

Derivean Reading – a critique of deconstructive criticism

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Summary

For Derrida deconstruction implies the dismantling of idealism. This article shows how a certain type of deconstructive criticism, here called “Derivean Reading”, tends to regress into idealism when the focus is shifted from the re-writing of metaphysical discourse to the re-reading of literary texts. An explanation for this is sought by following through the implications of intertextuality. When the social and political intertext is brought into play, deconstruction proves to be limited when it does not go beyond criticism or philosophy and fails to propose strategies for “rewriting” the structures of society. Deconstruction turns out to be itself an idealist endeavor insofar as it merely challenges our way of understanding the world, without helping to change it.

Opsomming

Vir Derrida impliseer dekonstruksie die aftakeling van die idealisme. Hierdie artikel toon aan hoedat 'n sekere soort dekonstruksiekritiek, hier genoem “Derivean Reading”, neig om weer in idealisme terug te val wanneer die fokus verskuif van die herskryf van metafisiese diskoers na die herlees van die literêre teks. Ter verduideliking hiervan word op die implikasies van intertekstualiteit ingegaan. Wanneer die sosiale en politieke interteks betrek word, blyk dekonstruksie beperk te wees in soverre dit nie daarin slaag om met strategieë vir die “herskryf” van sosiale strukture vorendag te kom nie.

1.

I shall not attempt to deconstruct deconstruction, but rather to tell the story of how a certain way of reading, that I shall call “Derivean Reading”, could have been derived.

I take up the tale at the point where writing is foregrounded:

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. (Derrida, 1974: 6)

These are the words with which Derrida introduces “The Program” in *Of Grammatology*. In talking about a certain movement, they clearly indicate that it is necessary, that there is something inevitable about it, that history, or rather writing, will take its course. It is this programme that he attempts to help along with his deconstruction of the Saussurian notion of language. And it is not merely a matter of writing being retrieved from a position of debasedness and redefined by deconstruction; deconstruction itself involves a way of writing. Deconstruction is itself a form in which a writing asserts itself.

The role of writing in the deconstruction of logocentrism has been made clear by Derrida from the very start. Deconstruction is not just a matter of

reversing a hierarchy, but also of re-writing the terms that it necessarily borrows from the metaphysics it is deconstructing. Deconstruction involves a laborious process of slowly detaching concepts from the classical discourse they are taken from, carefully and thoroughly surrounding them with a new discourse, painstakingly subverting the old. The deconstruction of Western Metaphysics is its re-writing; it is not a matter of the already-written being simply re-read.

It is as the rewriting of the notion of “writing” itself that deconstruction is of interest to the study of literature and in this respect it grafts itself onto a more comprehensive trend or “programme” – that of a group of writers associated with the journal *Tel Quel*. Derrida’s deconstruction of the opposition between language and writing finds its parallel in the way Kristeva replaces the division between writing and the structure of the world outside it with the notion of intertextuality. It is this notion, which can be traced back to the work of Vološinov (Bakhtin), which is found back in Derrida when he pronounces that “Il n’y a pas d’hors-texte”. One also finds a similar deconstruction of the opposition between reading and writing at the hands of Phillippe Sollers, who replaces this dualism with the term *écriture/lecture*. In “The Double Session” (1982) it becomes clear to what extent Derrida’s treatment of literature is grafted onto that of Sollers, specifically Sollers’ work on Mallarmé in “Literature and Totality” (1983 – originally published in French in 1966). Derrida’s writing in this text is also clearly grafted onto the anagrams of De Saussure which were published by Starobinski in the early sixties and which paved the way for Kristeva’s theory of paragrams (1967). Derrida could thus be seen as interacting with, assisting in and drawing on the work of a specific grouping in Paris in the sixties which was involved in the elaboration of a materialist theory of literature and language. It is not without significance that “The Double Session”, which deals specifically with literature,¹ was published in *Tel Quel*.

Derrida does not himself give any deconstructive reading of a literary text; he uses literary texts to deconstruct literature. One should note also that Derrida does not use just any literary text, but turns to those which in some way or another can be used to challenge the institutions of literature and literary criticism themselves. And then he does not read them, but rewrites the discourse around them, “marking the fissures” which point towards a possible alternative. In “The Double Session” for instance Derrida refuses to read Mallarmé’s *Mimique* in a classical way and “reduce it to a brilliant literary idealism” (1982:194); instead he uses it as an illustration of how the *role of reading* can be rewritten. (1982:225)

2.

In what has become known as “deconstructive criticism” in the USA the role of reading has of late been rewritten in a variety of ways which show some or other resemblance to the work of Derrida. There are resemblances, but also differences. I have stressed the role of writing and its importance for Derrida’s approach to literature because it is precisely this that certain practitioners

of deconstructive criticism have simply ignored. Though not everyone that uses the term “deconstruction” is guilty of this rearguard action which, as I will argue, reverts to a form of idealism, it is a significant trend of which I shall give three examples.

Perhaps the most telling instance is Culler’s exposition of the notion of “mis-reading”. Modelled on Derrida’s deconstruction of the hierarchy between language and writing, an implicit hierarchy between reading and mis-reading is overturned and the former redefined as being a special case of the latter. As Culler explains:

If a text can be understood, it can in principle be understood repeatedly, by different readers in different circumstances. These acts of reading or understanding are not, of course, identical. They involve modifications and differences which are deemed not to matter. We can thus say, in a formulation more valid than its converse, that understanding is a special case of misunderstanding . . . It is misunderstanding whose misses do not matter. (1983:176)

From Derrida to Bloom to Culler, quite a shift has occurred. This becomes all the more apparent if one compares this “mis-reading” with Sollers’ notion of *écriture/lecture*, or with Derrida’s notion of writing, for that matter. The whole point about the term “writing” (and its original debasement) is that it foregrounds the material nature of language, thereby countering the notion of the signified as some transcendental idea. *Écriture/lecture* similarly points to the fact that reading is as much a productive activity as writing, as opposed to the passive reception of some transcendental meaning. Furthermore, “writing” replaces “language” in Derrida’s usage precisely because it does not carry with it the same idealist connotations. With the term “mis-reading” this is not the case. The reversal of the hierarchy between reading and mis-reading is a reversal that quite comfortably takes place *within* an idealist paradigm. What is done away with, is the notion of a “true” reading – *not* the notion of a non-material reading. It is not, in other words, an idealist notion of reading that has been deconstructed. The notion of “misunderstanding” that Culler offers by way of explanation, is completely understandable in idealist terms.

This marks a significant departure from Derrida’s use of deconstruction. For Derrida the deconstruction of logocentrism implies the deconstruction of idealism:

Logocentrism is *also*, fundamentally, an idealism. It is the matrix of idealism. Idealism is its most direct representation, the most constantly dominant force. And the dismantling of logocentrism is simultaneously – *a fortiori* – a deconstruction of idealism. (Derrida, 1981:51)

It is the idealism in Saussure that is deconstructed by overturning the hierarchy between speech and writing. It is an idealist notion of reading that Sollers deconstructs with his notion of *écriture/lecture*. Mis-reading on the other hand is no more than an (idealist) parody of Derrida’s deconstruction of idealism. It is precisely this slip back into idealism that Derrida himself repeatedly warns against and is so careful to avoid.

This slip back into idealism between Derrida/Sollers and this version of American deconstruction is manifested in a shift of emphasis from writing to reading – from the materiality of writing to the relativity of reading. Just as logocentrism, by favouring speech above writing, represses the material nature of language – that materiality which gets foregrounded when speech is seen to be part of writing – so too the material nature of reading stands to disappear from sight and be repressed when it is not seen to be part of writing. The Derridean deconstruction of idealism is reversed and an idealist notion of reading once more becomes possible. An idealist notion of reading, what's more, that parodies Derridean deconstruction by applying his techniques and terminology within an idealist paradigm. The shift from writing to reading thus makes possible a so-called “deconstructive reading” of texts which leaves idealism, and therefore also logocentrism, completely intact. A deconstructive reading which does not rewrite, but rereads. Deconstructive criticism does not deconstruct literature itself by rewriting its discourse (as Derrida does); it “saves” literature by simply rereading deconstruction.

Paul de Man, for instance, in “The Rhetoric of Blindness” – his essay on “Derrida’s Reading of Rousseau” – turns deconstruction into a “reading” which “tries to deconstruct the blindness (of literary texts)” (1983:141) in order to “bring to light what had remained unperceived by the author and his followers” (1983:116).

In doing so he simply reads Derrida’s notion of *écriture* into the text of Rousseau and finds that Rousseau’s text already contains it. He then claims that Rousseau is saying the opposite to what Derrida attributes to him (133) and that in fact Derrida and Rousseau are really saying the same thing. What Derrida, and a whole tradition of Rousseau interpreters have misread, according to de Man, is the literary nature of his language. Once one reads this as Rousseau intended, one realises, according to de Man, that Rousseau *knew* that he would be misunderstood, for it is in the very nature of literary language to be taken literally and be misunderstood. De Man then argues that this theory is confirmed by the very fact that Rousseau *was* misunderstood:

That Rousseau was misunderstood confirms his own theory of misunderstanding. (1983:136)

What Derrida thus misreads, according to de Man, is that there is no need to deconstruct Rousseau, for he escapes the logocentric fallacy to the extent that his language is literary:

If we argue, moreover, that Rousseau escapes from the logocentric fallacy precisely to the extent that his language is *literary*, then we are saying by implication that the myth of the priority of oral language over written language has always already been demystified by literature, although literature remains persistently open to being misunderstood for doing the opposite. (1983:138)

It is thus not literature as an institution that is being deconstructed, but the literary that is seen to have deconstruction built into it. Literature is not

deconstructed, but saved – it merely has to be read properly, brought to light, not be misread.

Barbara Johnson similarly projects Barthes' rewriting of a text by Balzac onto the text itself:

Balzac's text . . . itself demystified the logocentric blindness . . . Balzac's text already worked out the same type of deconstruction of the readerly ideal as that which Barthes is trying to accomplish as if it were in opposition to the classic text. (1981:172)

Here too deconstruction is read into the text, as if it is a property of the text itself (as if it were not in opposition to the "classic text"). Shifting the emphasis from writing to reading has turned the attention away from the fact that it is the discourse of criticism itself which enables such a "deconstructive reading", and that it is the discourse of Derrida and Barthes that has in fact rewritten the text.

What is lost sight of, is the way in which the text is being rewritten when read, and the intertextual nature of this rewriting against the background of Derrida and Barthes. We find here something similar to the phenomenon that Marx describes under the heading, "The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret", in *Capital* 1, and that is called "reification" by Lukács:

The essence of commodity-structure has often been pointed out. Its basis is that a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a phantom objectivity, an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people. (Lukács, 1971:83)

Just as the exchange value of a commodity is attributed to the commodity itself within modern capitalism, thereby concealing its nature – the fact that a commodity only has exchange value as part of a social system of exchange relations – so too de Man and Johnson in the examples quoted attribute a certain quality to the text instead of seeing it as a function of the text's entrance into the specific discourse of deconstructive criticism. Deconstruction thus becomes reified by being attributed to the text.

A text can challenge the dominant discourse, contain contradictions which make it unreadable in terms of Western metaphysics, or be usable for the deconstruction of literature, but it does not make sense to say that it itself already deconstructs. For any text, no matter what its use for deconstruction, can be appropriated by the dominant discourse, be interpreted or simply declared to be nonsense. It can, in the words of de Man, be "misunderstood for doing the opposite" of whatever de Man wishes to see as its *real* function. And this is precisely the problem with this type of deconstruction – that it *can* be "misread". It is merely there for the enlightened few to spot, passive, at the mercy of its reader, waiting for someone to save it from the Western metaphysics it is supposed to deconstruct.

This type of deconstruction that is attributable to a text differs vastly from that undertaken by Derrida. He does not discover deconstruction in a text; he

uses a text as a launching pad for deconstructing the discourse around it. Deconstruction for him is a process of rewriting the institution of literature itself, subverting it, and not a matter of saving it by reading (not misreading) it in such a way that some hidden already deconstructive property comes to light.

Here again one sees a shift from writing to reading, from re-writing literary discourse to re-reading literary texts, from changing literature to saving the text. It is a shift from a radical strategy to subvert logocentrism and its idealist manifestations to an inherently conservative one which in no way necessitates leaving the idealist fold. This reification of deconstruction in fact amounts to nothing other than a form of idealism: the process of laboriously changing the relations between texts has taken on the character of a property that somehow magically attaches itself to some text (just as the *signifie* accompanies the *signifiant* in Saussure's phonocentric notion of the sign that Derrida took such pains to deconstruct). Deconstruction becomes some phantom presence that has always already been there, irrespective of the social relations of the society in which the text is read.

This shift from re-writing Western Metaphysics to re-reading literary texts *does* however, make possible a new way of reading in which deconstructive strategies and terminology are applied. Armies of critics can now move in on all the old classics to discover that they overturn hierarchies, elevate what has been marginal, or offer some or other inconsistency which resists them being made sense of. As a way of reading, such "deconstructive criticism" could be applied, not only to literary texts, but also to readings of texts.² What is more, every deconstruction can in turn be deconstructed, as Robert Young points out in his introductions to two articles of Barbara Johnson:

While Derrida accuses Lacan of "framing" Poe's Story, Johnson shows that he inevitable "frames" Lacan's *Seminar* also.

It could be argued then, that just as Barbara Johnson accuses Barthes of relegating Balzac's text to the readerly, in order to produce his own writerly reading, so she herself relegates Barthes' *S/Z* to the readerly to produce her own writerly reading. This, as she points out, is precisely what Sarrasine does to Zambinella in the story. At this point, we arrive (and end) with the problem of the reading-effect "trap" which Shoshana Felman analyses (but does not herself escape from) in *The Turn of the Screw*. (Young, 1981:226)

Each deconstructive reading can thus be reread/deconstructed in turn so that (by *deconstructio ad absurdum*) deconstruction itself is *mise en abime*.

This does not, however, mean that Western Metaphysics as such (or idealism) is being deconstructed. As in the case of misreading, the subversion of old certainties does not necessarily imply that their idealist base is being done away with. A "deconstructive" reading of a text that illustrates the inconsistencies and the elements of subversion imbedded in it, that questions its hierarchies or its suppression of the marginal, but still treats it as a text on its own, to be read just a little bit more closely to discover what it really says or does, remains an idealist reading.³ A "deconstructive" reading that discovers

in a text the evidence of deconstruction it is seeking reverts to the very type of mimetic reading or thematic criticism that Derrida sets out to deconstruct in “The Double Session”.

That deconstruction should relapse into idealism like this, is not something with which everyone would have a problem. An idealist like Culler, for instance, clearly does not:

A concern for purity is understandable among defenders of deconstruction, who are dismayed at the reception accorded ideas they admire, but to set up Derrida’s or de Man’s writings 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 and de Man only by dint of iteration: imitation, citation, distortion, parody. (Culler, 1983:228)

Deconstruction, here referred to as “ideas”, something that is “created”, that “teaches”, that “emerges”, has indeed acquired a phantom presence! This is nothing other than idealism re-constructing itself in a radical disguise.

3.

Deconstruction parodied, deconstruction reified, deconstruction mimed and thematised – these are ways in which the Derridean rewriting of discourse becomes a Derivean reading of texts. I have stressed the shift from writing to reading because it underlines a relapse into idealism that is easily lost sight of when other features of Derridean deconstruction are taken over. I have dwelled on how it is possible to invert hierarchies and still remain within an idealist paradigm. I have tried to illustrate the possibility, in other words, of having an idealist version of deconstruction. Perhaps one should ask why this is possible, for, after all, according to Derrida deconstruction is also the deconstruction of idealism.

A relapse into idealism takes place in the examples given when certain features of deconstruction are taken over but not others. This becomes possible when deconstructive criticism refuses to have any bias (not even an anti-idealist bias), when it is applied as a method serving no “alterior” purpose, but merely as a thing in itself. Every deconstruction could then in turn be deconstructed. *Deconstructio ad absurdum* – a fatal weakness, for if everything is seen as deconstructable, what reason would there be to favour a materialist perspective to an idealist one?

Thus it would seem that deconstruction has little (apart from Derrida’s warnings) to prevent its regress into idealism once it is practised for its own sake. And we have seen how it is possible, in its application to literature, for the emphasis to shift from writing to reading and for Derivean reading to take place. When one looks beyond the confines of literature, however, to its social context, it seems to be just about inevitable that this type of deconstruction would slip back into idealism. This can be seen when one follows through the implications of the notion of intertextuality.

First of all one should note the possibility of narrowing down the notion of intertextuality to make sense in idealist terms. The term, as proposed by Kristeva and Barthes (cf. Barthes, 1981) does not merely apply to what we have traditionally understood under “text”, but also to the social, economic and historical context within which written texts appear and are read. Understanding a text comprises not merely placing it amongst other literary texts, but writing it into its (historical, social and economic) intertext (cf. Barthes, 1981:45). The notion of “text” is thus rewritten, as Derrida does with the notion of writing. As in the case of language and writing, the hierarchy between text and reality is overturned and the dualism deconstructed. Unfortunately the word *intertextuality* does not have built into it the same anti-idealist reminder as the word *writing* which, when used for language, draws attention to its material nature. It is easy enough to reinterpret *intertextuality* in idealist terms, and to translate Derrida’s “Il n’y a pas d’hors texte” simply as: there is nothing but the text. In Post-modernist fashion⁴⁾ the literary text is then held up as a model for reality rather than the notion of text being expanded to include the rest of reality. Reality is, in other words, merely reread in textual terms – an approach which holds as little danger of breaking with an idealist paradigm as the notion of mis-reading discussed earlier.⁵⁾

It is with regards to the notion of intertextuality that deconstruction most clearly shows its inability to displace the centrality of the word and turn idealism (or logocentrism) on its feet. Having rewritten the notions of text and writing, the task of rewriting becomes more than just a matter of words: what needs to be rewritten is nothing less than the text of society – the structures of relations between people and their relations to the relations of production. This implication of the terminology of deconstruction has however not been followed through. It requires the mobilisation and participation of large groups of people and not just the esoteric brilliance of Derrida’s deconstruction on the level of what is more traditionally understood by “text”. In its own terms then, deconstruction illustrates its own limitations when it remains a literary, critical or philosophical endeavour. Barbara Foley thus quite rightly gets at its weak point when she accuses it of failing on the level of political practice (Foley, 1984).

When one considers the non-literary intertext, the implications of a shift from writing to reading become clear. Merely rereading (or mis-reading or mis-understanding) the social fabric of the intertext instead of rewriting it, amounts to merely trying to find new ways of looking at the world instead of trying to change it. It amounts to changing your idea of the world while it itself is left intact. This clearly is an idealist approach. The relevance of this regression into idealism for the deconstruction of logocentrism, similarly becomes clear. For how is one to get away from logocentrism in the end if the larger part of its intertext, the material conditions and the very texture of society, remain intact?⁶⁾

It is easy to remain blind to and simply repress this wider intertext when deconstruction becomes a thing in itself. It then, by definition, would not make sense to elaborate its own relation to its socio-political intertext, or to admit to any determination by something else, for that might imply some

(typically logocentric!) division, centering or hierarchy. Such a deconstruction which simply deconstructs (or refuses) any determining instance is inherently blind to its own parameters – to the way in which it might always, in a sense, already be derived.⁷)

Notes

1. More precisely with what goes on “between” literature and truth, with what “governs the philosophical or critical interpretation of ‘literature’, if not the operation of literary writing” (Derrida, 1982:192).
2. In her Ph.D. thesis Joan Hambidge goes as far as explaining mis-reading in terms of *différance* (1984:156–158).
3. An idealist reading, that is, of the text as if it is something autonomous, as opposed to understanding the text, or any reading of it, in its context – in its relation to other texts, to the literary trends, contentions, production and reception and to the social and economic intertext at a specific place and point in time.
4. I am referring to that literary trend with the implicit motto: All reality is fiction.
5. This is exactly the narrow version of intertextuality one finds in Leitch (1983) (and also in Cloete, Botha and Malan (1985)).
6. It is significant in this regard that Derrida himself has not elaborated the relation between his work of deconstruction and the work of Marx. For all his anti-idealism and his warnings against regressing into idealism, he has not come out with a dialectical materialist position. When pressed on this issue in an interview with Houdebine and Scarpetta (1981:62) he requests them to see the elaboration of his relation to Marx and Lenin as “lacunae” in his work. These have yet to be filled in.
7. On the relation between this type of post-structuralism and anarchism, see Liebenberg (1985)

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