



JACQUES DERRIDA'S DECONSTRUCTIVE STRATEGY OF READING TEXTS : AN EVALUATION OF THE DISCIPLINARY- INSTITUTIONAL STATUS OF LITERARY STUDIES

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ABSTRACT

Jacques Derrida, a French Philosopher, coins the term 'Deconstruction' which has been highly controversial yet immensely influential in much of the intellectual world on the late twentieth century, particularly in the 1970's. Derrida's lecture 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences' given at a symposium at Johns Hopkins University in 1966 marks the decentering of our intellectual universe. At this conference he was supposed to discuss the major concerns of structuralism. But his paper raises the issues of the blind spots in structuralism expressed the need to reconsider its principles. He raises the issues about the structuralist ideas like objectivity, belief in a scientific explanation behind the working of any system and faith in reason. This paper sets the poststructuralist movement in literature that is called deconstruction. He introduces with this the linguistic study of philosophical texts. He examines philosophical texts as constructs of language. He thinks language is rhetorical, fluid and unstable. His important works, i.e., his "annus mirabilis" all published in 1967 are Of Grammatology(1967), Writing and Difference(1967), Speech and Phenomena(1967) and Specters of Marx (1993).

The term 'deconstruction' derives from the work of Jacques Derrida:

I have never claimed to identify myself with what may be designed by this name. it has always seemed to strange to me, it has always left me cold. Moreover, I have never stopped having doubts about the very identity of what is referred to by such a nickname. (Derrida,1995. p.15)

When Derrida was often asked to define deconstruction, he replied:

What is deconstruction? Nothing, of course. (Derrida, 1991, p.275)



...deconstruction does not consist of theorems, axioms, tools, rules, techniques, methods...there is no deconstruction, deconstruction has no specific object...(Derrida,1996, p.218)

...deconstruction is neither an analysis nor a critique... I would say the same about method. Deconstruction is not a method and can not be transformed into one... it must also be made clear that deconstruction is not even an act or an operation...(Derrida, 1991, p. 273)

...deconstruction loses nothing from admitting that it is impossible. (Derrida, 1991, p. 272)

The term, 'Deconstruction', according to Jacques Derrida, is more than merely a method for interpreting texts; it is a mode of political action as well, though it is not "political action" as that term is ordinarily understood. It is, therefore, a way of criticizing not only both literary and philosophical texts but also political institutions. Derrida himself states in *Of Grammatology* (p. 158 and 163) that a deconstructive reading :

Must always aim at a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command of the patterns of language that he uses ... It attempts to make the not-seen accessible sight.

J. A. Cuddon in his Dictionary of Literary Terms asserts that in deconstruction :

A text can be read as saying something quite different from what it appears to be saying ... it may be read as carrying a plurality of significance or as saying many different things which are fundamentally at variance with, contradictory to and subversive of what may be criticism as a single 'stable' meaning. Thus a text may 'betray' itself.

Barbara Johnson states that deconstruction is not a hedonistic abandonment of all restraint, but a disciplined identification and dismantling of the sources of textual power.

Deconstruction is a theory that assumes that language refers to itself rather than to an external reality outside the text. There is nothing outside the text. Everything is text. Texts in deconstructive analysis have multiple, conflicting interpretations and such interpretations are not based on the author's intention or the critics desire for order but on the language of the text itself, language that has philosophical, political and social implications. Deconstruction is nothing, it is not a method, not a technique, not even act, because a 'deconstructive reading attends to the



deconstructive processes always occurring in the texts and already there waiting to read read' (Payne,1993, p. 121). The deconstructive process comes not from the reader/critic but from the text itself; it is already there, it is the tension 'between what (the text) manifestly means to say and what it is nonetheless constrained to mean' (Norris, 1987, p. 19). To say that deconstruction is impossible is therefore to acknowledge 'the impossible desire of language ... to make present the permanently elusive' (Payne,1993, p. 121).

There is no method to deconstruction because texts literally deconstruct themselves in their impossible attempt to employ language as a 'transcendental signifier' (Usher & Edwards, 1994), that is, as a way of 'pointing' at some something truth or other. As Spivak(1976) observes, 'All texts... are rehearsing their grammatological structure, self-deconstructing as they continue themselves' (p.lxxviii). All that the deconstructionists need to do, then, is write, because in the final analysis, deconstruction is writing. Furthermore, it is writing with no preconceived goal; as Barthes(1970) put it, 'to write is intransitive verb', a verb without an object, and end in itself. Deconstruction manifests itself in the process of writing rather than in the product:

'Deconstruction takes place, it is an event that does not await the deliberation, consciousness, or organization of a subject' (Derrida,1991, p.274).

But if this is indeed the case, the deconstruction is impossible in another and tangible sense. Firstly, the process of deconstructive writing produces a second text as a supplement to that which it seeks to deconstruct, which is itself (in Spivak's words) self deconstructing as it constitutes itself. Secondly, there is no single authoritative and 'correct' deconstructive reading /writing of any particular text. Therefore, each text contains within itself the possibility of a vast number of supplementary deconstructive texts, and each of those is likewise open to further deconstruction *ad infinitum* in an infinite regress. As Spivak (1976) points out, 'The fall into the abyss of deconstruction inspires us with as much pleasure as fear. We are intoxicated with the prospect of never hitting bottom' (p. lxvii). But we do not even need to write in order fall into the abyss. The very act of reading creates a new and different text; that is to say, reading writes.

McQuillan has observed, Derrida's assertion that deconstruction is not a method can itself be deconstructed: 'The word *pas* in French means both "not", so this ambiguous phrase can be translated as either "not a method" or "a methodological step"' (McQuillan),2000.p.5).thus, in keeping with this insistence that deconstruction can not be tied down to single meaning, Derrida reveals that his early work from the 1960s consisted *precisely* in an attempt to formulate such a strategy or methodological step that he elsewhere he claims to be impossible:



... I tried to work out... what was in no way meant to be system but rather a sort of strategic device, opening onto its own abyss, an enclosed, unencloseable, not wholly formalizable ensemble of rules for reading , interpretation and writing. (Derrida,1983, p. 40)

Not a system, then, but an ensemble of rules for reading, interpretation and writing. It is not entirely clear what these rules might be, but Spivak gives us some clues in her ‘Translator’s Preface’ to *Of Grammatology*:

To locate the promising marginal text, to disclose the undecidable moment, to pry it loose the positively lever of the signifier; to reverse the resident hierarchy, only to displace it; to dismantle in order to reconstitute what always already inscribed. Deconstruction in a nutshell. (Spivak, 1976, p. lxxvii)

‘Deconstruction is not what you think’ (Bennington,1998, p. 6). The bottom line, the degree zero, of deconstruction, lies in this: ‘deconstruction is the active antithesis of everything that criticism ought to be if one accepts its traditional values and concepts’ (Norris,1991, p. xi). Criticism traditionally seeks to establish the authorized meaning of the text, the *original* meaning placed in the text by the author. Deconstruction consists in putting this authority ‘out of joint’ (Derrida, 1995, p.25). Deconstruction is the enemy of the authorized/authoritarian text, the text that tries to tell it like it is, including this one.

Deconstruction is always immanent in the conceptual languages of metaphysics. Yet

Operating necessarily from the inside, borrowing all the strategic and economic resources of subversion from the old structure, borrowing them structurally, that is to say without being able to isolate their elements and atoms, the enterprise of deconstruction always in a certain way falls prey to its own work. (Derrida, 1974,24)

To quote Derrida,

... deconstruction is not a doctrine; it’s not a method, nor is it a set of rules or tools; it can not be separated from performatives ... on the one hand, there is no applied deconstruction: But on the other hand, there is no nothing else. Since deconstruction, doesn’t consist in a set of theorems axioms, tools, rules, techniques, methods. If Deconstruction, then, is nothing by itself, the only thing it can do to apply, is to be applied, to something else, not only in mere than one Language, but with something else. There is no Deconstruction. Deconstruction has no specific object ... Deconstruction can not be applied. So we have to deal with this aporia, and this is what Deconstruction is about.” (Derrida 217-18)



The soul of deconstruction is aporia. Deconstruction is based on the concept of aporia which appears in logic and rhetoric. Aporia has been used by Derrida in weak and strong forms and he has deconstructed the main concept of the authors like Plato, Levi Strauss or Rousseau using the concept of aporia which is a Greek term denoting a logical contradiction. The Oxford Dictionary avers that aporia is “a serious perplexity or insoluble problem.” Peter Barry in his book *Beginning Theory* suggests that the term ‘aporia’ means an impasse, and designates a kind of knot to the text which can not be unraveled or solved because what is said is self contradictory... The aporia, though, a textual knot which resists disentanglement ... as contradictions, paradoxes shift.” Julian Wolfreys in an essay ‘**Deconstruction, What Remains Unread**’ states :

“The language is found falling into the ruins it already is and that which remains of Language is the experience in this attempt at definition of the aporetic.”

According to Christopher Norris,

“Deconstruction is the vigilant seeking out of those ‘aporia’ blindspots or moments of self-contradictions where a text involuntarily betrays the tension between rhetoric and logic, between what is nonetheless constrained to mean.”

It is important to note on Derrida’s most celebrated statement from his book *Of Grammatology*, ‘There is nothing outside the text’. The inadequate notion of interpretation has been called by Derrida as a ‘doubting commentary’. The text must be produced after a critical reading since there is nothing behind it for reconstruction. Obviously therefore, the reading has to be deconstructive rather than reconstructive in this sense. Derrida famously argues:

“Reading ...can’t legitimately transgress the text toward something other than it.....or toward a signified outside the text whose content could take place could have taken place, outside of language, that is to say, in the sense that we give here to that word, outside of writing in general... there is nothing outside the text.” (Of Grammatology 158)

Deconstruction has been defined as applied Poststructuralism. Terry Eagleton refers to this as ‘reading against the grain’ or ‘reading the text against itself’.

Barbara Johnson defines deconstructionist reading:

“Deconstruction is not synonymous with ‘destruction’. It is in fact much closer to the original meaning of the word ‘analysis’, which etymologically means ‘to undo’... The deconstruction of a text does not proceed by random doubt or arbitrary subversion,



but by the careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text.” (The Critical Difference, p. 5)

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“a text can be read as saying something quite different from what it appears to be sayingit may be read as carrying a plurality of significance or a saying may be different things which are fundamentally at variance with, contradictory to and subversive of what may be seen by criticism as a single ‘Stable’ meaning. Thus a text may ‘betray’ itself.”

Derrida has criticized ‘logocentric’ approach of Plato by pointing to this kind of switchover from logic to mythology.

Jacques Derrida in “Deconstruction and the Other”,

I am not sure that deconstruction can function as a literary method as such. I am wary of the idea of methods of reading. The laws of reading are determined by that particular text that is being read. This does not mean that we should simply abandon ourselves to the text, or represent or repeat it in purely passive manner. It means that we must remain faithful, even if it implies a certain violence, to the injunctions of the text. These injunctions will differ from one text to the text so that one cannot prescribe one general method or reading. In this sense deconstruction is a method. (p. 124)

Sentence of the form ‘Deconstruction is so and so’ are a contradiction in terms. Deconstruction can not by definition be defined, since it presupposes the definability or, more properly, ‘undecidability’ of all conceptual or generalizing terms. Deconstruction, like any method of interpretation, can only be exemplified, and the examples will of course all differ. (J. Hillis Miller, *Theory Now and Then* 231)

Derrida comes to the conclusion that deconstruction is not a method of textual reading. Similarly, Miller suggests that deconstruction cannot be defined simply because it is undecidable. He, however, agrees that deconstruction is “a method of interpretation” or rather textual interpretation.

The basis of deconstruction arises emerges from Derrida’s argument that people usually express their thoughts in terms of binary oppositions. For example, people may describe an object as white but not black, or masculine and therefore not feminine, true or false. Derrida then provided his well-known theory that the signifier (i.e. the word) and the signified (i.e. its reference) have an arbitrary and random, rather than a straightforward and clear-cut, relationship. The function of deconstruction is to unravel the inconsistencies of language



most outstandingly by highlighting the contradictions embedded in a text. In so doing, it demonstrates how a text destabilizes itself, thus undermining its fundamental premises.

Derrida argued that all language is constituted by difference. He used the term to demonstrate that words are only the deferred presences of things they “mean” and that the meaning of words is grounded in their difference from other words.

Christopher Norris states, “Derrida is very wary about offering snap definitions of deconstruction... a typical deconstructive reading would take the form of a very close analysis of the text be it a literary text or a work of philosophy and look for significant binary oppositions, cases in which you have two terms or values which are opposed in some distinctive way and one of those terms will be dominant and accorded the greater value. It subverts all those binary oppositions that are central to western culture and every other culture that gives it a sense of superiority.”

Binary oppositions are structured in the manner :

- . Light/Darkness
- . Good/Evil
- . Male/Female
- . West/East
- . Presence / Absence
- . Speech / Writing

Bennington says: “Deconstruction is not a theory or a project. It does not prescribe a practice more or less faithful to it, nor project an image of a desirable state to be brought about.” (7) Deconstruction is not a dismantling of the structure of the text but a demonstration that it has already dismantled itself. (126) Derrida once comments on the question of the incommensurability between, on the one hand, deconstruction and , on the other, method:

I am not sure that deconstruction can function as a literary method as such. I am wary of the idea of methods of reading. The laws of reading are determined by that particular text that is being read. This does not mean that we should abandon ourselves to the text, or represent and even repeat in a purely passive manner. It means that we must remain faithful, even if it implies a certain violence, to the injunction of the text. These injunctions will differ from one text to the next so that one can not prescribe one general method of reading. In this sense deconstruction is not a method. (Derrida, 1983, 124)

The passage, when we read carefully, teaches us to attend to the contradictory ebb and flow of language , and its production of meaning, in a performative fashion: not through a consolidation of elements into a single meaning (the future of the nutshell) , but through the



operation of deferral and differentiation, spacing and, once again, a doubling of figuration, a disfiguration.

Derrida's comment to the demand for 'nutshell' approach to thought with the phrase 'in short':

In short, deconstruction not only teaches us to read literature more thoroughly by attending to it as language, as the production of meaning through difference and dissemination, through a complex play of signifying traces; it also enables us to interrogate the covert philosophical and political presuppositions of institutionalized critical methods which generally govern our reading a text... It is not a question of calling for the destruction of such institutions, but rather of making us aware of what we are in fact doing when we are subscribing to this or that institutional way of reading. (Derrida, 1983,125)

The institutional way of reading is necessary, from one perspective, for the functioning of the institution of itself. In the immediate example of the university, deconstruction can best function if it can be transformed into a reading method operating more or less like other reading methods with the ability to be abstracted, to be taught as a set of theorems and procedures which, in turn, can be applied to a range of texts, and, in the process, producing another competent set of analyses all of which generate yet one more set of final meanings. Derrida has occasion to define deconstruction in the following fashion: I have often had occasion to define deconstruction as that which is – far from a theory, a school, a method, even a discourse, still less a technique that can be appropriated – at bottom *what happens to pass* [*ce qui arrive*]. (Derrida, 1995, 17)

The question of deconstruction is a political one. Kamuf mentions regarding the institutional and political vagaries of deconstruction: Concerning the institution that is the university put in question by the PC debate, the 'deconstruction' is most often presumed to refer to a theory, a method, a school, perhaps even a doctrine, in any case, some identifiable or localizable 'thing' that can be positioned – posed and opposed - within the institution, but also that can be excluded from this defined closure.

The deconstructionists insist that there is no such thing as a deconstructive approach to literary studies, no such thing as a methodology or school of thought. Deconstruction has to exist. It has to have an identity. It has to be identifiable for some[(Kamuf), 1997,141)]. Deconstruction is a method of analysis or interpretation of texts taught in universities for the analysis of literary texts. It is taught in universities, as a method off reading and analysis, even while it given and institutional history. It flourished as a critical methodology in the early 1970s, particularly in Yale University, where it was championed by four critics in particular, J. Hillis Miller, Geoffrey Hartman, Harold Bloom and Paul de man.



In *Of Grammatology*, he examines and calls into question the operation of meaningful structures of binary oppositions as these pertain throughout the history of western metaphysics. Derrida termed this movement ‘logocentrism’ – the conceptual movement of thought which calms movement in favour of locating centres, origins, essences – was part of the work of *Of Grammatology* to expose how any system, structure, form or concept, in orienting itself according to some centre or truth, necessarily suppresses that which remains undecidable according to the logical economy of the structure.

Christopher Norris suggests that:

To deconstruct a text is to draw our conflicting logics of sense and implication, with the object of showing that the text never exactly means what it says or says what it means. (Norris, 1988, 7)

Clearly for Norris, deconstruction is an activity, available for the critical reader’s mastery, and reliant upon that reader’s active imposition of the method of analysis. Eagleton offers a similar definition of deconstruction once more: ‘deconstruction’ is the name given to the critical operation by which ... [binary] oppositions can be partly undermined, or by which they can be shown partly to undermine each other in the process of textual meaning ... *The tacit of deconstruction criticism* ... is to show how texts come to embarrass their own ruling system of logic; and *deconstruction shows this* by fastening on the ‘symptomatic’ points, the aporia or impasses of meaning, where texts get into trouble, come unstuck, offer to contradict themselves. (Eagleton, 1983, 132, 133-4) It is very clear from the various opinions, views and position of its leading theorists and the numerous critical perspectives there is certainly no single deconstruction as a theory of literature.

Paul de Man, Geoffrey Hartman, J. Hillis Miller, Shoshana Felman and Barbara Johnson are some of the most influential deconstructive critics in the field of literature. By inviting Derrida to Yale University, Paul de Man, Hartman, Harold bloom and Miller were instrumental in introducing deconstruction to literary criticism as a method of reading and textual analysis.



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