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LANGUAGE AND REALITY: POST-STRUCTURALISM IN AMERICAN LITERARY STUDIES

Post-structuralism (or deconstruction, as it was called in America) arises out of the structuralism of Roland Barthes. Like structuralism, deconstruction identifies textual features but, unlike structuralism, concentrates on the rhetorical aspect more than on the grammatical.

During his discussion of Rousseau in *Of Grammatology*, Derrida admits that he himself is striving toward «a certain exteriority in relation to the totality of the age of logocentrism» [Berman 1988, p. 199]. For Derrida, the «structures» of reality are meant to account for the generativity, change, and transmutation that characterize life and the world, as well as for the stable, unchanging ground of the structure itself.

In philosophy, including structuralism, ontological structure has «always been neutralized or reduced - by a process of giving it a centre—a fixed origin». The «freeplay» of structure, its generative potential, is «constituted upon a fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude which is itself beyond the reach of the freeplay» [Berman 1988, p. 200]. The names given to this steadfast centre (including essence, existence, being, truth, consciousness, God and man - designate what Derrida calls «transcendental signified», proposed groundings of the reality on which existence rests. Derrida rejects this stable foundation of structure, its «centre», for it is substantiated only by the false belief that there is a level at which reality appears to humans directly, with an immediacy of presence.

For Derrida there is a «rupture», following which «the centre could not be thought of in terms of a being-present». That rupture can be identified with the «space». Foucault shows opening between language and reality, as well as with the space, so important to Derrida and Lacan, between Saussure's «signifier» and «signified». The centre has no «natural locus», but is itself a «function» of the structured system, which, since it is always expressed in language, turns out to be language itself» [Berman 1988, p. 318].

Language is an infinitely interwoven fabric of signifiers, of language itself, with demonstrable power of direct representation or reflection (mimesis) of a reality eternal to it. «There is nothing outside of the text» [Berman 1988, p. 202]. Yet «the difference between signified and signifier belongs - to the totality of the great *le champ* covered by the history of metaphysics». Nothing is conceivable for us «except in the language that we have inherited» [Berman 1988, p. 192], since this very language composes our consciousness itself.

In language, according to Derrida's reinterpretation of the Saussurian model, no signified «concept» can be «present in and of itself». The concept is «inscribed in a chain», with a «play of differences» [Berman 1988, p. 204]. These differences produce the sense of the very thing they define, as Derrida writes in *Of Grammatology*, «the mirage of the thing itself, of immediate presence of original perception». «Immediacy» itself is a derived notion, a product of the signifying chain. To this «systematic play of differences, of the traces of differences, of the *spacing* by means of which elements are related to each other» [Berman 1988, p. 204], Derrida gives the name «difference» a neologism in the French language.

Differance is not the name of a thing, event, or a process, it has «neither existence nor essence. It derives from no category of being» [Berman 1988, p. 206]. The term functions to designate what cannot be designated because it is not anything at all. Every linguistic element exists only because of what it is not; each contains a «trace» of what is absent. The past and the future are constituted by the «trace» - the bond to an absence, a no-thing, that functions as what-has-been and what-may-be.

This absence is both temporal and spacial. As space, it is the difference between signs, the gap that both separates and constitutes them. As time, it is the difference of meaning, since meaning is never present but always being generated by the play of what is not present.

Derrida attempts to remove support for any notions of the self with which humanists (including American literary critics) have long been comfortable. Not unlike Foucault, Derrida wishes «to pass beyond man and humanism» [Berman 1988, p. 205]. He emphasizes «the illusory autonomy of a discourse or a consciousness whose hypostasis is to be deconstructed»; certainly there is «no subject who is agent, author, and master of *differance*» [Berman 1988, p. 210]. There is no autonomous, Cartesian-like subject who is situated in the world and looks out to perceive it directly. Derrida puts the metaphysical principle of the original self-evidence and presence of the thing itself in person into question.

The link between French thought and American thought can be formed at the level of an analysis of self and consciousness. The link is made through the passage-ways of a psychology of desire and literary critical practice. «Deconstruction» is the name Derrida gives to the critical methodology that issues from his analysis of what a text is and how it might be read. The method has been imported into the United States under that title.

Derrida's dominant idea concerning the literary text is that, since language is a chain of signifiers that does not point to independently existing signified, texts do not portray a real world that exists independent of language. So, criticism is to focus upon the text as a construct of language, a rhetorical fabrication that can be understood by being deconstructed in order to reveal its rhetorical machinery. This procedure leads to understanding that where truth was thought to be there is only an absence of truth, an empty place, which language has masked to create the effect of completeness and unity.

Derrida's best known aphorism, «there is nothing outside of the text» is preceded in *Of Grammatology* by the statement that, in the process of reading, one cannot transgress the text toward something other than it, toward a signified outside the text whose content could have taken place outside of language. Deconstruction, as literary critical practice, disassembles a text to reveal that what perhaps has appeared to be a consistent and unified work is a structure of rhetorical strategies. The uncovering of that structure leads to revealing of a coherent, non-contradictory, comprehensible meaning. Every text is subject to deconstruction, but language is deconstructible.

The customary values of meaning, of form or signifier, of metaphor / metonymy, of truth, of representation can no longer account for certain very determined effects of texts.

Derrida claimed that the Western tradition of thought repressed meaning by repressing the limitless vitality of language and by moving some thought to the margin. Yet while Derrida argued to subvert the dominant Western mindset, he also recognized that there is no privileged position outside the instabilities of language from which to attack. Thus, deconstruction deconstructs itself: in a self-contradictory effort it manages to leave things the way they were, the only difference being our expanded consciousness of the inherent play of language-as-thought.

The influence of Derrida in America grew rapidly following his appearance in this country at the 1966 Johns Hopkins conference. American deconstruction is, in fact, not French post-structuralism: it is a use of post-structuralism that continues a movement in American criticism begun by the New Critics, with significant modifications. The four critics at Yale University - J. Hillis Miller, Paul de Man, Geoffrey Hartman, Harold Bloom - are classified as deconstructive critics. Common themes, beliefs, and approaches emerge in their work «*Deconstruction and Criticism*», that was called the «manifesto» of American deconstruction. The problems discussed centre on two issues that affected literary criticism at that time. One is the situation of criticism itself, its main function - a function beyond academic or pedagogical. In their opinion, criticism is part of the world of letters, and has its own mixed philosophical and literary, reflective and figurative strength. The second shared problem is that of the importance - or force - of literature. What that force consists in, how it shows itself are the questions under discussion.

The critics assume that there are many ways of describing the force of literature. The priority of language to meaning is only one of them, but it plays a crucial role in their essays. It expresses what we all feel about figurative language, its excess over any assigned meaning, or, more generally, the strength of the signifier vis-a-vis a signified meaning that tries to enclose it. Deconstruction, as the critics suppose, refuses to identify the force of literature with any concept of embodied meaning and shows how deeply such logocentric perspectives have influenced the way we think about art. In their view, by the miracle of art the «presence» of the word is equivalent

to the presence of meaning. But the opposite can also be urged, that the word carries with it a certain absence or indeterminacy of meaning. Literary language foregrounds language itself as something not reducible to meaning: it opens as well as closes the disparity between symbol and idea, between sign and assigned meaning” [Deconstruction 1990, p. VIII].

In his essay «*The Breaking of Form*» Harold Bloom discovers how poems “break form to bring about meaning” [Deconstruction 1990, p. 1]. The word *meaning* itself goes back to a root that signifies «opinion» or «intention». The term «form» is a trope, a figurative substitution of the as-it-were «outside» for what the poem is supposed to be «about».

All that a poem can be about is the skill of invention, the heuristic gift. Freedom in a poem is freedom of meaning, the freedom to have a meaning of one’s own. Such freedom is illusory unless it is achieved against a prior plentitude of meaning, and so also against language.

The author proposes two different words for what we now call «reading». There is a relaxed reading and alert «reading», and the latter is always an agon. Reading well is a struggle because fiction and poems can be defined as works that are bound to be misread or troped by the reader.

Paul Valery observed that «one only reads well when one reads with some quite personal goal in mind. It may be to acquire some power. It can be out of hatred for the author» [Deconstruction 1990, p. 6]. Reading well, for Valery, is to make one’s own figuration of power, to clear imaginative space for one’s own personal goal. Harold Bloom states that the reading of poetry is as much idealized as the writing of it. The author observes that there are no texts, but only interpretations. He does not agree completely with deconstructive critics. Linguistic explanations doubtless achieve some intensity of technicality, but language is not in itself a privileged mode of explanation. Philosophers of intertextuality warn the readers that the meanings of an intertextual encounter are as undecidable as any single text is, but H. Bloom discovered pragmatically that such philosophers teach a kind of double - entry book keeping, which as a reader he has to discount.

H. Bloom expresses his solidarity with John Hollander, the leading authority upon lyrical form, who called tropes «turns that occur between the meanings of intention and the significances of linguistic utterances» [Deconstruction 1990, p. 10]. He expands Hollander’s description to open a hidden element in all criticism that deals with figuration. Any critic necessarily tropes or turns the concept of trope in giving a reading of a specific poem. A trope is troped whenever there is a movement from sign to intentionality, whenever the transformation from signification to meaning is made. The author follows K. Burke in seeing that the fundamental dichotomy in trope is between irony and synecdoche or, as Burke puts it, between dialectic and representation. He treats both metonymy and metaphor as heightened degrees of dialectical irony, with metaphor being the more extended.

In lyric poetry, there is a crucial gap between reduction or metonymy and the part-for- whole representation of synecdoche. Metonymy is a mode of repetition, working through displacement, but synecdoche is an initial mode of identification as its close association with the ancient topoi of definition and division would indicate. The topoi associated with metonymy are adjuncts, characteristics and notation, all of them namings through supposed cause-and-effect. A metonymy names, but a synecdoche begins a process that leads to an un-naming. Naming in poetry, in the author's opinion, is a limitation of meaning, whereas un-naming restitutes meaning, and so adds to representation. The critic, following after the poet of his moment and his climate, should oppose to the abysses of Deconstruction's ironies a supermimesis achieved by an art that will not abandon the self to language, the art of Ashbery's *Fragment*: «*The words sung in the next room are unavoidable. But their passionate intelligence will be studied in you*» [Deconstruction 1990, p. 37].

The essay «*Shelley Disfigured*» by Paul de Man is devoted to Shelley's last poem *The Triumph of Life*. He offers new reading of the fragment. In the critic's opinion we impose on the senseless power of positional language the authority of sense and of meaning. But this is radically inconsistent: language posits and language means (since it articulates), but language cannot posit meaning; it can only reflect it in its reconfirmed falsehood. The knowledge of this impossibility doesn't make it less impossible.

The imposition of meaning occurs in *The Triumph of Life* in the form of the questions that served as point of departure for the reading. It is as a questioning entity, standing within the pathos of its own indetermination, that the human subject appears in the text, in the figures of the narrator who interrogates Rousseau and of Rousseau who interrogates the shape. But these figures do not coincide with the voice that narrates the poem in which they are presented; this voice does not question and does not share in their predicament. We can therefore not ask why it is that we, as subjects, choose to impose meaning, since we are ourselves defined by this very question. From the moment the subject thus asks, it has already foreclosed any alternative and has become the figural token of meaning. In the poem, figuration performs the erasure of the positing power of language. In *The Triumph of Life*, this happens when a positional speech act is represented as a sunrise.

The persistence of light-imagey, in the description of the Chariot of Life as well as in the inaugural sunrise creates the illusion of a continuity and makes the knowledge of its interruption serve a ruse to efface its actual occurrence. The poem is sheltered from the performance of disfiguration by the power of its negative knowledge. But this knowledge is powerless to prevent what functions as the decisive textual articulation: its reduction to the status of a fragment brought about by the actual death and subsequent disfigurement of Shelley's body, burned after his boat capsized and he drowned off the coast of Lerici. This defaced body is present

in the margin of the last manuscript page and has become an inseparable part of the poem. At this point, figuration and cognition are actually interrupted by an event which shapes the text but which is not present in its represented or articulated meaning. The text was molded by an actual occurrence, and the reading of *The Triumph of Life* establishes that this textual model exposes the wound of a fracture that lies hidden in all texts.

In Shelley's absence, the task of reinscribing the disfiguration devolves entirely on the reader. The challenge that is in fact present in all texts and that *The Triumph of Life* identifies is actually carried out as the sequence of symbolic interruptions. *The Triumph of Life* warns us that nothing, whether deed, word, thought or text, ever happens in relation, positive or negative, to anything that precedes, follows or exists elsewhere, but only as a random event whose power, like the power of death, is due to the randomness of its occurrence. It also warns us why and how these events then have to be reintegrated in a historical and aesthetic system of recuperation that repeats itself regardless of the exposure of its fallacy. Reading as disfiguration, to the very extent that it resists historicism, turns out to be historically reliable, states the author. However, it cannot be monumentalized into a *method of reading* that would regress the rigor of Shelley which refuses to be generalized into a system.

Geoffrey H. Hartman is noted for the closeness of his critical position to phenomenologically oriented criticism. In his essay «*Words, Wish, Worth: Wordsworth*» Hartman investigates the poetic spirit inherent in Wordsworth. Wordsworth's poetry often describes a flashing on the inward eye. An after-image or memory surprises the mental traveler. A wish that has formed unconsciously is suddenly made conscious by being defeated, crossed or fulfilled in an unexpected way. The emphasis is on the strange fulfillment rather than on defeat; but precisely because of that, every anticipatory movement of the mind is attended by «anxiety of hope» [1805 *Prelude XI*, 372]. The wish, whether active fantasy or vague daydream, tends toward fulfillment. Wordsworth screens the most innocent «leaping up» of eye and heart. Many of his poems are reflections on «wayward» motions of the mind. The result is a consciously minor poetry, depressed yet psychically fascinating, which enacts that very distrust of enthusiasm limiting the greater part of the eighteenth-century verse. Wordsworth records scrupulously an inward action: the incumbent mystery of text - as well as sense — and soul. The relation of «text» and «soul» includes the reader and reading experience into the process of interpretation. G. Hartman insists that we must be able to talk about the reader both intrinsically, and *historically*. Many contemporary thinkers are not satisfied with viewing reading as a practical matter to be corrected or improved by some sort of training. They see it rather as a vital praxis connected with theory, ^{or} ideological values. A recent revival of methodology, due to the parascientific disciplines of structuralism and semiotics, has shaped the ^{conflict} between two types of reading: the direct or «inner light» approach, and the learned, scientific

approach, which sees all works as deeply mediated constructs, not available to understanding except through a study of history or of the intertextual character of all writing.

Wordsworth's poem *Prelude* suggests that we must read the writer as a reader, Hartman believes. The writer is a reader not only in the sense that he must have read to write, and so is «mediated», however original his work is. He is a reader because of his radically responsive position vis-a-vis texts, and an inner light that enables his counter-word, the very act of interpretation itself. Reading is a form of life whether or not correlative, as in Wordsworth, to a specific theology. And theology requires historical study to be appreciated. So that the conflict between direct and mediated types of reading continues to operate. This conflict called forth the analyses of a number of English writers (Christopher Butter, Jonathan Culler, Geoffrey Strickland, E.D. Hirsch in America, who couldn't separate reading and writing from communication, from convention, the socially determined interchange of information. A number of American critics, both for and against deconstruction, made an attempt to employ speech-act theory in literary criticism in order to remedy post-structuralism with which speech-act theory is incompatible.

Literary critics in America are customarily allied with a view of the self as a unified, coherent, ontologically fundamental entity, engaging its desire in a quest for meaning or fulfillment while residing often in confusion and contradiction. The deconstructive critics in America are more strongly influenced by this tradition, even when they challenge it, than by the fundamental post-structuralist epistemology. This accounts for certain of their modifications of post-structuralism. For them, criticism is a personal quest. This is an underlying reason for the elevation of criticism to a status not unlike that of poetry itself. All the same time they accept from post-structuralism the belief that, since language can never accord with reality, which therefore is never directly «present», truth is unobtainable.

The major attacks on deconstruction in America have responded to its seeming lack of seriousness about reading literature and to its refusal to privilege such reading as an act at all. Its opponents feel that it threatens the stability of the literary academy, that it promotes philosophical and professional nihilism. Despite its alleged shortcomings, the value of deconstruction may be as a corrective, as some of its cautions are absorbed into other interpretive approaches.

Literature

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