but for the intervention of Gernot (NL 3: 116–20); Ganelon swears vengeance to Roland in the presence of Charlemagne and the peers (*Chanson de Roland* 277–326). In contrast, the key component in the conflict between Beowulf and Unferth is not drama, but irony. Unferth openly mocks Beowulf, who responds in kind, assuming the same sarcastic attitude toward his opponent, but neither antagonist goes beyond verbal argument. The tone of their altercation has more in common with the comic exchange between Sir Kay and Yvain in Chrétien’s *Yvain* (590–648) than with the “epic” confrontations of open emotional intensity. Here again the Foucauldian idea of the connection between literary genres and the discourse of the body comes into play. The quality of romance as a genre of restoration finds its literal manifestation in the dialogue between Beowulf and Unferth. Heated emotions are transferred to words instead of actions; the goal of the debate is to inflict moral rather than physical damage on the opponent. The contest between Beowulf and Unferth is as much for discursive authority as it is for power or dominance—since it is this authority that determines the winner in the power struggle. Beowulf emerges victorious from this conflict of narratives, because he has the last word. By defeating a *byle*—which many scholars interpret as “court orator”—Beowulf proves himself the winner not only in the sphere of military accomplishments, but also in the field of rhetoric.

The three accounts of the Swedish-Geatish wars can be interpreted along similar lines. In light of the epic principle of narrative economy, the inclusion in the poem of three versions of the same story appears exceptional. These three versions can, however, be read as three different points of view, providing interpretive plurality. In his discussion of these accounts, Stanley Greenfield identifies the main theme of each. In his view, the *Beowulf* poet’s commentary is dominated by the theme of survival, Beowulf’s monologue by the theme of revenge, and the Messenger’s speech by the theme of presumption and rewards (Greenfield 121–24). The poet’s commentary appears to be the most impartial of the three. It merely “recapitulates the engagements Beowulf has lived through since he cleansed Heorot of the Grendel clan . . .” in order to bridge the chronological gap between the two parts of the poem. The account presented by Beowulf is
openly pro-Geatish: Beowulf “explicitly blames the sons of Ongentheow for the beginning of northern hostilities.” Finally, the Messenger’s statement is the antithesis of the view endorsed by his late king. He regards “the outcome of the action as a result of Hygelac’s arrogance in making the raid; and in his account of the Swedish-Geatish feud he finds the Geats presumptuous and causa belli.”

In an environment of interpretive plurality, Beowulf tries to assert his narrative authority over the other storytellers. Even if there is no need to “correct” a deprecating narrative, he endeavors to complement and reinforce a laudatory one. He juxtaposes his own tale of his fight with Grendel with the praise poem of the courtier, in which he is indirectly compared to Sigemund and Heremod, the most renowned heroes of his culture. Furthermore, as a creator and shaper of his story, Beowulf asserts and demonstrates that in the most important narratives of his life he is not just the main character but also the only character. These considerations may be related to his decision to confront the dragon alone, without his subjects’ aid. By refusing help, he determines the scene and content of the future tale about his deeds, regardless of whether or not he survives to tell it as a participant of the narrative effort. Beowulf is thus very conscious of his status as a potential narrator and of his participation in the action: the story of fighting the dragon must be his own story, both in terms of literal involvement and literary authorship. As in romance, where both the knight’s quest and his relation of it are deeply personal experiences, the account of Beowulf’s fight with the dragon may have only one protagonist. Viewed in this light, the idea that pride is the cause of his fall may have to be reconsidered. As Edward B. Irving maintains, “Beowulf is not ‘foolish’ or ‘arrogant’ . . . [in telling] his men to wait well out of range of this battle. He is quite right to do so; they are out of range. It is not their sið, not their adventure; it is one that belongs only to the dragon and himself, a dual and not a plural” (Irving 109–10).

The problem of pride as a possible major factor in Beowulf’s destruction, or the contradictions in the accounts of the Swedish-Geatish wars, are only a few of the many issues that arise in the process of deciphering the message of the poem. The interpretive plurality that governs the relations between the characters and events in Beowulf becomes the key to the reader’s perception of the text. If the protagonist is engaged in a quest for glory, the audience is engaged in a quest for meaning. Unlike many epics, with their usually uninterrupted linear structure and clearly defined central idea,
Beowulf abounds with inserted narratives, digressions, and intentionally ambiguous passages. As Larry D. Benson argues, it is these digressions that “establish the context within which Beowulf acts out his destiny” (Benson 34–35). In this respect the generic makeup of Beowulf closely approaches that of romance, since, as I have argued above, romance is particularly open to a multiplicity of interpretations.

The intricate web of meaning in the poem also illuminates the assumptions of modern critical theory about the interpretation of literary texts. For example, the function of multiple narratives in the poem is reminiscent of the Derridean claim that the meaning of the text is enacted through the phenomenon of difféance. For the purpose of my discussion, I will use the ideas of difference and deferral as they converge in the original concept of difféance. The characters’ stories in the poem can be regarded as signs in that they “function systematically” in the system of social signification, analogously to what Thomas Shippey describes as the function of weapons or gifts (Shippey 43). This “systematic function” implies that the meaning of the poem emerges from the relationship between its parts—the parts to a large extent represented by numerous embedded narratives that differ from each other in content and emphasis.

The curiously “unfocused” compositional organization of Beowulf renders the process of the poem’s interpretation potentially infinite, and is thus responsible for the endless deferral of the meaning of the poem. The task of interpreting this text is all the more difficult in view of what Theodore M. Andersson defines as the poem’s “mutability”: “No sooner is one mood established than it is superseded by its opposite. Hope gives way to disappointment, joy to grief, and vice versa” (Andersson 225). The complex interlace of concepts and ideas in the poem is effected through two important formal features: appositive style and metonymy. Both are based on the principles of difference and deferral. The techniques of apposition and metonymy help to locate the meaning of the text in the syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations (or differences) of the components to each other and to the text as a whole. Furthermore, they prove instrumental in the deferral of this meaning, since the number of relations that can be established between these parts is endless because of “free play” of differences between signs.

In his elaborate analysis of the poem’s appositive style, Fred C. Robinson shows how the authorial value judgment and belief system become reflected through juxtapositions of events, characters, or
their qualities. (Robinson 25). From the structural point of view, it can consist of either apposition of singular attributes, or juxtaposition of larger formal units, such as independent narratives. For example, the stories of Sigemund and Heremod (875–915), one immediately following the other, and both preceded by the tale of Beowulf’s fight with Grendel (said to have been performed first), incorporate the narrative of Beowulf into the legendary narrative of the past and provide some important insights into Beowulf’s character. Sigemund’s feat is paralleled by Beowulf’s killing of Grendel, and foreshadows Beowulf’s confrontation with the dragon. Sigemund’s opposite is Heremod, a powerful and heroic but inordinately proud king, whose ambition proved his undoing. The placing together of the names of Beowulf and Heremod is significant. Although the similarity between the two is explicitly denied, the passage contains a warning about the dire consequences of pride, a warning that Beowulf disregards later when preparing to fight the dragon.

He þær eallum weard,  
mæg Higelaces manna cynne,  
freondum gefægra; hine fyren onwod. (912–14)

(Hygelac’s kinsman [Beowulf] was more valued by all men, and dearer to friends. Sins/violent deeds were his [Heremod’s] undoing).

Gillian Overing develops Robinson’s approach by broadening the category of apposition and discussing the “controlling presence” of metonymy in Beowulf. Her commentary on the crucial function of metonymic elements in the text presents a Derridean antithesis to J. R. R. Tolkien’s view of the poem as a system of binary oppositions, “a balance . . . of ends and beginnings,” a poem of contrasts between “risings and settings . . . youth and age, first achievement and final death” (Tolkien 26). Overing instead proposes to regard the seeming “lack of structure” in the poem as a deliberate literary strategy that creates “a discourse mode without a center, one that functions without fixed, privileged reference points, or a ‘transcendental signifier . . .’” (Overing 6).

Connected to the notion of difference as a primary source of meaning in the poem is the poststructuralist claim that the meaning of the text should be sought on its margins rather than in the central narrative. In light of this claim, the numerous narrative digressions can be regarded as the principal source of information about the ethical stance of the author and the ideological message of the poem.
For example, the Ingeld/Freawaru episode offers a critique of political alliances formed through matrimonial ties; the Finn episode, related in the middle of a feast at Hrothgar’s hall, emphasizes the tragic nature of violent blood feuds; it also alludes to the future strife within the Danish royal house and Hrothulf’s usurping of the throne. Much of the ominous effect in this instance is created by contrast with the bright and cheerful environment and circumstances of the poem’s recitation. Raymond P. Tripp, Jr. has discussed digressions as an important interpretive tool in *Beowulf*:

The poet’s digressiveness, thus, emerges in the context of an increasingly internalized world as the means of registering his new understanding of human action, and telling us what he thinks are essential facts of life and what men can do about them . . . it is through digressing that our poet presents the values and perspectives through which the more actional parts of his poem . . . are to be understood . . . their relationship to the “central fable” is not structural, but modal . . . They work to qualify, to redefine the action before the audience, . . . to desynonymize it from the pagan action. (Tripp 64–65)

Some additional examples of difference and deferral that are indicative of the similarities between *Beowulf* and later medieval romance in terms of generic structure can be found in the beginning and final scenes of the poem. Unlike epic, which usually begins in medias res, *Beowulf* recounts a detailed prehistory of the main events, a prehistory similar to that often found in romances and serving as a prologue. Such prehistories may include the character’s lineage, as in Chrétien’s *Cligès* or the *Guillaume d’Angleterre*, perhaps by Chrétien, in Gottfried’s *Tristan* and Wolfram’s *Parzival*; they may also contain a description of the character and the situation that prompted him to undertake the quest.

One of the most remarkable features of the introduction in *Beowulf* is that the narrative of the hero begins, and continues for a long time, in the absence of that hero. Beowulf’s arrival on the scene is anticipated but deferred. The rhetoric of anticipation becomes apparent in the description of Scyld’s reign, death and funeral, which establishes a prototype for the reign of Beowulf, and the naming of King Beowulf of the Danes. However, the appearance of the protagonist himself is not announced until line 193, when we see him boarding a ship and preparing to sail to Hrothgar’s aid. Moreover, even after Beowulf enters the narrative, he still travels nameless for some time. He finally reveals his name, and his full identity, in line 343, when introducing himself to Wulfgar. Deferral of identification
is not uncommon among romance characters. Such is, for example, the case with many heroes in Parzival, where the act of naming has a profound symbolic significance and where the characters’ proper names are seldom revealed immediately after their introduction.

The rhetoric of deferral manifests itself with particular clarity in the concluding scenes of the poem. The narrative of the Geats does not end with the death of Beowulf; on the contrary, a new chapter of this narrative immediately begins, with Wiglaf as Beowulf’s successor and the main character. In the meantime, definitive judgment on Beowulf’s last deed is never pronounced. It is unclear whether Beowulf’s heroic death is a triumph of valor and spirit or a tragedy of pride:

Biowulf’s share of that kingly treasure was paid for by death. Each of them [combatants] had reached the end of this transitory life.

Beowulf’s conquest of the hoard is in vain—the gold that he receives as a trophy is to burn with him on the pyre. He freed his subjects from the dragon, but now they are left without rule and protection, threatened by a hostile invasion. The Messenger, who brings the news of Beowulf’s death to his people, glorifies the deeds of his slain king, yet also prophecies ruin for the Geats—a ruin that is inevitable following the death of their leader and defender. The fundamental discrepancy between Beowulf’s loyalty to his people and the demands of his ambition is finalized in the very last line of the poem, which describes him as both most kind and most eager for fame. This characterization juxtaposes the mortal sin—vainglory—and the highest virtue—charity—and leaves the task of resolving this dilemma to the audience. With the end of Beowulf’s adventure the quest of the reader begins—the quest for reading and understanding the poem’s ideological message.

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NOTES

1 Dating Beowulf remains highly contentious, with suggestions ranging from the mid-8th to the early 11th centuries. Even if we assume the latest possible date—the 11th century—the poem would still have been composed much earlier than the first continental romances.

3 The principle of différence has been used by poststructuralist scholars as the key concept to interpreting literary texts, although originally it was not confined to the domain of literature but systems of representation in general. This term was introduced by Jacques Derrida to include both spatial and temporal ideas of difference and deferral, respectively. The meaning of a text, according to Derrida, emerges from a ‘play of differences’ between its parts; this “play” is possible because a text consists of signs and because one sign differs from another. The process of finding such a meaning is endlessly deferred because a sign that represents an object (in this case, the meaning) defers the appearance of this object. According to Derrida, “. . . this principle of difference, as the condition for signification, affects the totality of the sign, that is the sign as both signified and signifier. The signified is the concept, the ideal meaning; and the signifier is what Saussure calls the “image,” the “physical imprint” of a material, physical—for example, acoustical—phenomenon . . . The signified concept is never present in and of itself, in a sufficient presence that would refer only to itself. Essentially and lawfully, every concept is inscribed in a chain or in a system within which it refers to the other; to other concepts by means of a systematic play of differences. Such a play, différence, is thus no longer simply a concept, but rather the possibility of conceptuality, of a conceptual process and system in general . . . ” (125). Furthermore, referring to necessary plurality of meaning: “. . . we must conceive of a play in which whoever loses wins, and in which one loses and wins on every turn . . . différence maintains our relationship with that which we necessarily misconstrue, and which exceeds the alternative of presence and absence” (131–32).

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