

JACQUES DERRIDA AS A DECONSTRUCTIVE THEORIST WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO “STRUCTURE, SIGN AND PLAY IN THE DISCOURSE OF HUMAN SCIENCES”

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Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) is undoubtedly one of the most influential thinkers in the history of western thought. Derrida is responsible for the pervasive phenomenon in modern literary and cultural theory known as “deconstruction.” While Derrida himself has insisted that Deconstruction is not a theory unified by any set of consistent rules or procedures, it has been widely regarded as a way of reading, a mode of writing, and, above all, a way of challenging interpretations of texts based upon conventional notions of the stability of the human self, the external world, and of language and meaning. Often deconstruction, a French word is described as a ‘method’ of ‘analysis,’ a ‘type’ of ‘critique,’ and ‘act’ of ‘reading’ as a ‘way’ of ‘writing,’ deconstruction as a broad phenomenon has become all of the things.

Like the New Criticism in the 1940’s and Structuralism thereafter, Deconstruction is the most influential critical movement of our time. According to the theory of Deconstruction, no work of literature whatsoever has been able to express exactly what it wanted to say and thus the critics’ business is to deconstruct and re-create them, taking their words as not the outward form of their meaning but only the ‘trace of a quest.’ (Das 31) The purpose of this paper is to show what the theory of deconstruction means and how it is different from earlier theories of literary criticism particularly New Criticism and Structuralism. The deconstructive philosophy of Derrida is a reaction to the structural anthropology of Claude Levi-Strauss.

Derrida moved from a text oriented deconstructive approach through analysis of politics and institution. The work of Jacques Derrida in the 1960’s is generally considered of crucial moment in the rise of post structuralism. In three seminal works – “Of Grammatology,” “Speech and Phenomenon” and “Writing and Difference.” Derrida calls into question the notion of centres, unity, identity, signification working at a point where he is intensely self-conscious and self-critical of his own writings, Derrida demolishes the boundaries between literature and non-literature. Derrida’s transatlantic influence can be traced to an important seminar held at John Hopkins University in 1966. A number of leading French theorists, such as Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, and Lucien Goldmann, spoke at this conference. Derrida himself presented what was quickly recognized as a pioneering paper entitled “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” a text which shows both what Derrida owes to structuralism and his paths of

divergence from it. Throughout the 1970's, it remained an influential piece of critical writing in America.

In "Structure Sign and Play" Derrida's endeavor might be seen as threefold: (i) to characterize certain features of the history of Western metaphysics, as issuing from the fundamental concepts of "Structure" and "Center," (ii) to announce an "event" – in effect, a complex series of historical movements – whereby these central notions were challenged, using the work of the structuralist anthropologist Levi Strauss as an example; and (iii) to suggest the ways in which current and future modes of thought and language might deploy and adapt Levi-Strauss' insights in articulating their own relation to metaphysics.

According to Derrida:

"The whole history of the concept of structure must be thought of as a series of substitutions of center for center... successively, and in a regulated fashion, the center receives different forms as names. The history of metaphysics, like the history of the West, is the history of these metaphors and metonymics. Its matrix . . . is the determination of being as presence in all the senses of this word. It would be possible to show that all the names related to fundamentals, to principles or to the center have always designated the constant of a presence." (394-5)

Derrida asserts the concept of structure that has dominated Western science and philosophy has always been referred as a "Center or a point of presence, a fixed origin." (Derrida 278) The function of such center has been both to organize the structure and to limit the free play of terms and concepts within it, in other words, to foreclose such play.

Here in 'Structure, Sign and Play' he directs his critique specifically to the structuralism of Levi – Strauss' structural anthropology. That structuralism, Derrida argues, is based on the tacit assumption that is implicit in all conceptions of structure, of an opposition between the "structure" itself and a "center," which as Derrida says, was not only to orient, balance and organizes the structure – one cannot in fact conceive of an unorganized structure but above all to make sure that organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the free play of the structure." Such a centre however is not the structuralism, Derrida asserts, was the rupture and disruption that first became aware of the necessity of "free play" of structures what Saussure, for instance, describes as the way signs in the system or "structure" of language can be understood as elements "each suggesting and opposing the others."

But structuralism failed, he implied to explore "the desire for the centre in the constitution of structure." Derrida explores that desire in Levi-Strauss' work itself between the desire for the "free play" of functional explanation and at the same time, a tacit desire for center is implicit in the privileging of nature over culture "an ethic of nostalgia for origins, an ethic of archaic and natural innocence." Derrida makes the deconstructive move of demonstrating that the opposition reversed or not can be seen to non-opposition that "free play" and "center" are both functional and organizing principles.

Although the structure thereby depends on the center, the center itself is fixed and "escapes structurality," since it is beyond the transformative reach of other element in the structure. Hence the center is, paradoxically, outside the structure, and the very concept of a centred structure is only "contradictorily coherent." What expresses is a desire for a

“reassuring certitude” which stands beyond the subversive or threatening reach of any play which might disrupt the structure. The center, that which gives stability, unity and closure to the structure, can be conceived as an “origin” or a “purpose,” terms which invoke the notion of a “full presence (such as the Logos) that can guarantee such stability and closure.”

Derrida says that the kind of decentering comes into being with Nietzsche, Freud and Heidegger but they too were trapped in a sort of circles a unique circle. For instance, Nietzsche tried to usher in the death of God and Christianity. He said, God or any absolute reference point, really does “die” (does become decentred) for the modern world. Freud engaged in a critique of consciousness and the self identity of the human subject.

The word “deconstruction” is Derrida’s coinage in response to the philosopher. Martin Heidegger’s idea of “destructive” analysis. Heidegger re-examined the conventional metaphysics of being and time. The discourse of each of these thinkers put into question some of central concepts and categories that have dominated Western thought since Plato and Aristotle. Derrida borrows a set of binary distinctions from Saussurean linguistics (such as nature/culture, raw/worked etc.) to contest the claims of Western metaphysics. Language, Derrida believes, is a system of signs and the relation between language and reality is taken as the relation between a set of signifiers and a corresponding set of signified.

Derrida comments on the West’s sentimental desire for a guaranteed authority, a finality of essence and meaning the “transcendental signified.” This transcendental signified is the logos where all truth originates, rests and which is irreducible and unquestionable. God’s understanding is the other name for logos as self presence. The logos can be infinite and self present and it does not borrow outside of itself the signifier that it emits and that affects it at the same time.

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. 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. Derrida groups metaphysics, linguistic and structuralism into one category.

The new concept of writing proposed by Derrida has three complex words: “difference,” “trace” and “archewriting.” Difference has two aspects: differing and deferring. Each sign according to Derrida performs two functions: differing and deferring, not by signifier and the signified. No sign is adequate and therefore every sign is written “under erasure,” “sous rapture,” a term that Derrida coins to express the “inadequacy of the sign.” The nature of language which conveys meaning through differences between linguistic signs and where the sign present is marked by the traces of the signs absent precludes the possibility of saying anything with finality.

Deconstruction attempts to demolish the myth of language by exposing the metaphysical foundation of our understanding of language. Commenting on Derrida’s concept of writing, Gayatri Spivak states that it is “Something that carries within itself the trace of perennial alterity; the structure of the psyche, the structure of the sign. To this structure Derrida gives the name writing.” (39)

Derrida's deconstructive critique of Western epistemology, the manner in which the West knows the world has led him to deconstruct many institutions of Western culture. From his general theories and specific commentaries, three issues can be taken that have a direct bearing on literary theory and criticism: textuality, undecidability and strategy.

Derrida believes that literature is only a free play of signifiers without a centre. His theory of deconstruction aims at liberating language from the traditional Western concept of text along with ways of dealing with it. It is in this regard that Derrida proposes "dissemination" as an alternative to the polysemy of interpretation. In the words of Derrida:

There are thus two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, of sign, of free play. The one seeks to decipher which is free from the order of the sign, and lives like an exile the necessity of interpretation. The other affirms free play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name man being the name of that being throughout the history of metaphysics or of ontotheology in other words, through the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of the game. (Das and Mohanty 411)

Thus, according to Derrida, in spite of the "difference" that the author makes between one word and another, he can never express his meaning accurately and exactly. He must always mean more than and something different from that he indicates through writing. Furthermore, deconstructive readings always seem to start out with a set of conclusion, lacking any sense of suspense about the outcome of the reading. Despite its alleged shortcomings, the value of deconstruction may as a corrective, as some of its cautions are absorbed into other interpretive approaches.

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