In the Introduction to his 2020 collection of essays, *Serious Noticing*, the eminent literary critic James Wood talks about how he has always sought to be "a threefold critic—writerly, journalistic, scholarly." He elaborates this as follows: "I like the idea of a criticism that tries to do three things at once: speaks about fiction as writers speak about their craft; writes criticism journalistically, with verve and appeal, for a common reader; and bends this criticism back towards the academy in the hope of influencing the kind of writing that is done there."

In the following excerpt, Wood explains the scholarly critical tradition and the journalistic tradition, respectively, both of which he appreciates to a certain extent and both of which he finds inadequate. While we do not have time to engage with the writerly aspect, let's focus on the other two aspects, which constitute the commendable triple criticism after all.

Read the excerpt carefully and write a coherent and well-structured essay to analyze each of the two modes of criticism. You must show that you understand the gist of each mode: Why is one called "deconstructive" and the other "evaluative"? How does each mode work? What are the limitations of each mode, according to Wood? Or, why does he say both modes "are interestingly narrow, and their narrowness mirrors each other"? Do you agree?

Refrain from quoting the original text verbatim; try to paraphrase or summarize in your own words. Feel free to use examples you can think of to support your point. (Length requirement: 250 words minimum)

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(From James Wood, *Serious Noticing*)

I was taught how to read novels and poems by a brilliant poststructuralist critic called Stephen Heath. I have an image in my mind of Dr. Heath holding a sheet of paper—the hallowed "text"—very close to his eyes, the physical proximity somehow the symbolic embodiment of his scrutinizing avidity, while he threw out his favorite question about a paragraph or stanza: "what's at *stake* in this passage?" He meant something more specific, professionalized and narrow than the colloquial usage would generally imply. He meant something like: what is the dilemma of meaning in this passage? What is at stake in maintaining the appearance of coherent meaning, in this performance we call literature? How is meaning wobbling, threatening to collapse into its repressions? Dr. Heath was appraising literature as Freud might have studied one of his patients, where "What is at stake for you in being here?" did not mean "What is at stake for you in wanting to get healthy or happy?" but almost the opposite: "What is at stake for you in maintaining your chronic unhappiness?" The enquiry is suspicious, though not necessarily hostile.

This way of reading could broadly be called deconstructive. Put simply, deconstruction proceeds on the assumption that literary texts, like people, have an unconscious that frequently betrays them: they say one thing but mean another thing. Their own figures of speech (metaphors, images, figurative turns of phrase) are the slightly bent keys to their unlocking. The critic can unravel—deconstruct—a text by reading it as one might read a Freudian slip. And just as an awareness of how people unconsciously defend and betray themselves enriches our ability to comprehend them, so a similar awareness enriches our comprehension of a piece of literature. Instead of agreeing with people's self-assessments, we learn how to read them in a stealthy and contrary manner, brushing them against their own grain.

At university, I began to understand that a poem or novel might be self-divided, that its intentions might be beautifully lucid but its deepest motivations helplessly contradictory. Indeed, deconstruction tends to

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specialize in—perhaps over-emphasize—the ways in which texts contradict themselves: how, say, *The Tempest* is at once anti-colonialist in aspiration and colonialist in assumption; or how Jane Austen's novels are both proto-feminist and patriarchally structured; or how the great novels of adultery, like *Anna Karenina* and *Madame Bovary* and *Effi Briest*, dream of female transgression but simultaneously enforce punishment for that transgression. Critical intelligence is made more complex and sophisticated by an awareness that literature is an always-frail ideological achievement, only ever a sentence away from dissolution. My own reading of literature was permanently altered by this new understanding, and my critical instincts (especially when teaching) are still often deconstructive.

But alongside Dr. Heath's question lies the looser, perhaps more generous usage preferred by writers and interested readers. When a book reviewer, or someone in a creative writing workshop, or a fellow author complains, "I just couldn't see what was *at stake* in the book," or "I see that this issue matters to the writer, but she didn't manage to make me feel that it was *at stake* in the novel," a different statement is also being made about meaning. The common implication here is that meaning has to be earned, that a novel or poem creates the aesthetic environment of its importance. A novel in which the stakes are felt to be too low is one that has failed to make a case for its seriousness. Writers are fond of the idea of earned stakes and unearned stakes; a book that hasn't earned its effects doesn't deserve any success.

I'm struck by the differences between these two usages. Both are central to their relative critical discourses; each is close to the other and yet also quite far apart. In Stakes 1 (let's call it), the text's success is suspiciously scanned, with the expectation, perhaps hope, that the piece of literature under scrutiny will turn out to be productively unsuccessful. In Stakes 2, the text's success is anxiously searched for, with the assumption that the piece of literature's lack of success cannot be productive for reading, but simply renders the book not worth picking up. The first way of reading is non-evaluative, at least at the level of craft or technique; the second is only evaluative, and wagers everything on technical success, on questions of craft and aesthetic achievement. Stakes 1 presumes incoherence; Stakes 2 roots for coherence. Both modes are interestingly narrow, and their narrowness mirrors each other.

Not to think about literature evaluatively is not to think like a writer—it cuts literature off from the instincts and ambitions of the very people who created it. But to think only in terms of evaluation, in terms of craft and technique—to think only of literature as a settled achievement—favors those categories at the expense of many different kinds of reading (chiefly, the great interest of reading literature as an always *un*settled achievement). To read only suspiciously (Stakes 1) is to risk becoming a cynical detective of the word; to read only evaluatively (Stakes 2) is to risk becoming a naïf of meaning, a connoisseur of local effects, someone who brings the standards of a professional guild to bear on the wide, unprofessional drama of meaning.