

chapter 4

Deconstructive Literary Criticism

In 1873 a youthful Friedrich Nietzsche wrote a brief essay entitled "On Truth and Lies in the Nonmoral Sense." The essay was never published in Nietzsche's lifetime and was never even finished—it comes down to us in the form of two completed sections and preliminary notes toward several more. The essay deals, more or less, with the question of human knowing and especially with the fundamental role that language plays in the conceptualization of all knowledge:

It is this way with all of us concerning language: we believe that we know something about the things themselves when we speak of trees, colors, snow, and flowers; and yet we possess nothing but metaphors for things—metaphors which correspond in no way to the original entities. . . . Thus the genesis of language does not proceed logically in any case, and all the material within which the man of truth, the scientist, and the philosopher later work and build, if not derived from never-never land, is at least not derived from the essence of things. (82-83)

To Nietzsche, all knowledge is indirect and metaphorical, and "reality" is nothing but "an X which remains inaccessible and undefinable for us" (83). Language does not refer to some external reality but only to itself, and the same can be said for all knowledge. Any link between language and reality is purely metaphorical. "Every concept arises from the equation of unequal things," Nietzsche writes (83). All knowledge arises in relation to other knowledge, and the resultant epistemological self-referentiality results in an infinite regression that can never hit bottom.

Nietzsche's essay suggests that the search for truth and the quest for centers and origins that underlie the epistemological investigations of post-Cartesian

Western philosophy are ultimately doomed to failure. This suggestion strongly resembles many of the proclamations of recent poststructuralist philosophers such as Jacques Derrida—and with good reason. As Sanford Schwartz points out, the “On Truth” essay has become a sort of “manifesto” of the poststructuralist movement (75). Nietzsche’s radical questioning of the ultimate authenticity of all human knowledge also anticipates many later developments in literature, where numerous authors have launched similar demystifying assaults against the epistemological tradition of the Enlightenment.

The term *poststructuralist criticism* can refer to any one of a number of critical approaches that arose in the late 1960s and early 1970s in reaction to the dominance of structuralism in European intellectual endeavors of the previous two decades. As was the case with structuralism, poststructuralist techniques and assumptions have been applied not only to a variety of strategies for reading literature but also to a variety of disciplines. Poststructuralism has been an important influence in such fields as philosophy, psychology, linguistics, history, and anthropology, in addition to literary criticism. To a first approximation, we can identify two major branches of poststructuralist literary criticism. The first of these, deriving most importantly from the work of Michel Foucault, concentrates its work on culture and society, on the institutions and practices that condition our reading of literature. Poststructuralist cultural criticism is discussed in a later chapter. The other important branch of poststructuralist criticism is identified most directly with the work of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. It involves the critical strategy known as “deconstruction,” an approach that gained immense popularity (and attracted violent opposition) in America in the 1970s. This chapter deals with that approach.

Deconstruction is essentially a formalist method of close reading, and for that reason it has often (especially in recent discussions) been compared to the New Criticism. For example, deconstruction closely resembles the New Criticism in its emphasis on careful attention to linguistic subtleties that might lead to irony, ambiguity, paradox, and other forms of multiple meanings. Deconstruction differs substantially from the New Criticism in its refusal to attempt a resolution of these paradoxes and ambiguities through any appeal to organic unity in the literary text. As J. Hillis Miller, one of the leading American practitioners of deconstructive criticism, puts it, “The new turn in criticism involves an interrogation of the notion of the self-enclosed literary work and of the idea that any work has a fixed, identifiable meaning” (“Stevens” 333). Moreover the formalist emphasis on the text itself is significantly problematized in deconstructive criticism, for which textual boundaries are highly permeable and unstable, thus challenging conventional notions of just what constitutes a “text.” Indeed deconstructionists do not distinguish between text and world in New Critical fashion because in their view everything is textual. That is, humans approach everything through language. In an oft-quoted statement, Derrida thus declares that “there is nothing outside of the text” (*Grammatology* 158).

Derrida’s project grows out of a fundamental challenge to the traditions of Western philosophy. In particular, he argues that this philosophy is consistently

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informed by what he refers to as "logocentric" or "metaphysical" thinking—that is, the notion (derived from the monotheistic religions of the Judeo-Christian tradition) that there is an ultimate center and ground to philosophical truth. Derrida notes that logocentric logic sees language as a reflection of some preexisting meaning or reality, whereas he believes that meaning is created in language. This emphasis on the creative potential of language has obvious implications for literature, though its ramifications go well beyond literature as well. For example, Derrida's challenge to the Western tradition of logocentric thought involves a fundamental challenge to the long-cherished notion of the "transcendental subject"—that is, to the idea that individual human beings exist as stable entities identifiably separate from the world around them. But just as Derrida sees no clear boundary between text and context, he also sees no absolute distinction between subject and world. The transcendental subject (modeled on the God of monotheistic religions) uses language to express its feelings and thoughts about the world. For Derrida, however, the human subject is created in and through language rather than existing prior to and independently of language.

The poststructuralist view of language grows out of the structuralist belief in language as a self-referential system that operates according to its own rules and conventions rather than out of any direct relationship to reality. Structuralism crucially relies on the work of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, who developed a systematic approach to the description of language as a self-contained system. Saussure distinguishes between *la parole* (specific instances of actual language use) and *la langue* (the system of accepted rules and conventions that govern the use of language and render communication possible). Saussure's work focuses on the latter aspect of language and on the ways rules and conventions operate to allow the expression of meaning in intelligible ways. For Saussure, language consists of "signs" that allow users to relate linguistic expressions to reality. A sign for Saussure has two fundamental components: the "signifier" (a unit of sound, usually corresponding to a word) and the "signified" (a concept or meaning invoked by the signifier). Importantly, however, the signifier and signified are not linked in any natural or absolute way—as the names of things were synonymous with the things themselves in the biblical language of the mythical Adam. Instead the two parts of the sign are linked purely by arbitrary convention and by their participation in the entire system of language.

Saussure's approach points toward a detailed and systematic study of language. Moreover given the centrality of language to human social endeavors, it is not surprising that Saussure's insights were widely adopted by investigators in a number of human sciences in the course of the twentieth century. Thus Claude Lévi-Strauss applied structuralist insights to anthropology in an attempt to develop an understanding of the social practices of "primitive" cultures and of the functioning of such cultural artifacts as myths; Louis Althusser used structuralist methods to extend the work of Karl Marx to develop detailed models of the workings of ideology in capitalist society; Jacques Lacan updated Freudian psychoanalysis by employing structuralism to produce models of the structure

of the human mind; the early Michel Foucault applied structuralist insights to analyze the workings of social institutions and the history of ideas.

Not surprisingly, structuralist techniques were particularly valuable in the study of literature, with critics Roland Barthes and Tzvetan Todorov, among others, performing extensive studies of the structural principles of literary works. In the important work *S/Z*, for example, Barthes conducts a detailed and systematic analysis of the construction of Honoré de Balzac's *Sarrasine* by performing a sequential reading that separates the text into 561 segments, or "lexias," and explores the function of each lexia in terms of five codes: hermeneutic (dealing with enigmas), semantic (signifying connotations), symbolic (signifying the ability of literary motifs to represent ideas beyond the scope of the text itself), proairetic (dealing with actions), and cultural (referring to knowledge or wisdom). Barthes precedes this analysis with comments on the plurality of texts and on "readerly" texts (which allow the reader to consume them passively) and "writerly" texts (which require the reader actively to participate in the generation of meaning) (4-5).

But structuralist literary criticism goes far beyond the study of narrative structures or of patterns of imagery. In particular, the structuralist emphasis on the system of language undercuts the Romantic notion of the author as the transcendental originator of his own texts, proposing instead that all texts arise within the systems of conventions and practices that constitute language and literature. Thus in a famous essay, "The Death of the Author," Barthes argues that the notion of the "author" is a modern product of the Renaissance emphasis on the individual but that in writing "it is language which speaks, not the author" (143). For Barthes, then, "a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture" (146). It is the task of the reader, especially of writerly texts, to assemble these textual fragments into meaningful form: "The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination" (148).

In this view, all texts are products of "intertextuality," of the sometimes subtle relationships among all texts: "Every text, being itself the intertext of another text, belongs to the intertextual, which must not be confused with a text's origins: to search for the 'sources of' and 'influence upon' a work is to satisfy the myth of filiation" ("Work" 77). In the course of his career, Barthes gradually moved to a more and more radical emphasis on the plurality and "play" of language in this intertextual process. In particular, he began to emphasize the "pleasure" of the text, distinguishing between the "text of pleasure," a conventional, "comfortable" text, and the "text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language" (*Pleasure* 14). Such emphases, however, begin to unsettle the rather

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scientific structuralist emphasis on system and structure. Indeed while building significantly on the structuralist focus on the centrality of language to human endeavor, poststructuralism arose in the late 1960s and early 1970s largely against what was perceived as an overly simplistic and ultimately impoverishing structuralist emphasis on stable structure and well-behaved form.

From an American perspective, Derrida became the leader of the post-structuralist assault on structuralist decorum when he burst onto the American scene in the late 1960s with the essay "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." In this essay, he suggests that a fundamental "rupture" in the history of the concept of structure occurred in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This rupture, exemplified in the Nietzschean critique of metaphysics and in the Freudian critique of the identity of consciousness, involved a new ability to conceive of structures based on principles of play, interpretation, and sign rather than on older notions of presence, truth, and an ultimate center to all structures (247-250). Derrida then points out that there are two directly opposed ways of reacting to this loss. The first involves a longing or nostalgia for the apparent security that such centers had always provided. Derrida associates this nostalgic rage for order with structuralism, particularly with the anthropological studies of Lévi-Strauss. The second potential reaction is that of Nietzsche, "the Nietzschean *affirmation*—the joyous affirmation of the freeplay of the world and without truth, without origin, offered to an active interpretation" (264).

Derrida's deconstructive program pursues the implications of this Nietzschean affirmation, especially for philosophy. In the process, Derrida undertakes the development of an alternative approach to philosophy that eschews many of the most cherished and fundamental assumptions of the Western philosophical tradition. Vincent B. Leitch provides a series of aphorisms that summarize many of the principal implications of Derridean deconstruction:

The world is text. Nothing stands behind. . . . The concepts "being," "consciousness," "presence," and "self" are creations, fabrications, patchworks—interpretations. Functions not facts. Effects of language, not causes. . . . The text is not an autonomous or unified object, but a set of relations with other texts. . . . The "genealogy" of the text is necessarily an incomplete network of conscious and unconscious borrowed fragments. Manifested, tradition is a mess. Every text is intertext. (58-59)

Probably the most fundamental assumption of Western philosophy is Aristotle's principle of noncontradiction, which states that a thing cannot both have a property and not have a property. Derrida, following Nietzsche, argues that this principle leads to an "either-or" logic that leads directly to the habit of dualistic thinking (or division of all aspects of life into binary sets of opposed categories) that is central to Western thought. For Derrida, such dualistic thinking is impoverishing; it cannot encompass the complexity and richness of language

and its products, which do not fall neatly into either-or categories. Furthermore, and perhaps more important, Derrida finds that dualistic thought inevitably leads to hierarchization, with one pole of a binary opposition being valued over the other. He therefore seeks to undermine, or deconstruct, binary oppositions throughout his work, typically by showing that the two poles are not diametrically opposed but mutually involved. There can be no concept of "bad," for instance, without a concept of "good"—and vice versa. Derrida thereby disrupts the traditional privileging of one pole over the other by showing that they cannot even be conceived of independently.

This project can be applied directly to literary texts, which are often constructed on the basis of binary oppositions. As Christopher Norris, a leading explicator of Derrida's work, points out, one of the essential features of a deconstructive reading is that it "consists, not merely in *reversing* or *subverting* some established hierarchical order, but in showing how its terms are indissociably entwined in a strictly undecidable exchange of values and priorities" (Derrida 56). Barbara Johnson, describing her own deconstructive critical practice, provides an excellent summary of the process of deconstruction of binary oppositions in the reading of literature:

The starting point is often a binary difference that is subsequently shown to be an illusion created by the workings of differences much harder to pin down. The differences *between* entities (prose and poetry, man and woman, literature and theory, guilt and innocence) are shown to be based on a repression *within* entities, ways in which an entity differs from itself. . . . The "deconstruction" of a binary opposition is thus not an annihilation of all values or differences; it is an attempt to follow the subtle, powerful effects of differences already at work within the illusion of a binary opposition. (x-xi)

Many of the dualities central to Western thought (male versus female, white versus nonwhite) have clear social and political implications. Others have more subtle philosophical implications, and it is on the latter that Derrida himself concentrates. For example, his challenge to the notion of a distinct boundary between the inside and outside of texts undercuts the dualistic distinction between these regions while at the same time questioning the traditional formalist privileging of the text while paying little attention to historical context. Similarly Derrida extends the structuralist challenge to the notion of the autonomous self to undermine the dualistic opposition between subject and object, or individual and surrounding world, that is central to Western philosophical systems like that proposed by René Descartes. From the perspective of literary studies, one of Derrida's most important projects involves a challenge to the traditional distinction between philosophy (as the literal expression of truth about the world) and literature (as the metaphorical realm of fiction).

In particular, Derrida denies a dualistic distinction between literal and metaphorical language. Following Nietzsche, Derrida argues that language cannot

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escape from metaphors: "If one wished to conceive and class all the metaphorical possibilities of philosophy, one metaphor, at least, always would remain excluded, outside the system: the metaphor, at the very least, without which the concept of metaphor could not be constructed, or, to syncopate an entire chain of reasoning, the metaphor of metaphor" (*Margins* 219-220). Philosophical language, like literary language, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature, and as a result the traditional claim that philosophy provides a more direct expression of truth than literature does has no basis.

Derrida pursues this deconstruction of the distinction between philosophy and literature in a number of ways. For one thing, he often writes about literature, as in the essays collected in *Acts of Literature*. For example, Derrida has identified the writing of James Joyce as one of the major influences on this philosophy. Derrida also writes in a highly literary fashion, employing complex writing strategies that eschew the traditional philosophical drive for lucidity and instead embrace a playful, punning discourse in which the sounds of words can be as important as their meanings and style can be as important as content. The sometimes frustrating experience of reading Derrida's writing is described in an early review of the English translation of *Of Grammatology*:

A reader feels that to raise one question will necessarily uncover a whole network of possible lines of investigation, until he finds himself almost entirely implicated in Derrida's text and its system of literary and philosophical allusions—perhaps without hope of exit. . . . After reading a text written, as Derrida would say, by his ironic discourse, therefore, the reader trained in the Anglo-American school of analytic philosophy is likely to be left with the impression of a man playing with the pieces of a jig-saw puzzle—the pieces being fragments largely drawn from texts of Nietzsche, Freud, and Heidegger. . . . Such a reader naturally expects the puzzle to be solved in the end, and is disappointed and bewildered when he finds instead that Derrida appears able only to play with the pieces. Perhaps the essential pieces are missing after all, or perhaps there are too many pieces to begin with. (O'Hara 363-365)

A great deal of Derrida's work is in fact concerned with the topic of writing. One of his central arguments involves the somewhat surprising conclusion that Western thought has consistently privileged spoken over written language because the former seems more directly linked to its originating speaker and thus more closely similar to the Word of God that supposedly spoke the universe into being. Although Derrida's critique of the privileging of speech over writing goes back to Plato, it focuses particularly on structuralism. For example, he argues that Saussure's emphasis on spoken language is a principal modern example of this long-term trend. Derrida also discusses the argument of Lévi-Strauss in *Tristes Tropiques* that his introduction of writing into an oral South American native culture resulted in a powerful imperialistic drive toward bureaucratization in that culture. Lévi-Strauss thus sees the native culture as being

threatened with enslavement by the introduction of writing, and Derrida finds here an especially clear example of his argument that Western culture in general hates and fears the power of writing. In fact, Derrida calls this episode "the finest example of what I have called the 'metaphysics of presence'" (*Grammatology* 131). He then proceeds to argue that there is more than one way to interpret Lévi-Strauss's data concerning the effect of writing: "What is going to be called *enslavement* can equally legitimately be called *liberation*. And it is at the moment that this oscillation is *stopped* on the signification of enslavement that the discourse is frozen into a determined ideology" (131).

Derrida's conclusion here flies in the face of most analyses of encounters between European (written) culture and the oral traditions of American, Asian, and African native cultures. In particular, it ignores the many instances of imperial power and domination in which written language often played a central role. It is for such reasons that Derrida's work has often been criticized for a seeming disengagement from political reality, though politically conscious critics such as Michael Ryan have argued that Derrida's frequent radical challenges to accepted ideas have a great deal in common with emancipatory political projects such as Marxism.

In any case, for Derrida the traditional privileging of speech over writing has far-reaching implications. It is related, for instance, to the view of the human subject as the originator of meaning. As Terry Eagleton points out:

We have become accustomed since Derrida to associating a traditional Western prejudice for "living speech" as against script with a potent metaphysic of the human subject, centred in the rich plenitude of its linguistic presence, the fount and origin of all sense. It is in this refusal of the materiality of the sign, this ineradicable nostalgia for a transcendental source of meaning anterior to and constitutive of all sign systems, that Derrida finds the Western tradition most deeply marked by idealism. (55)

Derrida's own emphasis on the materiality of language, and particularly of writing, leads him to a number of important observations about the nature of the writing process. Arguing that Saussure's treatment of the relationship between signifier and signified is informed by a traditional Western belief that meaning precedes language (that the signified exists prior to the signifier, which then simply represents it), Derrida points out that in the epoch of theology/metaphysics, signification (the creation of meaning through signs) is always belated. Signs exist as the secondary expressions of preexisting meaning, and signification points back to a place of origin: "Thus, within this epoch, reading and writing, the production or interpretation of signs, the text in general as a fabric of signs, allow themselves to be confined within secondariness. They are preceded by a truth, or a meaning already constituted by and within the element of the logos" (*Grammatology* 14).

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in the process of writing. One of his key terms is *différance*, a neologism combining the French verbs for "to differ" and "to defer" to show how language depends on differential systems to produce meaning while at the same time endlessly postponing a final end to this production. There is, then, a fundamental difference between traditional authorship and what Derrida calls "writing": The theological notion of authorship points backward (and inward) to a prior point of origin; writing is radically contemporary, pointing forward and outward, irreducibly caught up in the flow of history and in an explosive dissemination of multiple meanings. Derrida extends Barthes's structuralist notion of writing not as the expression of individual consciousness but as an assemblage of intertextual fragments, making it more radical:

It is a question of producing a new concept of writing. This concept can be called *gram* or *différance*. . . . Whether in the order of spoken or written discourse, no element can function as a sign without referring to another element which itself is not simply present. This interweaving results in each "element"—phoneme or grapheme—being constituted on the basis of the trace within it of the other elements of the chain or system. This interweaving, this textile, is the *text* produced only in the transformation of another text. Nothing, neither among the elements nor within the system, is anywhere ever simply present or absent. There are only, everywhere, differences and traces. The *gram*, then, is the most general concept of semiology—which thus becomes *grammatology*. (*Positions* 26)

To Derrida, not only do all words bear the traces of their previous appearances in other texts (and even of their *future* appearances in other texts), but they also bear the traces of the other words in the text. In fact, the system of self-reference in literary language extends outward to encompass the entire linguistic structure. Thus each word bears the traces of all other words in the entire language: "Certain forces of association unite—at diverse distances, with different strengths and according to disparate paths—the words 'actually present' in a discourse with all the other words in the lexical system" (*Dissemination* 129-130). The intricate interrelationships among different parts of the linguistic system are beyond authorial control and often lead to results that authors neither intend nor anticipate. Because of such relationships, no author can produce a pure expression of her own thoughts, which in any case are themselves a product of language. For Derrida, "the writer writes *in* a language and *in* a logic whose proper system, laws, and life his discourse by definition cannot dominate absolutely. He uses them only by letting himself, after a fashion and up to a point, be governed by the system" (*Grammatology* 158).

Among other things, Derrida is aware that his own project cannot escape the heritage of the metaphysical tradition: "*There is no sense* in doing without the concepts of metaphysics in order to attack metaphysics. We have no language—no syntax and no lexicon—which is alien to this history; we cannot utter a

single destructive proposition which has not already slipped into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest" ("Structure" 250). But Derrida is not suggesting here that nothing can be done; he is merely indicating that any attack on metaphysics must be an attack from within and that such an attack must include self-referential meditations on its own terms and conditions.

For Derrida, all writing is a process of "grafting," or assembling preexisting fragments, regardless of whether the author is aware of this process. No text exists in isolation. Instead all texts are part of the intertextual system, so that "reading . . . cannot legitimately transgress the text toward something other than it, toward the referent (a reality that is metaphysical, historical, psychobiographical, etc.) or toward a signifier 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 of the text" (*Grammatology* 158).

Derrida relates his vision of texts as the result of intertextual connections to the process referred to by Lévi-Strauss as *bricolage*, where the *bricoleur* is a sort of junk man who randomly collects odd bits and scraps without any particular plan and then uses those diverse materials as the need arises. Derrida himself often foregrounds the *bricolage* nature of his own writing by creating split texts composed of different elements differentiated by the use of different fonts, multiple columns, and so on. Texts such as "The Double Session" (*Dissemination* 173-286), "Living on," and (most important) *Glas* overtly enact the Derridean view of the construction of all texts. Indeed Derrida sometimes relates his own methods to those of the *bricoleur* and even suggests that, because of the "necessity of borrowing one's concepts from the text of a heritage which is more or less coherent or ruined, it must be said that every discourse is *bricoleur*" ("Structure" 255). As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak puts it, echoing Julia Kristeva's reminder of the inescapability of intertextuality, Derrida's views on the limitations of knowledge imply that "the reason for *bricolage* is that there can be nothing else" (xix). In this vein, Derrida speaks of the way his own texts are quite literally "assembled": "I insist on the word 'assemblage' here. . . . The word 'assemblage' seems more apt for suggesting that the kind of bringing-together proposed here has the structure of an interlacing, a weaving, or a web, which would allow different threads and different lines of sense or force to bring others together" (*Speech* 132).

This vision of writing leads Derrida to be particularly critical of classical forms of writing (philosophical and otherwise) that seek to hide their textuality and present themselves as finished, seamless wholes. For example, he argues that a book, through its very nature as a bound unit, stands as a representation of the metaphysical ideal of wholeness and full presence that underlies the entire history of Western philosophy. Furthermore, for Derrida the idea of the book as a totality implies a view of language as being capable of expressing complete, self-contained meaning. In his essay "The End of the Book and the Beginning of Writing," Derrida warns against the illusions of closure and completeness that

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the book tends to encourage. Instead Derrida wants to emphasize the notion of writing as an ongoing and dynamic activity as opposed to the static nature of the book. The very notion of the book as the endpoint of writing acts to devalue the process in favor of the product, and the very notion of endpoints and closures indicates a belief in ultimate origins and truths:

The idea of the book is the idea of a totality, finite or infinite, of the signifier; this totality of the signifier cannot be a totality, unless a totality constituted by the signified preexists it, supervises its inscriptions and its signs, and is independent of it in its ideality. The idea of the book, which always refers to a natural totality, is profoundly alien to the sense of writing. It is the encyclopedic protection of theology and of logocentrism against the disruption of writing, against its aphoristic energy, and . . . against difference in general. (*Grammatology* 18)

Indeed Derrida has suggested that this attack on the totality of the book is central to his entire early project. When asked by an interviewer to comment on his own books, he responded that "in what you call my books, what is first put into question is the unity of the book and the unity 'book' considered as a perfect totality, with all the implications of such a concept. And you know that these implications concern the entirety of our culture, directly or indirectly" (*Positions* 3). Derrida's books, then, are in fact antibooks. Much of this attack on totalization, or the development of all-encompassing ideas or systems (occurring in the late 1960s), obviously arises from the intellectual climate of the time and is specifically motivated by an opposition to the kinds of totalizing systems proposed by Derrida's structuralist predecessors. Such attacks on the illusory wholeness of the book are common in poststructuralist discourse, and it is no accident that poststructuralist critics prefer to speak in terms of "texts" rather than "books." Derrida explains the difference: "If I distinguish the text from the book, I shall say that the destruction of the book, as it is now under way in all domains, denudes the surface of the text. That necessary violence responds to a violence that was no less necessary" (*Grammatology* 18). In short, a principal difference is that the text lays bare its own mode of operation, exhibiting a self-conscious awareness of (and thereby shattering) the illusion of wholeness and completeness implied by the physical status of the book as a bound volume.

It is in this opposition to ideas of wholeness, completeness, and unity that deconstruction differs most radically from the ideas of the New Critics. Derrida's own project radically resists reduction to the status of a well-defined system. For example, Rodolphe Gasché notes the importance of the ultimate undecidability of so many of Derrida's positions: "This plural nature, or openness, of Derrida's philosophy makes it thoroughly impossible to conceive of his work in terms of orthodoxy . . . primarily because it resists any possible closure, and thus doctrinal rigidity, for essential reasons" (8). Critics such as Richard Rorty have argued that Derrida's work depends so crucially on a direct confrontation with the Western philosophical tradition that Derrida's project is itself in danger of hardening into

a system. Meanwhile the widespread popularity of Derrida's ideas among literary critics in America in the 1970s led to an institutionalization of deconstruction as a "method" that some (including Derrida himself) have seen as contrary to the antisystematic nature of his own project.

A number of important American critics (including Paul de Man, J. Hillis Miller, Geoffrey Hartman, Harold Bloom, Barbara Johnson, Shoshana Felman, and Joseph Riddel) have pursued deconstructionist methods of literary criticism that are importantly influenced by Derrida's work. Such criticism typically involves close and careful reading of literary texts to seek points at which they rely on metaphysical assumptions, dualistic thinking, or logocentric thought. Deconstructive critics then attempt to show how texts at such points contradict or undermine themselves, leading to the generation of meanings that may go beyond, or even directly oppose, those apparently intended by the author. When done well, deconstructive criticism makes important and fundamental statements about the nature of literary texts and of language itself. It can also be intellectually challenging, even exhilarating in the play of its language and the force of its ideas.

The radical challenge to closure and completeness that is so crucial to deconstruction has provoked a great deal of opposition from more conventional critics, who see the denial of firm meaning in deconstructive analysis as a form of interpretive anarchy. Such critics (M. H. Abrams, Robert Alter, Gerald Graff, John M. Ellis, Denis Donoghue, and E. D. Hirsch are among the more prominent) have also charged that deconstructive analyses, especially when performed by critics who may be less adept than leading practitioners such as Miller or de Man, tend to produce a tedious and formulaic sameness, predictably reducing all texts to a demonstration of the inherent instability and ambiguity of language. Indeed for some critics, deconstruction is not radical *enough*, amounting to little more than a reworking of the New Criticism with a French accent. For such reasons, and for difficulties in engaging with real-world political issues, deconstruction has become less popular in American literary criticism since the mid-1980s. Many of its proponents, however, believe that this loss in popularity may ultimately be a positive development, allowing an escape from trendiness that will encourage more serious and fundamental exploration of the implications of deconstruction.

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