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A Critique

Edited by

Rajnath

Contributions by

M. H. Abrams

Michael Vannoy Adams

Jonathan Culler

Howard Felperin

Rodolphe Gasché

Jean H. Hagstrum

Murray Krieger

Vincent B. Leitch

Christopher Norris

Leonard Orr

Rajeev Patke

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# Deconstruction. A Critique

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*Edited by*

RAJNATH

*Professor of English  
University of Allahabad*

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MACMILLAN

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First published 1989

Published by  
THE MACMILLAN PRESS LTD  
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 2XS  
and London  
Companies and representatives  
throughout the world  
Printed in Hong Kong

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
Deconstruction: a critique.

1. Literature. Deconstruction

I. Rajnath, 1943-  
801'.95

ISBN 0-333-46950-X

# Acknowledgements

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Thanks are due to the following for permission to reprint copyright works:

Cornell University Press, for 'Construing and Deconstructing' by M. H. Abrams, first published in *Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism*, edited by Morris Eaves and Michael Fischer, pp. 127–82 (copyright © 1986 by Cornell University Press).

Johns Hopkins University Press, for 'Setzung and Übersetzung: Notes on Paul de Man' by Rodolphe Gasché, which first appeared in *Diacritics*, vol. XI (1981) pp. 36–57.

University of Chicago Press, for 'The Lateral Dance: The Deconstructive Criticism of J. Hillis Miller' by Vincent B. Leitch, which first appeared in *Critical Inquiry*, vol. VI (Summer 1980) pp. 593–607.

University of Georgia, for 'Samuel Johnson among the Deconstructionists' by Jean H. Hagstrum, first published in *The Georgia Review*, vol. 39 (Fall 1985) pp. 537–47.

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# Introduction

## RAJNATH

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Deconstruction is of French origin but it has found most fertile soil in America. Derrida's philosophy has not been taken seriously by philosophers, but American literary critics have built on its basic assumptions the magnificent edifice of a new critical movement. Interestingly enough, Derrida himself emerges as a major literary critic, if judged by his own standards which do not distinguish between literature and philosophy.

The backdrop against which deconstruction emerged in France was essentially different from the background of deconstruction in America. In France deconstruction came into being in reaction against structuralism which, like phenomenology, touched the American critical scene only at a tangent. Deconstruction in America, like reader-responsism, emerged against the background of the New Criticism which had had long hegemony.

The literary criticism in America during the sixties was a confluence of several critical trends: some old, others just surfacing, but with none of them taking a predominant position. It is said that the New Criticism came to an end in 1957 with the publication of Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*. However, the immediate reaction against the New Criticism came from the Chicago critics, whose manifesto came out in 1952 under the title *Critics and Criticism* edited by their leader R. S. Crane, which included Crane's essay on Cleanth Brooks and Elder Olson's on William Empson – two virulent attacks on the major practitioners of the New Criticism.

The Chicago critics continued to publish in the sixties. In 1962 came Wayne C. Booth's major critical work, *Rhetoric of Fiction*, written under the influence of the Chicagoans. Booth stressed the need for pluralism in fictional criticism as against the New Critics' monism. In 1967 R. S. Crane published in two volumes his *Idea of the Humanities*, where in the second volume the New Critics are again denounced for their monism.

But the real blow to the New Criticism came from reader response criticism and deconstruction. Both movements began in America in the late sixties and attained maturity in the seventies. Reader-response criticism came into existence with the publication of Stanley Fish's *Surprised by Sin: The 'Reader in Paradise Lost'* (1967) and Norman N. Holland's *The Dynamics of Literary Response* (1968). The first deconstructive essay in English translation was Derrida's own 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', published in 1970 in *The Structuralist Controversy*, edited by Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato. In 1971 Paul de Man's *Blindness and Insight* ushered in deconstruction as a critical movement in America.

At the very initial stages of reader-response criticism and deconstruction, Fish and de Man each published an essay demolishing the basic premises of the New Critics. Fish's essay 'Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics', first published in *New Literary History* (1970) and later reprinted as an appendix in his *Self-Consuming Artifacts* (1972), counters the New Critical position of W. K. Wimsatt and M. C. Beardsley in 'The Affective Fallacy'. Wimsatt and Beardsley have argued that the critic going by the effect of the work on the reader is sure to go amiss. Fish gives a significant quotation from their essay where 'the affective fallacy' is defined as 'a confusion between the poem and its *results* (what it *is* and what it does)',<sup>1</sup> and goes on to demonstrate the fallacy of the affective fallacy.

Fish argues that literature is made in the mind of the reader, not in 'the printed page or the space between the covers of the book'<sup>2</sup> and therefore the work's effect on the reader cannot be ignored. The New Critics' shibboleth that the poem is on the page has been found untenable and their belief in the objectivity of the text is reckoned no more than an illusion. Fish also calls in question the New Critics' idea of spatial structure which presumes that the critic responds to the total utterance which is the unified literary work. As against the New Critics, Fish maintains that the structure of a work of literature is generated by the temporal flow of the reading experience and 'the reader responds in terms of that flow and not to the whole utterance'.<sup>3</sup> Fish also seeks to demolish the New Critics' binary distinction between ordinary and poetic language by tracing poetic qualities in what generally passes for ordinary, conversational language.

If Fish points out the fallacy of the New Critics' 'Affective

Fallacy', de Man in his 'Form and Intent in the American New Criticism' finds fallacious their 'Intentional Fallacy'. In 'The Intentional Fallacy', written jointly by W. K. Wimsatt and M. C. Beardsley, any consideration of the writer's intention is placed outside the frontiers of criticism. In their essay Wimsatt and Beardsley have maintained that 'the design or the intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art'.<sup>4</sup>

De Man argues that the New Critics' exclusion of intention is necessitated by their emphasis on organic unity. As the writer's intention flies in the face of the idea of organic unity, its consideration in literary criticism is considered fallacious. It is an artefact such as chair, not a natural object like plant, which is marked by intention.

Although the New Critics deny the writer's intention and postulate that the unity of a literary work is organic, their stress on irony and ambiguity in literature undermines organic unity. 'Instead of revealing a continuity,' writes de Man, 'affiliated with the coherence of the natural world, it takes us into a discontinuous world of reflective irony and ambiguity.'<sup>5</sup> Irony and ambiguity can characterize only an intentional object and by emphasizing these qualities the New Critics accept intention by the back door.

De Man differs with the New Critics in his concept of intention. The New Critics believe in only one kind of intention, that which the writer has in mind at the time of composition, and which can be inferred only from biographical information. But this intention, de Man argues, is different from the intention which is realised in the structure of a work of literature. The structural intention directs and controls various components of a work and designs them into a whole. As against the New Critics, de Man maintains that a literary work is an intentional, not a natural, object.

I have intentionally referred to the above essays by Stanley Fish and Paul de Man, because they mark a watershed in American literary criticism. The New Criticism may have started weakening around 1957 but its final end came only around 1970 when Fish and de Man challenged some of its basic premises.

The essays in this volume have a dual purpose. They aim at giving a critical and comprehensive account of deconstruction, and at the same time they place deconstruction in multiple perspectives. Murray Krieger covers the entire gamut of contemporary criticism, whereas M. H. Abrams studies a particular segment of it.

But being traditionalists, both argue that the human concern is not completely absent from deconstruction. My own and Jean Hagstrum's essays are studies in comparison. Christopher Norris, Michael Ryan and Michael Vannoy Adams examine deconstruction in relation to other disciplines, while Rajeev Patke assesses its relevance to the study of poetry. Howard Felperin examines the dilemma in which deconstruction finds itself. The last four essays study the individual critics.

In his essay 'From Theory to Thematics: the Ideological Under-side of Recent Theory', Murray Krieger argues that moral and ideological meanings are ever present in literary theory. Even when the critic's focus is on the verbal structure, as in the New Criticism and deconstruction, his attitude to the structure itself brings out his moral concern. In his brief survey of Western critical theory, Krieger demonstrates how the explicitly stated morality gradually yields place to the morality suggested by the literary form. In the New Criticism the spatial form is not merely the juxtaposition of opposed meanings of verbal units resolving into a synthesis, but also a suggestion of the breakthrough of the time temporal by the eternal present which has obvious ontotheological implications. As against the New Criticism, deconstruction, with its dissociations of language from reality and the emphasis on pure temporality, expresses by implication faith in 'the disappearance of God'.

In 'Construing and Deconstructing' M. H. Abrams distinguishes between the two kinds of reading that the deconstructionists make, a conventional reading of construing and a critical reading of deconstruction. Abrams calls them reading<sub>1</sub> and reading<sub>2</sub>. He traces this dual reading, like a couple of other ideas in Derrida, back to David Hume.

The standard procedure followed by the deconstructionists is to move from reading<sub>1</sub> to reading<sub>2</sub>, subverting the former by the latter. Abrams takes up as an example Derrida's reading of Rousseau's *Essay on the Origin of Language*. Derrida's first reading of the *Essay* has nothing unusual about it. He has as much faith in the determinate meaning as any other reader trained on conventional meaning which is presumably the outcome of the conventional view of language. It is in the second reading that he finds the contradiction between what Rousseau wants to say and what actually gets said, giving rising to deconstruction.

Abrams seeks to correct the distorted image of Derrida that

emerges from most commentaries on him. Derrida, according to him, does not believe in 'anything goes in interpretation', as the determinate meaning first discovered will constrain the 'freeplay' of language in the deconstructive reading. Abrams finds the procedure he discovers in Derrida in J. Hillis Miller's deconstructive reading of Wordsworth's 'A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal'. Like Derrida, Miller makes a dual reading, one conventional and the other deconstructive. Abrams shows his personal preference for conventional reading over deconstructive reading.

My own essay starts with a discussion of the parallels and differences between the New Critics and deconstructionists in their attitude to language. It points out how Richards anticipated Derrida in his concept of language and the way words function in sentences. Comparing the New Critics and deconstructionists, the epigones of Richards and Derrida respectively, I point out that they agree on the presence of the referential property of language and diametrical oppositions in poetry. Cleanth Brooks and J. C. Ransom, on the one hand, and de Man and Hillis Miller, on the other, are in agreement that the language of poetry conflates referentiality with rhetoric, denotation with connotation. Both Ransom and Brooks speak of the reconciliation of opposites. In deconstruction opposites do not reconcile but cancel each other out; nevertheless their presence is a precondition for deconstruction.

Where the New Critics and deconstructionists part company is the structure of poetry. The New Critics idealise the spatial structure with a centre, whereas the deconstructionists believe in the temporal structure and decentring.

In 'Samuel Johnson among the Deconstructionists' Jean H. Hagstrum argues that despite the gap of about two centuries between Samuel Johnson and the deconstructionists, one finds some interesting parallels between them. Johnson anticipated the deconstructive notion as expressed by Harold Bloom in *The Anxiety of Influence* that a later poet can be imitated by his ancestors.

Like the deconstructionists, Johnson also believes that a work of art cannot be reduced to determinate ideas, as its performances are inconstant and uncertain. Johnson also provides the apt vocabulary for describing the deconstructive style. He would have called it 'terrific', 'repulsive' or 'bugbear' style. Some of the adjectives that Johnson employs to castigate Shakespear can effectively sum up the style of the deconstructionists; 'fantastically perplexed', 'far-fetched and ineffective', 'forced and unnatural', for instance.

In 'Philosophy, Theory and the Contest of Faculties' Christopher Norris expresses the opinion that philosophy and criticism are best kept apart. He disapproves of the attempt on the part of pragmatists like Richard Rorty and Jean-François Lyotard to convert philosophy into criticism by calling it the interpreting of texts. Deconstruction is not an offshoot of pragmatism, as Rorty makes it out to be. He counters Rorty's argument that in its willingness to give up most of the truth-claims, deconstruction becomes another version of pragmatism. De Man's assertion that the referential function of language is not completely denied in deconstruction is itself a rebuttal of Rorty's thesis.

In 'The Marxism Deconstruction Debate in Literary Theory' Michael Ryan takes issue with deconstructive theorists as well as Marxists who discern nothing but antithesis between deconstruction and Marxism. If Christopher Norris reduces deconstruction to formalism, Frederick Jameson and Terry Eagleton fail to historicise deconstruction.

Ryan discerns political leftism and cultural pluralism in Derrida. He argues that deconstruction points out the way representation and discourses construct social reality. The same social event can be construed very differently by different news media, ABC and CBS news, for example. Similarly Ryan shows how a subculture subverts the dominant culture, just as a subtext subverts the main text, which has obvious Marxist implications.

In 'Deconstructive Philosophy and Imaginal Psychology' Michael Vannoy Adams examines the parallelism between Derrida and James Hillman, the propounder of the imaginal psychology. Adams starts with an account of the oppositional logic of structuralism which not only arranges phenomena in binary opposition but also privileges one phenomenon over another. Derrida undoes the logic of opposition by bringing in his deconstruction and dissemination stemming from the freeplay of signifiers.

Like Derrida, Hillman also rejects 'oppositionalism' which he discerns in Freud as well as Jung, since it results in the reduction of image into concept. He sets off against 'oppositionalism' his de-structuralising or revisioning which, like Derrida's dissemination, postulates the freeplay of the image. Both Derrida and Hillman inveigh against interpretation which reduces a series of signs or images to some ultimate sense.

'Deconstruction and American Poetry: Williams and Stevens' by Rajeev Patke is an application of deconstruction to these two

American poets. Starting with the differing definitions of deconstruction by Jonathan Culler, Josue Harrari, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Derrida himself, Patke goes on to demonstrate how close Heidegger and Wallace Stevens come to Derrida.

Patke takes up poems by William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens for extended analysis, as they seem to anticipate in their poetries Derrida and his deconstruction. Williams's 'The Descent' and Stevens's 'It must be Abstract' and 'Not Ideas About the Thing but the Thing Itself' are given by their poets 'dual identities' which undercut each other. These poems undermine the Romantic idea of organic unity which is embedded in a single unified meaning. They are marked by self-deconstruction, as the 'dual identities' are intentionally and self-consciously generated by the poets for the purposes of deconstruction.

In 'The Anxiety of American Deconstruction' Howard Felperin avers that the American version of deconstruction has given cause for anxiety to both the Marxists and the humanists. Whereas the Marxists find deconstruction reactionary, the humanists consider it revolutionary. For the Marxist or leftward critics deconstruction is a form of aestheticism which in its excessive preoccupation with language returns criticism to the idealist metaphysics. For the humanist critics, on the other hand, deconstruction with its irrationalism challenges humanism which has had a long tradition in Western criticism. The most subtle form of anxiety of deconstruction one discerns in deconstruction itself. On the one hand, it is by its very nature inimical to institutionalisation and, on the other, it seeks to institutionalise itself. Deconstruction today finds itself in a situation where it has already been institutionalised with students trained on deconstruction having joined faculties. If deconstruction acquiesces in this routinisation, it ceases to be deconstruction; and if it continues to subvert it, it not only opposes itself but loses all hopes of institutionalisation. Either way there is reason for anxiety.

In 'The Post-Turn Turn: Derrida, Gadamer and the Remystification of Language', Leonard Orr, through a deconstructive reading of Gadamer and Derrida, arrives at the conclusion that in deconstruction language is remystified and speech reasserted, undercutting its apparent emphasis on demystification and writing.

Apropos of Derrida's *différance* and its double implication of deferral and difference, one temporal and the other spatial, Orr says that the differential spatiality suggests mystification of the present.

In his review article on Paul de Man's *Allegories of Reading* Rodolphe Gasché offers a critique of de Man's critical postulates. Starting with an exposition of J. L. Austin's speech act theory, on which de Man draws so heavily, Gasché goes on to attempt a deconstructive reading of *Allegories of Reading*. While demystifying and detotalising the text through the deconstructive denunciation of its unifying, unitary principle or meaning, de Man's deconstruction creates a new unifying principle. Totalisation detotalised in deconstructive reading results in retotalisation which needs to be deconstructed again.

Gasché also states that while denying that the text has cognitive strata, de Man's deconstruction admits cognition through the back door. Knowledge in deconstruction is a negative knowledge but it is knowledge all the same. It is a knowledge, for instance, of the fact that all totalisations and retotalisations of knowledge need to be debunked.

'The Lateral Dance: the Deconstructive Criticism of J. Hillis Miller' by Vincent B. Leitch touches on the major concerns of Hillis Miller, such as transformation of metaphysics, rhetoric as magic, the lateral dance. Leitch argues that despite Miller's opinion that the tradition of presence and the tradition of difference have nothing in common, one comes across metaphysical presence in Miller as well as the other deconstructionists. Leitch gives several examples from Miller to the effect that in the text are present simultaneously traditional metaphysics and its subversion. He demonstrates how the deconstructive reading is a search for the literal base whose failure gives rise to another deconstructive reading.

Leitch finds present an element of conservatism in deconstruction, as its ultimate aim is to renew and preserve culture by salvaging suppressed materials. Moreover, the fact that the deconstructionists deal primarily with the texts of the great tradition and that their readings have so far failed to bring about any massive revisions in the tradition also reinforces their conservatism.

Jonathan Culler's 'Hartman and Derrida' is a review article on Geoffrey Hartman's *Saving the Text*, a book-length study of Derrida's *Glas*. Starting with general speculations on deconstruction, Culler points out its threefold implication for literary criticism. It disrupts the hierarchical relationships in binary oppositions such as philosophy and literature, the literal and the metaphorical, the intrinsic and the extrinsic; it identifies some fundamental questions



relating to general human concerns on which literary criticism can focus; and it offers a particular style of reading which disclaims any unity or predominant attitude that the text may possess.

Hartman's place in the movement of deconstruction is that of a maverick. Culler subscribes to this view. The very question posed in *Saving the Text*, how to save the text rather than subvert it, is anti-Derridean, as Derrida will not accept that there is something called a fixed determinate text.

Examining deconstruction from different angles, the essays collected here cover a wide range of topics relating to deconstruction such as tradition versus deconstruction, the nature of deconstruction, deconstruction and other disciplines, deconstruction of deconstruction, and the future of deconstruction. It is hoped that the book will provide the reader with a definitive account of deconstruction and set him thinking not only of the aspects of deconstruction but criticism in general.

#### Notes

1. W. K. Wimsatt and M. C. Beardsley, *The Verbal Icon* (London, 1970) p. 21.
2. Stanley Fish, 'Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics', *Self-Consuming Artifacts* (Berkeley, Calif., 1974) p. 397.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 388.
4. Wimsatt and Beardsley, *The Verbal Icon*, p. 3.
5. Paul de Man, 'Form and Intent in the American New Criticism', *Blindness and Insight* (New York, 1971) p. 28.