

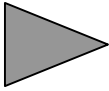
THE UNREACHABLE “OTHER LAND
(‘BEYOND METAPHYSICS’)

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Abstract

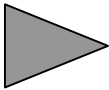
The present article, which is meant as a brief introduction to the “anti-metaphysical” deconstructionist project, is a paradoxical attempt to make sense of a peculiar type of critical discourse that obstinately resists intelligibility. As such, to deconstructionists themselves it would necessarily appear as one more illustration of the illegitimate, totalising, yet unavoidable gesture condemned by both Derrida and his Yale followers – a gesture ironically performed by its own critics, at times. Given the deconstructionist inconsistency that we have just mentioned, we prefer to look at it as one more example of logocentric “blindness” understood in the highly ambivalent, demannean sense of the word, as both a hindrance to, and a condition for valuable critical “insights”.

Keywords: presence, nihilism, subversion, undecidability, logocentrism, metaphysics.



The Indefinable Deconstruction

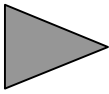
The major theoretical problem posed by the deconstruction phenomenon to an empathetic observer could be reduced to one simple statement: deconstruction is elusive of definition. Even if it were possible to sort out its “uncontrollable overdetermination” (Derrida, 1986: 13) and capture its numberless aspects (political, ethical, religious, “technological”, academic, etc.) into a single clear formula, the successful conceptualization would go against deconstruction’s own anti-totalizing “principles”. From a deconstructionist point of view, deconstruction can never be the object of an “exhaustive definition”, precisely because a definition understood as a form of totalisation is the very “enemy” of deconstruction. Is deconstruction, therefore, a way of reconsidering the truths of traditional Western metaphysics? Is it just one more “method” of reading literary and non-literary texts? Is it an overall intellectual, allegedly subversive, attitude towards tradition? Deconstructive rigour leaves any question about identity unanswered.



The Deconstructionist Project and its opponents

Forty years have passed since the publication of the first two major contributions to the deconstructionist “displacement” of the conceptual system of traditional Western philosophy, also known as the “metaphysics of presence” (Derrida, 1998:50): Jacques Derrida’s *De la grammatologie (Of Grammatology)* and *L’Ecriture et la Différence (Writing and Difference)*. The French deconstructionist’s work has had a huge impact on an important segment of American literary criticism: the elite “Yale School” of the late 70s and early 80s (Paul de Man, J. Hillis Miller, Geoffrey Hartman and, to a certain extent, Harold Bloom) and on its more or less conspicuous followers (such as Barbara Johnson, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Carol Jacobs, Cynthia Chase, Andrzej Warminski, Shoshana Felman and others), generally tempted to dilute deconstruction by combining it with other critical approaches such as feminism, postcolonialism, new historicism, psychoanalysis, marxism. The subversive force underlying the deconstructionist project has often been misconstrued as “nihilism”, or even as a form of intellectual “terrorism” devastating its object of study and, more importantly, threatening deep-rooted habits of mind and undisputed values of

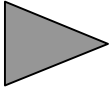
Western culture such as unity, truth, meaning, identity, stability, homogeneity, immediacy, intelligibility, all of which are instances of what is traditionally understood as “presence”. Derrida’s deconstructionist work is indeed an “anxiety”-generating reaction against “the historical determination of the meaning of being in general as *presence*” – with its numberless “subdeterminations”: “presence of the thing to the sight as *eidos*, presence as substance/essence/existence [*ousia*], temporal presence as point [*stigmè*] of the now or of the moment [*nun*], the self-presence of the cogito, consciousness, subjectivity, the co-presence of the other and of the self, intersubjectivity as the intentional phenomenon of the ego” (*Ibid*: 12). It is a reaction against the “logocentrism” of metaphysics, that is, against traditional philosophy’s obsessive search for a meaning understood as an autonomous foundation, a grounding or centring principle, or an originating force – in a word, a presence.



An outrage against tradition: presence as an effect of differences, or the impossibility of full presence

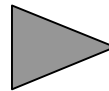
The aspect of deconstruction found by its opponents to be the most intolerable is its ruthless treatment of the very idea of presence and of everything that appears as present. In defiance of the universal human need for certainty and stability, presence is regarded by all deconstructionists starting with Derrida not as a given but as an effect. In other words, every manifestation of presence is a product, a derivation, an effect of differences rather than a pure original presence, or a heterogeneous, highly unstable construction rather than a solid foundation. As demonstrated by Derrida through the textual analysis of passages from Rousseau’s *Confessions*, all “immediacy” turns out to be “derived”, and what we all too glibly call “presence” is nothing but a “chimera” since it has characteristics usually attributed to its opposite, “absence” (which, conversely, has features associated with “presence”). “Meaning”, for instance, is undecidable, and “truth” is “founded” on a play of differences. Upon closer analysis, *all* variants of simple and pure presence are products of differences that are themselves results of a “*différance*” which can no longer be conceived in terms of the classic hierarchical opposition presence/absence. “*Différance*” is a lexical (or rather “graphic”) innovation, an “undecidable” derived from the verb *différer*, with its double meaning “to differ” and “to defer”, “to postpone”, used by the French deconstructionist to designate both a “structure” and a “movement”, both difference itself and the process or act

of generating differences: “the production, simultaneously active and passive [...] of intervals without which the ‘full’ terms could not signify, could not function” (Derrida, 1981:27).



Metaphysical concepts and oppositions reconsidered

Derrida’s deconstruction wages its war on the “metaphysics of presence” on the one hand by rethinking the “onto-theological” concepts used when referring to foundations or origins, to grounding forces or centring principles that always involve presence, and on the other hand by calling into question the “violent”, asymmetrical oppositions specific to metaphysical logocentrism (such as presence/absence, speech/writing, meaning/form, intelligible/sensible, nature/culture, etc.) whose first, privileged term is thought to belong to the area of the *logos* and signify a higher degree of presence than the second, supposedly inferior one. Even the “metaphysical exigency” of invariably “conceiving good to be before evil, the positive before the negative, the pure before the impure, the single before the complex, the essential before the accidental, the imitated before the imitation” (Derrida, 1995:93), or of analysing first “an origin or [...] a ‘priority’ held to be simple, intact, normal, pure, standard, self-identical” and only afterwards what appears as a “derivation”, a “complication”, a “deterioration” or an “accident” is brought under deconstructive scrutiny. Obviously, this is part of deconstruction’s effort to critically reconsider the idea of presence, on which the traditional “hierarchical axiology” is based.



The case for deconstruction: a deconstructionist view

Devastatingly “nihilistic” as it may appear to traditionalists, deconstruction is not, however, meant by Derrida (and the American deconstructors) as an act of “demolition” but rather as a “destruction” understood in a sense very close to the specific, almost “archeological”, Heideggerian meaning of the German word “*Destruktion*” as defined in *Sein und Zeit* –, namely as a sort of “de-sedimentation [...] of all the significations that have their source in that of the *logos*” (Derrida, 1998: 10), be it a finite or an infinite one (speech or the Word of God, His infinite and eternal reason). The effect of deconstruction is avowedly positive, salutary, as well as subtly subversive without being annihilating.

The apocalyptic rhetoric of those intent on “deconstructing” deconstruction for its subversive attitude towards tradition has not been countered explicitly by deconstructors, since, as Paul de Man aptly remarks in his Preface to *Allegories of Reading*, any attempt to clarify the deconstructionist endeavour would “go against the grain” (de Man, 1979:X) of deconstruction itself, of its detotalising, non-elucidating discourse. One such discourse is found in the essay “*The Critic as Host*” by J. Hillis Miller, in which the false opposition between the so-called deconstructive “nihilism” and the traditional metaphysical way of thinking is subverted in a rigorously deconstructionist manner. Professor Miller demonstrates the reversible, “alogical” relation between the two seemingly antithetical terms by showing how each turns out to be “fissured already within itself” (Miller, 1979: 219), “both eater and eaten” (Ibid: 220), or “parasite” and “host” to the other, each containing the invisible “other than itself” (Ibid: 228) within itself. A scholarly etymological argumentation leads Professor Miller to admit to deconstruction’s failure to “liberate us from the prisonhouse” of metaphysical language; the criticised metaphysical vocabulary and patterns of thought are inevitably part of any deconstructive discourse in the same way that nihilism is the indestructible virus “always already at home” (Ibid: 229) in metaphysics, as illustrated by the self-subversive force of all the great texts belonging to the Western metaphysical tradition. The most deconstruction can hope to achieve through its reading effort is to get a glimpse into a place forever off limits to Westerners, into the inaccessible “other land (‘beyond metaphysics’)” (Ibid: 231) from a very singular vantage-point: a “borderland”, a “frontier region”, an “in-between zone” (Idem) – which explains the deconstructionist’s ironic sense of frustration or failure to gain any real “mastery over the work” (Ibid: 252). Through a “ceaseless” and “dissatisfied” (Idem) interpretive movement without closure, described by Professor Miller as a highly ambivalent “movement in place” (Ibid: 250) that brings the critic “the greatest joy in the midst of the greatest suffering” (Ibid: 231), and by maintaining the tension between dialectical movement and undecidability that sets deconstruction apart from traditional criticism, the deconstructive reader takes up the challenge (made by the text “itself”) of “untangling” the uneasy “inherence” of nihilism and metaphysics in each other. The unavoidable co-existence is always signalled to the deconstructionist by the language of the text, which is actually the only language available, used by metaphysicians and “nihilists” alike.



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