

# Deconstruction, literature and ideology

Wilhelm Liebenberg

## Summary

This paper attempts to show how deconstruction is liable to misunderstanding and non recognition (especially in South Africa and in the USA) because of the fact that it is divorced from its materialist base and because of the failure to understand it as essentially a critique of Western metaphysics, as a deconstruction of (Hegelian) idealism in all its ramifications, and not of texts as such. When texts are read/written, they are used to illustrate concepts and to unearth codes of society structured by ideology. Thus The Theory of the Text, in fact, necessitates a sociology of literature.

The deconstructionist needs to know exactly what he or she is trying to escape from and needs to make visible the hidden ideologies and thereby supplying intertextually validated alternative interpretations. This is allowed for by Barthes, but Barthes did not bother to undertake it, thus ignoring a central discovery of the Bakhtin school: that the ideological nature of meaning implies that the sign, when used, is always a site of struggle, whether one is aware of it or not.

## Opsomming

Hierdie artikel toon hoedat dekonstruksie maklik misverstaan en misken kan word en (s veral in Suid-Afrika en in die VSA) vanweë die feit dat dit losgemaak word van sy materialistiese grondslag en vanweë 'n onvermoë om dit te verstaan as wesentlik 'n kritiek op Westerse metafisika, as 'n dekonstruksie van (Hegeliaanse) idealisme en wat daarmee gepaard gaan en nie as 'n dekonstruksie van tekste as sodanig nie. Wanneer tekste gelees/geskryf word, is dit om konsepte te illustreer en om ideologies-gevormde sosiale kodes uit te lig. Die Teorie van die Teks noodsaak dus 'n literatuursosiologie.

Die dekonstruksiekritikus moet weet waarvan hy/sy wegvlug en moet ideologieë ontbloot en ook alternatiewe interpretasies gee wat intertekstueel bewys word. So 'n benadering is moontlik binne Barthes se teorie, maar Barthes het hom nie geërg aan so 'n onderneming nie, waardeur hy 'n kritieke ontdekking van die Bakhtin-skool verwaarloos het, naamlik: dat die ideologiese aard van betekenis onvermydelik impliseer dat die stryd gaan om die gebruikte teken, of mens daarvan bewus is of nie.

At the beginning of his work *Of Grammatology* (1974) Jacques Derrida foresees the dawning of a new age. He maintains that

phonetic writing, the medium of the great metaphysical, scientific, technical, and economic adventure of the West, is limited in space and time . . . (1974a:10)

The end of Western metaphysics, which he regards as 'all in all a short enough adventure' spanning no more than three millennia, is historically outlined, according to Derrida, by the way in which the notion of language on which it is based 'now seems to be approaching what is really its own *exhaustion*' (1974a:8). For:

By a slow movement whose necessity is hardly perceptible, everything that for at least some twenty centuries tended toward and finally succeeded in being gathered under the name of language is beginning to let itself be transferred to, or at least summarized under, the name of writing. (1974a:6)

This displacement of language by writing is the theme of Derrida's so called 'deconstruction' of the traditional notion of language that has been with us since Aristotle, according to whom:

Spoken words are the symbols of mental experience and written words are the symbols of spoken words. (Quoted in Derrida, 1974a:30)

One finds the same idea in De Saussure at the beginning of this century:

Language and writing are two distinct systems of signs; the second exists for the sole purpose of representing the first. (*ibid.*)

This hierarchical ordering of language and writing is inverted by Derrida, and in the process both language and writing are redefined. In a sense De Saussure's definition already deconstructs itself: the fact that one can talk of writing as a secondary signifier – a signifier of a signifier – opens up the possibility of seeing language – the so called original signified – in exactly the same way. Derrida is thus able to write that

the signified always already functions as a signifier. The secondarity that it seemed possible to ascribe to writing alone affects all signifieds in general. (1974a:7)

Language is thus seen as only an aspect, a species of writing, thereby underlining its material nature – a materiality that has been repressed by 'logocentrism' since Aristotle.

I do not have the time to go into the detail of this deconstruction of what is essentially the idealism in De Saussure; what I would like to emphasise however is that Derrida's deconstruction of Western metaphysics, or 'logocentrism' as he calls it, has the nature of a critique of ideology.

What is metaphysics? A white mythology which assembles and reflects western culture: the white man takes his own mythology (that is, Indo-European mythology), his *logos* – that is, the *mythos* of his idiom, for the universal form of that which it is still his inescapable desire to call Reason . . . (Derrida, 1974b:11)

As in the case of ideology, metaphysics according to this view presents that which is historically determined as if it were universal, natural, or common sense. There is a difference however, in that Western metaphysics as Derrida describes it, spans the whole of Indo-germanic civilisation for the past three millennia, whereas ideologies are normally seen to pertain to different classes and to dominate for relatively shorter periods. Roland Barthes, who also sees the dawning of a new age when he talks of a new discourse, bringing about a mutation 'perhaps as important . . . as the one marking the passage from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance' (quoted in Kristeva, 1980:92) therefore talks of an ideological critique of the sign. Kristeva, who similarly sees the second half of the Middle Ages as 'a period of transition for European culture,' marked by the way in which 'thought based on the sign replaced that based on the symbol' (1980:38) also uses the term 'ideology' rather than 'metaphysics'.

Derrida's deconstruction is thus aimed at something similar but much more fundamental and of a much greater duration than an ideology – something which in fact he does not even believe one can someday escape from (cf. *Positions*, 1981:17). For him 'it is not a question of 'rejecting'' notions such as time, presence, truth and all that accompanies logocentrism, for

they are necessary and, at least at present, nothing is conceivable for us without them. It is a question at first of demonstrating the systematic and historical solidarity of the concepts and gestures of thought that one often believes can be innocently separated. (1974a:13)

Therefore, in deconstructing, one is

operating necessarily from the inside, borrowing all the strategic and economic resources of subversion from the old structure. (1974a:24)

This means that one actually remains within the very metaphysics one is trying to dismantle:

... that is to say without being able to isolate (the) elements and atoms (of the old structure), the enterprise of deconstruction always in a certain way falls prey to its own work. (*ibid.*)

And therefore:

above all the work of deconstruction, its 'style', remain(s) by nature exposed to misunderstanding and nonrecognition. (1974a:4)

It is this liability to misunderstanding and nonrecognition that will be the theme of the rest of this paper.

This very propensity for being misunderstood has itself been misinterpreted. It is made into an inevitability by Jonathan Culler for instance, who takes it to imply that there is no reason to believe that any such theoretical enterprise could ever free itself from the premises it seeks to undermine. (cf. Culler, 1983:109) There is however a distinct difference between likelihood and such inevitability. When Derrida writes, after introducing the terms *graphie* and *trace*:

My efforts will now be directed toward slowly detaching these two concepts from the classical discourse from which I necessarily borrow them (1974a:46),

he is not the victim of the universal irony one finds in Culler. To clarify this necessity for slow detachment, it might be useful to follow up a footnote to his article, 'White Mythology', which refers one to Althusser's essay on 'Contradiction and Overdetermination', specifically the parts dealing with that well known passage of Marx:

With (Hegel, the dialectic) is standing on its head. It must be turned right side up again, if you would discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell.

Althusser argues that a mere inversion would leave the dialectic untouched, since 'it is inconceivable that the essence of the dialectic in Hegel's work should not be contaminated by Hegelian ideology' (Althusser, 1977:91). He consequently argues that this expression – the 'inversion' of the dialectic – which he regards as being metaphorical, poses 'not the problem of the inversion of the 'sense' of the dialectic, but that of the *transformation of its structures*' (*ibid.*:93). He argues that Marx did not in fact merely retain the terms of the Hegelian model of society and 'invert' them – 'He substituted other, only distantly related terms for them' (*ibid.*:109). Moreover, with Marx 'it is not just *the terms* which change, it is also *their relations themselves*' (*ibid.*:111).

This article of Althusser not only makes clear what is involved when Derrida talks of deconstruction, but also shows a certain allegiance. Although his exact relation to Marx and Lenin remains a big question (cf. an interview with him by Houdebine and Scarpetta in *Positions* (Derrida, 1981)), he makes it quite clear that what he writes 'can be considered' 'materialist' (*ibid.*:64) and that his deconstruction is the deconstruction of idealism – the ideology of Hegel. It is the idealism in De Saussure that he deconstructs when he inverts the hierarchy of language and writing and painstakingly sets out to transform the terms, and the relations between them, so as to found, not a 'science' of the sign, but a materialist Grammatology.

It is this materialist basis which gets lost when deconstruction crosses the ocean to America. A typical product of the Yale type of deconstruction is the notion of 'misreading', which one finds in Harold Bloom and Paul de Man. Parodying Derrida's inversion of language and writing, the 'hierarchy' between reading and misreading is 'inverted' to make of reading just a special case of misreading. Misreading would then 'resist metaphysical idealizations and capture the temporal dynamic of our interpretive situation' (Culler, 1983:178). This, however, is not essentially different from any relativistic notion of reading. An inversion has been made, but no real transformation: the idealist connotations of the word *reading* are not necessarily done away with when one uses the word *misreading* instead. In fact, 'misreading' still implies some true reading (perhaps even more than the word *reading* by itself).

This becomes all the more apparent when one compares it to the way the notion of reading has been treated in France. Julia Kristeva, for instance, underlines the way in which the word *lire* has been historically determined by restoring it to its earlier uses: to gather, to pluck, to take possession of, to spy, to steal... (1967:58). Reading would clearly not be a specific case of 'misreading' if the word meant all these things. Philippe Sollers, to quote a further example, had in any case already deconstructed the distinction between reading and writing, replacing both by the concept *écriture-lecture*, which has been taken over by Kristeva, Baudry and Derrida himself, and which fits in with Derrida's transformed materialist notion of writing.

Misreading is not the only example of American Deconstruction which simply inverts without transforming. The term 'deconstruction' itself has fallen prey to the danger of being misunderstood and lapsing back into

idealism. Loosened from its materialist anchors it easily becomes a thing in itself. 'A deconstructive reading', according to Barbara Johnson, 'is a reading which analyses the specificity of a text's critical difference from itself' (1981:167). 'Difference is not engendered in the space between identities,' she writes, 'it is what makes all totalisation of the identity of a self or the meaning of a text impossible' (*ibid.*:166). Note that this type of deconstructive reading is still a reading in the traditional sense of the word – merely a specific way of reading which 'deconstructs' itself without posing any alternative.

One could also identify another mode of 'deconstructive' reading which simply applies Derridean terminology, using deconstruction as a model for the interpretation of literary texts – a way to solve a hermeneutic problem. Barbara Johnson on 'Sarrasine' by Balzac, for instance:

In Derrida's terms, Sarrasine reads the opera singer as pure Voice, as an illusion of imaginary immediacy, as full and transparent logos, whereas she is the very image of the empty and arbitrary sign, of writing inhabited by its own irreducible difference from itself. (1981:172)

This is the style of deconstruction that seems to have been imported into this country. It is in this way that the concept was consistently applied with respect to texts of Byron, Fugard and John Miles at a special conference on deconstruction held by SAVAL at Potchefstroom earlier this year. (The papers are included in this number.)

The general spirit of this type of deconstructive criticism is reflected quite clearly in Jonathan Culler's reply to the reproach that it weakens the original formulations of Derrida. According to Culler, to set up his work

as the original word and treat other deconstructive writing as a fallen imitation is precisely to forget what deconstruction has taught one about the relation between meaning and iteration and the internal role of misfires and infelicities. Deconstruction is created by repetitions, deviations, disfigurements. It emerges from the writings of Derrida... only by dint of iteration: imitation, citation, distortion, parody. (Culler, 1983:228)

This parody, or 'misreading', of 'what deconstruction has taught one' clearly ignores Derrida's insistence on the manner in which deconstruction should, following Althusser, not only invert, but also transform.

When deconstruction becomes a thing in itself like this, each deconstruction can in turn be deconstructed. Uses in this way, it becomes a tool, a mere technique in the service of a sinicism which simply sees everything as being relative. It becomes a matter of deconstructio ad absurdum (as a colleague of mine remarked) by which all Derrida's fears are realised and his critique of idealism with its painstaking work at transformation completely neutralised.

Derrida himself warns against this:

Every time that, in order to hook writing precipitously up with some reassuring outside or in order to make a hasty break with idealism, one might be brought to ignore certain recent theoretical attainments, one would all the more surely

regress into idealism, with all of what . . . cannot but link up with it, singularly in the figures of empiricism and formalism. (1981b:43/44)

The recent theoretical attainments he refers to include: the critique of the transcendental signified, deconstruction, and the reconstruction of the textual field out of the workings of intertextuality. It is to the latter that I now wish to turn.

What then is this reconstruction of the textual field without which deconstruction is sure to regress and slip back into idealism? It is the theory of the text which was developed by those associated with the journal *Tel Quel* in Paris during the late 1960's and early 1970's (Barthes, Derrida, Kristeva and Sollers). It is a theory which arose, as Barthes puts it, out of the 'meeting of different epistemes: Freudianism, Marxism and Structuralism' – out of a Freudian and Marxist critique of Structuralism in fact (Barthes, 1981a:35).

This is not the place to try and explain this theory and theoretical concepts put forward by Julia Kristeva (phenotext and genotext, signifiante and jouissance, signifying practice, productivity and intertextuality); for the purpose of my argument I will however dwell for a moment on the relation between the sign and ideology.

The Theory of the Text uses the term 'ideology' as Althusser uses it, and very much as it was used by the Bakhtin School in Russia in the 1920's (Bakhtin, Volosinov, Medvedjev). The term 'ideologeme' employed by Kristeva is in fact taken over from the Bakhtin School who used it for the basic unit of meaning, which is by nature ideological. Ideology according to this approach is not simply 'false consciousness' but a structuration without which no communication would be possible at all.

It is Julia Kristeva who, in the wake of Derrida's deconstruction of the idealism in De Saussure, came forward with a more sophisticated development of the Bakhtin School approach when, in an essay published in *Tel Quel* in 1967 ('Pour une sémiologie des paragrammes') she proposed a revision of the concept of the literary text based on the principles announced in the 'Annagrams' of De Saussure.<sup>1</sup>

In a move similar to Derrida's deconstruction of the hierarchy between language and writing, he shows poetic language to be, not a mere deviation from normal language, but the exploration of the possibilities of language. Normal language becomes a restricted subset of poetic language. Underlying signification there is thus an infinity of possibilities. This is an approach which ties up with De Saussure's original notion of the arbitrary nature of the sign.

The sign being arbitrary, and the potential relations between signifiers infinite, it follows that some stabilisation of the way a signifier is related to a signified is necessary for any communication to be possible at all. The arbitrary nature of the sign thus implies its social nature. Meaning is a matter of convention, a structuration of the interrelationships between signs determined by the historical requirements of society. This amounts to saying that meaning is ideological, that no communication is possible without some structuration which pins down a signifier to a signifier like the upholstery buttons (*points de capiton*) of Lacan.

It is on Lacan that Kristeva draws largely in her doctoral thesis, *Revolution and Poetic Language*, of which the theoretical introduction appeared in English translation last year, and wherein she puts forward a theory of the nature of the possibilities of signification underlying language in terms of psycho-analytical concepts such as drives, lack and desire.

Such in essence, and in very simplified terms, is Kristeva's materialist alternative to a theory of language. With regard to it I would like to make two points. The first being that it has been accompanied by a very specific bias.

'The Theory of the Text,' as Barthes sums it up in an article of that name in 1973 (1981a:31-47), favours a practice of exceeding the limitations of signification, of breaking loose from the ideologically structured phenotext that constitutes language, to explore the possibilities of the underlying genotext, the field of play of the signifier. This practice, which opposes itself to signification, is called 'signifiante'. 'We can henceforth understand that the text,' writes Barthes,

is a scientific concept and at the same time a critical value, permitting an evaluation of works according to the degree of intensity of the 'signifiante' which is in them. Hence the privilege accorded by the theory of the text to the texts of modernity (from Lautréamont to Philippe Sollers) is double: these texts are exemplary because they present (in a state never previously attained) 'the labour of semiosis in language and with the subject', and because they constitute a de facto claim against the constraints of the traditional ideology of meaning. (1981a:41)

The theory of the text favours a practice of subversion of what in theory it studies – an anarchism for which Lautremont, Mallarme, Artaud and *Finnigan's Wake* are the favourite texts. This attitude is perhaps most pronounced in an article Julia Kristeva published in *Tel Quel* (1977) in which she writes:

A spectre haunts Europe: the spectre of dissidents (4)

and in which she advocates a spirit of anarchism against power, institutions and beliefs.

This spirit of anarchism goes hand in hand with a specific attitude towards the question of ideology. In a later work of Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, one finds for instance the following aside:

(... 'dominant ideology'. This expression is incongruous. for what is ideology? It is precisely the idea *insofar as it dominates*: ideology can only be dominant. ...where the 'dominated' are concerned, there is nothing, no ideology, unless it is precisely – and this is the last degree of alienation – the ideology they are forced (in order to make symbols, hence in order to live) to borrow from the class that dominates them. The social struggle cannot be reduced to the struggle between two rival ideologies: it is the subversion of all ideology which is in question.) (1976:32/33)

This clearly represents the spirit of anarchism Kristeva advocates. It is per-

haps this spirit of anarchism which has facilitated the easy appropriation and emasculation of the notion of 'deconstruction' which I referred to above.

Roland Barthes' view of ideology quoted above is one that I for one would not accept without question. It sees society as something remarkably monolithic, without the existence of social groups that differ in the ways they live their relations to the relations of production. To quote from another of his latest texts, *Sade, Fourier, Lyola*:

In fact, today, there is no language site outside bourgeois ideology: our language comes from it, returns to it, remains closed up in it. (Barthes 1977:10)

Bourgeois ideology has here reached the inescapable proportions of Derrida's notion of Western metaphysics. But whereas this might seem to be the situation in the Paris of the seventies, it seems quite obvious that it is not going to hold for a country like South Africa.

This brings me to the second point that I would like to make: that even if one does not share the specific perspective of the later Kristeva and Barthes, the Theory of the Text on which their anarchistic flight from ideology is based, still provides a very useful set of theoretical tools for a critique of ideology as it manifests itself in literature. In this regard one should note that the work done by Derrida, Kristeva and Barthes has been geared towards a critique of metaphysics and of ideology as such, and not towards the understanding of the specific nature of the ideology that manifests itself in any specific reading of a text. It is for this reason that the texts of modernity that Barthes refers to in the quotation above, have been valued so highly – those are the texts that foreground and put in question metaphysics and ideology. When Derrida reads/writes a text by Mallarme in 'The Double Session' (1981b) he is using the text to illustrate the workings of 'dissemination', and not using deconstruction to read the text. Similarly Roland Barthes is not interpreting or reading when he cuts up Balzac's 'Sarrasine' in *S/Z* or Edgar Allan Poe's short story in his 'Textual Analysis of Poe's 'Valdemar''. He is analysing, and

the analysis itself, although it was carried out on a contingent text, was already theoretical, in the sense that it observed (that was its aim) a language in the process of formation. That is to say – or to recall – that we have not carried out an explication of the text. (Barthes 1981b:155)

This theoretical practice which has been demarcated by Barthes, and which in his work has been largely restricted to analysing the working of ideology as such, in fact allows one to go beyond the text in a way not made possible by the formalist sciences of literary theory and semiology:

it reintroduces into its field history (and) society (in the form of the intertext). (Barthes, 1981a:45)



The intersection of phenotext and genotext constitutes:

what is called, in the wake of the Russian post-Formalists and Kristeva, an 'ideologeme', a concept which allows us to articulate the text on to the intertext and to 'think it in the texts of society and history'. (*ibid.*:44)

The codes that constitute the many voices that participate in the intertextual weaving of the text, are conventions, rooted in society, structured by ideology. It is the identification of these codes, which has been begun by Barthes, that enables one to relate the text to society and history, to discover how writing reads reality, how the codal possibilities have been limited, how meaning is overdetermined; how the text is structured ideologically. These codes also enable one to observe how the text is written when being read – which side of a not so obvious ambiguity the reader sides with, which codes are activated and which codes are being repressed.

What I am suggesting is that the Theory of the Text, as outlined by Barthes, makes possible – in fact implies – a sociology of literature (which can go much further than Lucien Goldman's correlation of the broad themes of Racine with the 'vision du monde' of the Noblesse du Robe, or his later attempts at finding a structural homology between the economy and the text). I would further suggest that this is not only made possible, but necessary, if one wants to arrive at any understanding of the ways in which texts *are* in fact interpreted, and *do* in fact communicate.

I would be sceptical of the success of any 'deconstructive' flight from ideology that does not know what exactly it is that it is trying to escape from, and its ability to transform what remains invisible. In his deconstruction of idealism, Derrida makes visible what has been repressed – he shows the historical and mythological nature of concepts that have been accepted as natural and sets out to transform them. In her critique of the sign Julia Kristeva has similarly situated an idealist notion in its history and come up with a materialist alternative. If one wished to do something similar for literature one would first of all have to make visible the hidden ideology – the ideology of reading and writing – along the lines indicated by Roland Barthes.

And secondly, it is not enough to just experience the 'jouissance' of going beyond the limitations of communication. Does this experiencing and exploration of the possibilities of signification not also leave the operative ideology intact, waiting in the wings for the moment one is going to need it again in order to communicate? Demystifying ideology is not just a matter of escaping from it, but of writing some understanding (some alternative interpretation) of the way in which a specific ideology structures a specific meaning by inserting the text in its specific history and society – its intertext. This is something Roland Barthes' theory clearly allows for, but which he does not bother to undertake. For all the use that the post-structuralist critique of the sign has made of the work of the Bakhtin school, they seem to have lost sight of one of its central discoveries: that the ideological nature of meaning implies that the sign, when used, is always a site of struggle, whether one is aware of it or not.

## Notes

1. A research into the possibility of a creative principle for Indo-Germanic verse that De Saussure abandoned but which was delved up out of the library at Geneva and published by Jean Starobinski in the sixties.

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