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Whatever Happened to Deconstruction?

LOIS TYSON

For many of us in academia who consider ourselves lovers of literature, phrases such as *post-Saussurean linguistics* and *deconstructing the text* evoke the kind of fear and loathing that the Crusaders must have felt when they learned that the infidels had taken the Holy City. Although deconstruction is no longer a new phenomenon on the academic scene, a significant number of college and university faculty remain uncertain about post-structuralist theories of language and literature. We may well be uncertain, when works by some of the biggest names in the field—Luce Irigaray, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan—employ such unusual language and organizational principles that they seem to defy our understanding and acceptance. Nevertheless, taken together, post-structuralist theories of language and literature do operate from a rather cogent body of premises.

Every philosophical system has its ground of existence—God, Spirit, *Dasein*, Being, Change, the One, the Many. For post-structuralists, the ground of existence is language. Therefore, the world is infinite Text. Everything is textualized. All contexts—political, psychological, theological—are intertexts. What we know as literature is textuality. Tradition is intertextuality. Because human beings are constituted by language, they, too, are texts. “Now hold it right there,” I hear someone saying. “Human beings are texts? It sounds as if post-structuralism reduces us to our least human elements and then abandons us to whatever future we can have in that depleted condition!” Before we can know exactly what condition we’re being left in, we must understand what post-structuralism intends by *language*.

As we learned from semiotics, language is a system of signs. Every sign consists of signifier (word) + signified (concept to which the word refers). In its most simplified context—picture a person standing in an open field pointing to the only tree in sight—a phrase such as *this tree is big* seems to have an unequivocal meaning. There is only one tree in question and we know that a claim is being made that it is big in size. However, even in this apparently clear situation, many questions concerning signification arise. What does the speaker intend by the statement *this tree is big*? Is she comparing the tree to herself? To another tree? What other tree? Is she surprised by the size of the tree? Or is she merely informing us that the tree is big? Is she informing us so that we’ll know something about the tree or so that we’ll understand something about the word *big*? What must she think of us if she believes we need such information? Does she think we are just learning to speak English? Or is she being sarcastic? If so, why? This string of questions may seem to push the

point a bit far, but it does illustrate that human utterances are rarely, if ever, as clear and simple as the semiotic formula signifier + signified implies. Any given signifier can have any number of signifieds at any given moment. And, although context often helps us to limit the range of possible signifieds for some signifiers, it simultaneously increases the range of possible signifieds for others. Signifiers are saturated with possibilities, nuances, implications. Meaning is as much in the ear of the listener as beauty is in the eye of the beholder; any statement can be taken (and even intended) in any number of ways at any given time. That is why communication is such a complicated and uncertain thing.

If we stopped at this point, we could rewrite the semiotic formula as sign = signifier + signified + signified + signified That is, we could explain communication as a sliding accumulation of signifieds. But what does the term *signified* mean? Semiotics obviates the problem by circular definition: the signified is that to which the signifier refers. But what is the signified “in itself”? If the signifier is the word *tree*, then the signified must be the idea of a tree, the tree we picture in our imagination. And what do we understand by this imagined tree? The tree is every meaning we have come to associate with it over the course of our lives. In my own case, it means the shade my mother always sought on picnics, as I do now, to the chagrin of my friends whose mothers sought the sun; it means the many varieties of leaves I collected, waxed, and sorted in kindergarten; and it means the precious resource of beauty and environmental health we are rapidly losing. That is, the word *tree* refers to a chain of signifiers in the mind of the person uttering—or hearing—it. And each signifier in that chain is itself constituted by a chain of signifiers, and so on. What we have been calling the signified is always yet another chain of signifiers. Texts are thus chains of signifiers, and so are people.

The notion that a person is a chain of signifiers is not as unusual or unreasonable or even as new as it may seem. The idea that a person is the sum total of his or her knowledge has been around a long time, as has the belief that we can't finally know “things in themselves,” that knowledge cannot fully recover the object for the subject.¹ In a sense, post-structuralism combines these two views: we are the sum total of our knowledge; that knowledge is a knowledge of phenomena, of what things *appear* to be, not of noumena. It is to phenomena, then, that our language wants to refer. But, just as there is a gap between subject and object, there is a gap between language and its referents. Whatever contact is made is unstable, transient, uncertain, problematic.² The only new step added by post-structuralism is its explanation of the source of appearances, and even this step resonates with the work of structuralist Mikhail Bakhtin: the source of appearances—that is, the source of our perceptions, which are revealed in the language that expresses them—is the discourses, the value-laden systems of signs, into which we were born. Because all signs are value laden, all language is ideologically saturated, culturally mediated. For example, I remember a story my high-school biology teacher told us about the attempt to introduce the rhythm method of birth control in an underdeveloped country many years

ago. Each woman in the program was given an abacus-like device, consisting of red and white beads arranged to represent her fertility cycle. Each bead represented one day and, if a given day's bead was red, she was not to have sexual intercourse that day; a white bead meant that sex on that day was safe. After several months passed, statistics showed that the pregnancy rate among women in the program had not changed at all, and social workers were at a loss to understand the problem. They finally discovered that women who wanted to have sex on red-bead days would simply push the beads over until a white one appeared: they assumed the beads were a kind of magic! Thus, the program initially failed because both clients and social workers were able to view the project only in terms of their own cultural, or ideological, perspectives. Because it is through language that we pass on our ideologies, it is not unreasonable to say that it is through language that we conceive and perceive our world and ourselves.

For the study of literature, the implications of this view of the relationship between language and culture are manifold. To begin with, because everything is just another text, literature loses its privileged status over, for example, my last letter to my sister. By the same token, literature is no less real or valuable than history or philosophy.³ Most important for our purposes, meaning and value are not inherent in great works of art; rather, great works of art are matters of definition. If their appeal lasts over time, it is because different groups of people value them for different reasons. This is another way of saying that no two people reading a book are reading the same work. Meaning is not a stable element residing in the text for us to uncover or passively consume. Meaning is created by the reader in the act of reading. Furthermore, the meaning that is created is not a stable element capable of producing closure, but rather a multiplicity of meanings, none of which can ever be wholly separated from its opposite. Therefore, what have been considered the "obvious" or "common-sense" positions from which a text is intelligible are really ideological stances with which we are so familiar that we consider them "natural."⁴ In short, there are no naive readings, and meaning and value are functions of the reader, not the text. Just as an author can't help but draw upon the assumptions of her cultural milieu in writing a book, readers can't help but draw upon the assumptions of theirs in interpreting it. Therefore, both the literary and the critical work can be subjected to deconstruction, the primary activity of post-structuralist critics.

The main purpose of deconstruction is to seek a plurality of meaning in any given text by investigating the ways in which language is used to smooth over the contradictions intrinsic to the language-mediated, cultural milieu in which the work was spawned. In this way, literature is opened to provide various avenues for understanding history, current social phenomena, the function of language, and even the nature of fiction itself. For example, in her deconstruction of the Sherlock Holmes novels, Catherine Belsey claims that the project of the stories is to dispel mystery and make everything accountable to scientific analysis. The text's own failure to do so in the case of its numerous, shadowy, female characters, she asserts, illustrates the in-

adequacy of the bourgeois scientificity that informs the stories' ideology: "In claiming to make explicit and *understandable* what appears mysterious, these texts offer evidence of the tendency of positivism to push to the margins of experience whatever it cannot explain or understand" (117).

Deconstructing a text, then, is a purposeful, serious activity that seeks to increase our understanding of our world, our past, and ourselves by uncovering the unexamined assumptions inscribed in our language. Despite the transient, uncertain, problematic nature of communication, it tries to communicate. Why, then, has it received such a prolonged hostile response from such a large segment of the academic community? I think the source of the problem is three-fold: a failure in communication between the avant-garde and the "old school," the humanist/romantic nostalgia to which Western academia is heir, and, of course, the politics of self-interest increasingly fostered by our profession.

Perhaps partly because of the difficult and complex nature of post-structuralist premises, it has been relatively easy for opponents of deconstruction to misrepresent it. Deconstruction does not, as some would have it, celebrate misreading, transform reference into illusion, or conceive of literature as the random flight of signifiers across textual surfaces. Rather, deconstruction celebrates the inevitability of a multiplicity of readings and recognizes the difficulties involved in judging a given interaction of text and reader as a misreading (as does reader-response criticism). The only kind of reference we really know about is the reference of signifier to signifier. Yet, while the signifiers in a literary text have multiple and unstable relationships with each other, relationships that are complicated by the processes of signification that go on between text and reader, they do not fly across the page at random. Unfortunately, many opponents of deconstruction make statements like these in order to play on the worst nightmares of non-initiates. It is not merely that such statements are inaccurate, but that their implications—for example, that if we subscribe to post-structuralism, the literary world will become a place in which authors will write words at random because they know that words refer to absolutely nothing and that college professors will be promoted if they can just publish enough misreadings—are inaccurate as well.

In addition to this kind of apparently deliberate misrepresentation, there is the work of some so-called deconstructors who, from an understandable but not excusable desire to publish, jumped on the band wagon early in the game and got their articles past editors who were interested in vogue material and who may not have known enough about the theories involved to spot a bogus piece of writing. We've all seen at one time or another, for example, an article that exults in deconstructing a text's binary oppositions in a free play of word association to no apparent purpose. The notion of "free play" is, in fact, probably one of the most misunderstood and misused ideas to come out of post-structuralism. Free play is always free play *of meaning*. Multiple meanings struggle for hegemony in any given reading, and they are, of course, the products of perspective, context, association. One way to interpret

a text “deconstructively” is to articulate as many of the meanings as one can find and map their relationships. But one does this for a purpose: to make a point about the text, the culture informing its creation, the author, or the readership. As in any article worth reading, some point must be made. Anyone who uses deconstruction as an end in itself is using it for the wrong reason. It might be useful to remind ourselves, at this point, that the celebration of free play, originating with Jacques Derrida, is only one strand in Derrida’s thinking. It is balanced, in his work, with a logical rigor that one could wish more practitioners had imitated.

Another reason, I think, for the failure of deconstruction to find a warm welcome in mainstream academia is the prevalence there of romantic nostalgia for what post-structuralism considers myths, such as the view of the text as the product of mysterious creation and the belief that value and meaning are inherent in texts. As the centuries fly by, we seem to lose more and more of what little comfort and stability Western civilization was able to carve out of life during the Middle Ages. I don’t think we’ll ever really get over the loss of God (I don’t think we’ll live long enough as a species to do so) because, in God, we had an answer, a response to that yearning for the Other in the bottomless pit of our collective stomach. In losing God we lost home, parents, siblings, spouse, lover, everything. Our best shot at a substitute was humanism, the belief that the individual human being is the unit of value and meaning. And I think it is the fear that post-structuralism undermines humanism that bothers so many of us. For the beliefs that post-structuralism labels romantic myths are humanist beliefs: they are based on the notion that an individual author puts meaning into his or her work and readers discover it. What is meaning if it can be endlessly deconstructed into more and contradictory meanings? Certainly, it can be nothing to rely on in this world where there is already so little to rely on. It can be nothing capable of getting us through a long and lonely winter night. We need the familiar comfort of closure.

Connected with the impulse to protect and preserve humanism is, I think, the desire to believe in the possibility of innocence, which keeps alive wonder. Ideology seems somehow deliberate, mechanistic, cold, inhuman. It’s something we associate with Soviets, freezing weather, manipulation, exploitation. It runs contrary to the American ideal of the rugged individual who “cain’t talk too good” but is sincere and motivated by genuine feelings rather than by intellectualism or by anything that could be even remotely related to ideology. Innocence is associated with the source of wonder: if all the mysteries are solved, we’ll lose the child-like appreciation of beauty we value so highly; we’ll lose our ability to feel under the crushing heel of intellect. I foolishly told my date, during a heated discussion of post-structuralism one evening, “You’re afraid that if you understood what made a book tick, you wouldn’t be able to get it up for the text anymore.” I think that what I said to him is somewhat true of all of us: we want to “master” the text, to “penetrate” its depths and, at the same time, maintain its mystery so that we will continue to desire to penetrate and master it.

Finally, I don't think we can ignore the political implications—the marketplace considerations—involved in the wholesale rejection of post-structuralism by some segments of academia. Whether this rejection takes the form of the avoidance in one's own writing of the issues raised by post-structuralism or the avoidance of adequate coverage of these issues in the classroom, it's hard to believe that the underlying cause is lack of familiarity with the theories involved. Academic professionals are nothing if not good readers, and the principal texts have been available in English for too long a time (and with too many good secondary texts to facilitate study) to claim ignorance as an excuse. While it might be possible to blame some of the opposition to post-structuralism on lack of interest, ability, or energy, or even on the fear that post-structuralist theories are beyond one's comprehension, these reasons certainly can't account for the degree of opposition we still see among the majority of interested, bright, energetic faculty members who have the confidence engendered by the attainment of an advanced degree, numerous publications, and a successful career. The likely culprit here is the political self-interest that the profession's publish-or-perish ultimatum fosters.

Most of us upward of thirty years of age were brought up to be New Critics. I was trained as one without the benefit of being told so. New Criticism, like the biographical/historical method before it, was considered by my teachers not *an* approach to literature, not one critical method among others, but *the* approach to literature. It had no rivals in the classroom and few in the critical literature. New Criticism simply replaced every other method that had preceded it. So far-reaching were its effects that many of the primary texts published during its heyday were published without what has since become the usual biographical blurb about the author, source information, critical afterword, or anything else to interfere with the reader's "unmediated" apprehension of the *objet d'art*. It seems reasonable to conclude that, if New Criticism eliminated biographical/historical criticism, then post-structuralism might eliminate New Criticism. "Let's hope it's just a flash in the pan, and, if we ignore it, maybe we can help assure that it will be nothing more"—this kind of attitude has to be operating, consciously or unconsciously, in the minds of many of our colleagues. It's not that they can't learn a new way; it's that they don't want to be forcibly deprived of the old way in exchange for a new one that might not be as esthetically, creatively, or emotionally satisfying. Of course, one might argue that they should at least give themselves the opportunity to make an informed judgment.

Given the failure of deconstruction to inform the writing—and, therefore, the teaching—of so many English professors, why should we bother to take a closer look at it now? The best reason is, I think, deconstruction's usefulness as an interdisciplinary, critical-thinking tool that can function as an important addition to the New Critical principles implicitly operating in many literature classrooms. By providing almost diametrically opposed visions/versions of language, art, and culture, these two theoretical perspectives together provide an introduction to and illustration of some of the major issues that have informed debates in the humanities since Par-

menides and Heraclitus.⁵ Furthermore, by increasing students' responsibility for the production of meaning, deconstruction encourages them to become more engaged in their reading and writing and to reject the uncritical application of the scientific model—one "right" answer for every question—too often imposed on the humanities. In addition, familiarity with deconstruction can help develop critical-thinking skills transferable to other domains: it can help students learn to think more critically about issues that arise, for example, in the study of history, politics, science, psychology, and communications. Perhaps the most important benefit it can offer our students, however, concerns insight into the nature of knowledge itself.

Catherine Belsey's assertion that the scientific positivism informing modern Western culture tends to "push to the margins of experience whatever it cannot explain or understand" (117) can be applied to every methodology. In any given object under investigation, we tend to see that which our methodological instrument is tuned to see, not necessarily because there is no objective reality beyond our subjective impressions, but more probably because objective reality is so dense and rich that, like Walt Whitman in "Song of Myself," it "contain[s] multitudes" (l 1326). The most useful conclusion we can draw from this state of affairs is not that every methodology is, in its own way, correct or that all methodologies are equally useful, but that, no matter how correct or useful any methodology is, it is incomplete. Methodologies can thus be used to interrogate and complement one another within a discipline or among disciplines. Such a dialectical⁶ view stresses the interactive and interdependent nature of all ways of approaching reality: changes in one approach imply changes in other approaches, whether or not we are aware of those implications; and concepts usually placed in opposing categories—for example, reason and passion, science and the humanities, psychology and politics—are found to overlap or inhabit each other in new and significant ways. The ability to think dialectically is important for students in every major field of study, both in terms of their own education and in terms of the way their education will impinge on global political and environmental decisions made over this next crucial decade. If we can give our students some firsthand, positive experience with such an inherently interdisciplinary way of thinking, I believe we will have met a real educational need.

Notes

1. Many opponents of deconstruction indeed argue that post-structuralist theories are of no value because they offer nothing truly new, their major premises having been derived from the work of earlier thinkers. I agree that post-structuralism is derivative: I have found, for example, a number of Derrida's ideas mentioned (though often not developed) in Nietzsche's *The Will to Power*. However, a similar judgment can be brought against many other important schools of thought, for some of the most brilliant and useful Western thinking has been derivative. Al-

though it builds on what has gone before, derivative thought can nevertheless offer radically new perspectives.

2. It is important to note that the relationship between language and its referents is problematic, not utterly impossible, as many people mistakenly believe is post-structuralism's claim. If linguistic reference were impossible, then Derrida's notion of *bricolage*—indeed all attempts to communicate—would be futile.

3. Borrowing from Derrida, Paul de Man's *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, and Proust* shows how literary texts implicitly acknowledge and exploit their own rhetorical structures, which makes them less deluded than historical and philosophical texts.

4. Catherine Belsey's "Deconstructing the Text" provides probably the clearest explanation of the ideological underpinnings of so-called "common-sense" interpretations of literature.

5. I argue for the mutually illuminating character of New Criticism and deconstruction in a forthcoming essay tentatively entitled "Not So Strange Bedfellows: New Criticism and Deconstruction in the Undergraduate Literature Classroom," which is an expanded version of this essay.

6. Walter Davis illustrates the value of dialectical thinking by using psychoanalysis, existentialism, Hegelian dialectics, and Marxism to constitute for critical theory what he calls "dialectical pluralism." The first four chapters of his remarkable *Inwardness and Existence: Subjectivity in/and Hegel, Heidegger, Marx, and Freud* enact dialectical pluralism; the fifth chapter articulates its principles.

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