25th Anniversary Edition

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Theory and Criticism after Structuralism

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Preface to the 25th Anniversary Edition

The sports section of the *New York Times* reported in July 2007, as Barry Bonds approached the Major League home run record, "Bonds spent his free time in Chicago praying with Jesse Jackson, visiting with his family, and deconstructing videotape of his swing." Clearly *deconstruction* has entered the language as a synonym for analysis that exposes mechanisms, procedures, or habits. Its connotations do not appear to be settled, though. Woody Allen's film *Deconstructing Harry* announces a dismantling or undoing that does not bode well for Harry, whereas the *Times* reporter suggests that Bonds's deconstructive analysis provided insights into his swing and enabled him "to correct some flaws."

The fortunes of the word *deconstruction* are doubtless one reason that *On Deconstruction* is still in demand twenty-five years after it sought to explain deconstruction and to examine its implications for literary study. The term *deconstruction* was one of the flash points in critical and cultural debates of the last quarter of the twentieth century, a rallying point and term of abuse, the name of a body of difficult, deeply influential theoretical writings and also the name for a broad movement in twentieth-century thought in which assumptions or presumptions of a millennial philosophical, literary, and critical tradition have been put in question. Most simply, deconstruction is a mode of

References for the authors and titles mentioned in this preface appear in the Bibliography for the 25th Anniversary Edition, starting on page 307.

philosophical and literary analysis derived from the work of the philosopher Jacques Derrida, which interrogates basic philosophical categories or concepts. Deconstruction is never simple, however; it is not, Derrida insists, a school or a method, a philosophy or a practice, but something that happens, as when the arguments of a text undercut the presuppositions on which it relies or as when the term *deconstruction* (*déconstruction*), which Derrida introduced somewhat casually as a French translation of the terms *Abbau* and *Destruktion* ("unbuilding" and "destruction") in Martin Heidegger's philosophical writing, takes on a life of its own, escaping the control of the author and coming to refer to a broad intellectual process or movement that the end of the twentieth century by no means exhausted.

Deconstruction arises in philosophy as reading of philosophical texts against the grain of the philosophical tradition, contesting its hierarchical binary oppositions (meaning/form, soul/body, inside/outside, speech/writing, and so on) by exploring how they are already deconstructed—shown to be constructions—by the texts that assert or depend on them. Because Derrida does philosophy by reading texts slowly, with virtuoso resourcefulness, attentive to their rhetorical strategies and ideological investments, his work appealed to students and teachers of literature, who found in it close reading that (1) was not subservient to the ideological notion of organic form that underlay the most widespread practice of close reading, that of the New Criticism, and (2) showed that texts are playing for important stakes: the oppositions that they engage structure thinking about fundamental questions, as I show in chapters two and three. Derrida's readings take as their goal not admiration of the works' artistry and the complexity of their thematic constructions but a teasing out of their warring forces of signification and an interrogation of the pieties and principles that these texts insightfully engage.

On Deconstruction explores the relation of deconstruction to structuralism and other critical movements in chapter one, provides an account of Derrida's engagement with the philosophical tradition and the characteristic strategies of deconstructive reading in chapter two, and looks concretely at the possibilities deconstruction offers literary studies in chapter three. It still provides a good introduction to deconstruction, though since

the book's appearance in 1982 the bibliography of deconstruction has grown enormously. There can be no question of surveying this material here: Derrida's own writings in the subsequent twenty-two years include more than thirty books and innumerable essays, lectures, introductions, and interviews. Derrida's writings were at one time the primary referent of the term *deconstruction,* but deconstruction, which was already engaged with philosophy, psychoanalysis, and literary studies in 1982, became an extraordinarily powerful intellectual paradigm, whose exfoliation in myriad fields of the humanities and social sciences marked the intellectual life of the 1980s and 1990s. The term *deconstruction* has thus come to designate a range of radical theoretical enterprises in such fields as law, architecture, theology, feminism, gay and lesbian studies, ethics and political theory, in addition to philosophy, psychoanalysis, and literary and cultural studies. Though diverse, these enterprises share a critical dismantling of the conceptual oppositions that had previously been regarded as fundamental to the disciplines.

That program, and the flair of the term *deconstruction* itself, gave it a surprising role in the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s. Those combatting pressures to open the canon to works by women, members of minority groups, and third-world cultures or to reject high culture in favor of popular culture seized on the term *deconstruction* to label the developments that they saw as tearing down Western civilization itself. In fact, deconstructive critics, despite their sympathies with movements to broaden the canon, were deeply engaged with the texts of the high cultural tradition, from Plato to Proust, which they saw as particularly savvy and enlightened, richer and more subversive than readers had previously realized. They were scarcely agitating to substitute soap operas for Shakespeare or Kant: the desire to teach popular culture or to substitute non-Western texts for historically crucial works of the Western tradition came from practitioners of cultural studies, who often saw deconstruction as a dangerous, elitist enemy, committed to high culture, engaged with difficult philosophical texts and their specialized jargon, and valuing difficulty and complexity. But such are the seductions of language that in the culture wars *deconstruction* became a broad brush to stigmatize all kinds of initiatives in scholarly work and shorthand for a nihilistic assault on the Western canon and received values.

Such quarrels about the destruction of Western culture seem rather quaint today, when the forces of the internet and new media are producing as powerful cultural effects as did shifts in university reading lists or changing modes of analysis of literary and philosophical texts and when the Bush administration has done more to bring Western culture into disrepute in the rest of the world than critical analysis of its blind spots and contradictions ever could have done. Rather than dwell on the fortunes of the term *deconstruction* in the debates of the 1980s and 1990s, I will say something about developments since 1982 and offer some bibliographical suggestions for pursuing them.

Jacques Derrida's own writings prior to 1982 already engaged a broad range of texts and issues—in philosophy, psychoanalysis, aesthetics and art criticism, and literary studies—but his subsequent writings are amazing in their range and intellectual energy: to mention just a few, there are ventures into law, religion, friendship and the political role of the opposition between enemy and friend, the legacy of Marx, the possibilities of Europe, the concept of "rogue states," institutions and the teaching of philosophy, as well as his own biography.[1] In addition, Derrida has written a good deal about literature, from Shakespeare to Celan, with especially important explorations of Baudelaire, Joyce, Ponge, Genet, Blanchot, and Celan.[2] These texts can't be described as deconstructions of hierarchical oppositions, an inversion and displacement of oppositions; they explore, as the title of an important interview with Derek Attridge puts it, "That Strange Institution Called Literature." Engaged with the performative dimensions of literature, which aims to be a singular event, with literature as the supreme example of the right to say anything that should characterize democracy, and with "call of the secret" with which literature impassions us, calls us to interpretation, even though there is no

[1] In addition, at least 20 volumes of his seminars will be published over the coming decades. The best bibliography is by Peter Krapp on the University of Minnesota website: http://www.hydra.umn.edu/derrida/jdind.html.

For the topics mentioned, see, for example, "Force of Law: The Mystical Foundations of Authority," *Acts of Religion*, *The Politics of Friendship*, *Specters of Marx*, *The Other Heading*, *Rogues*, *Who's Afraid of Philosophy?* and "Circumfession."

[2] *Acts of Literature* collects many of these essays, together with the superb Attridge interview. For others see *Given Time* (Baudelaire), *Signsponge* (Ponge), *Glas* (Genet), *Demeure* (Blanchot), and *Sovereignties in Question* (Celan).

secret, no hidden answer, these essays do not interpret works but explore their broadest stakes and implications, as well as the most intimate play of their language. In *The Singularity of Literature*, largely inspired by Derrida, Attridge writes, "Derrida's work over the past thirty-five years constitutes the most significant, far-reaching, and inventive exploration of literature for our time" (139), though as yet this remarkable contribution has scarcely been assessed or assimilated. There have, however, been many other books written about Derrida. Two especially admirable and quite different accounts are Geoff Bennington's "Derridabase," a systematization of his thought, which Derrida seeks to outplay in the autobiographical "Circumfession," which runs along the bottom of each page of their joint publication, *Jacques Derrida*, and Martin Hagglund's *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life*, which reads Derrida's engagement with the philosophical tradition as a decisive rejection of transcendence and affirmation of survival.

Since 1982 deconstruction has spread into many fields, but within philosophy it remains a source of contestation. While analytic philosophers have generally been resistant to deconstruction and to Derrida, even to the point of excluding him from philosophy and associating him with literary theorists, Samuel C. Wheeler's *Deconstruction as Analytic Philosophy* and Gordon Bearn's "Derrida Dry: Iterating Iterability Analytically" successfully recast Derridean arguments in the idiom of analytic philosophy. Rodophe Gasché, determined to rescue Derrida from literary theory and to recapture him for the tradition of continental philosophy, provides in *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* the most rigorous and successful attempt to present Derrida as a systematic philosopher in a traditional mode. Among many books on Derrida as philosopher, Geoff Bennington's *Interrupting Derrida* includes a brilliant analysis of philosophical responses to Derrida's work.[3]

Within literary studies deconstruction has come to be broadly diffused, so that conceptions associated with deconstruction (the critique of the idea of organic form, for instance, and the notion that writing about literature should explore how it engages the presuppositions on which it relies) have become very

[3]See also Hobson and Staten.

widespread. In addition to Derrida's own extensive writing about literature, which has still not been assimilated by critical practice, a substantial body of work by Paul de Man, a good deal of it published only posthumously, became available.[4] These essays fortified a distinctive tradition of deconstructive or rhetorical readings of literary works, outlined in *On Deconstruction*.[5] There are in recent years fewer readings devoted to showing how literary works subvert the premises on which they rely and more engagement with their philosophical stakes, of the sort explored by de Man in essays on Rousseau in *Allegories of Reading*. J. Hillis Miller has been a prolific critic, producing work on a wide range of authors and topics, especially narrative and rhetorical strategies. Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha, and Robert Young, among others, have demonstrated the productiveness in postcolonial studies of alertness to deconstructive operations.

Barbara Johnson, whose early incisive, elegant deconstructive essays were already highlighted in *On Deconstruction*, has continued in the same vein, broadening her engagement with psychoanalysis, women's writing, feminist theory, African-American literature, and cultural studies. Two of her essays that might be cited as exemplary of deconstructive reading are "Anthropomorphism in Lyric and Law" and "Muteness Envy." The former brilliantly brings together de Man's analysis of the trope of anthropomorphism, which is crucial to lyric poetry, and the anthropomorphizing operations at issue in legal debates. The determination of what the law will treat as a person—what entities or organizations are deemed to have the rights of a person—has immense consequences for the allocation of social privileges and resources, and an account of the rhetoric of legal reasoning in this realm proves extremely illuminating. Johnson's "Muteness Envy" reads Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," with its "still unravished bride of quietness," against Jane Campion's film *The Piano* and the critical reception of the film, so as to explore the

[4] *Aesthetic Ideology*, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, *Resistance to Theory*, and *Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism*. For discussion, see Culler, "Resisting Theory," in *The Literary in Theory*; Waters, *Reading de Man Reading*; and Cohen et al., *Material Events: Paul de Man and the Afterlife of Theory*.

[5] See works by Balfour, Booth, Burt, Caruth, Chase, Edelman, Hamacher, Hertz, Jacobs, Kamuf, Newmark, Redfield, Royle, Terada, and Warminski, for particularly powerful work in this lineage.

cultural construction and aestheticization of female muteness as a repository of feminine value. Johnson concludes that the work performed by the idealization of woman's silence is that "it helps culture not to be able to tell the difference between their pleasure and their violation," a problem at issue in *The Piano* and the debates about it.[6] Johnson's essay is an extraordinarily efficient and insightful example of deconstructive reading engaging a variety of cultural texts on issues of great moment.

Beyond philosophy and literary studies, the impact of deconstruction has been extensive. Most broadly it has encouraged the questioning of the hierarchical oppositions that structure any field of inquiry and an interest in whether and how these fundamental oppositions are subverted by the phenomena that they are used to describe. Deconstruction is thus a powerful version of the general critique of supposedly scientific metalanguages—sets of terms or concepts used to analyze a domain that are regarded as external to the objects they describe. Deconstructive analyses explore the ways in which the supposedly neutral or scientific metalanguage is affected by the phenomena it is supposed to analyze—for instance, how a psychoanalytic theory is itself structured or affected by the mechanisms of repression and wish-fulfillment it purports to describe.

There are two main aspects to the influence of deconstruction outside of literary and philosophical studies. On the one hand, granting primacy not to what a text says but to how what it does relates to what it says, deconstruction foregrounds the rhetorical structures and performative effects at work in discourses or discursive practices of all sorts, as discourses structure experience in particular ways. It thus seconds and invigorates the constructivist tendencies of numerous disciplines: the attempt to show that the phenomena studied by a discipline are not simply given to experience but are produced by conceptual frameworks and discursive practices. On the other hand, as a critical exploration of fundamental oppositions and an attempt to intervene and alter the value attributed to particular terms, deconstructive thinking has affected not just how texts are read but also the sense of what a discipline's goal might be.

[6]Barbara Johnson, *The Feminist Difference*, 137.

In its diffusion in the humanities and social sciences, following its greatest moment of fame in the 1970s and 1980s, deconstruction in the broadest sense became a critique of categories taken as natural and a drive to pursue the analysis of the logic of signification in a given area as far as one can, even if the result is disquieting—an exacerbation of questions or problems rather than their resolution. It thus joined with other strands of postmodern and post-structuralist thinking to inspire suspicion of established categories and canons and skepticism about objectivity.

An excellent introduction to the deconstruction in diverse manifestations is *Deconstructions: A User's Guide*, edited by Nicholas Royle, in which a roster of distinguished contributors discuss a surprising range of topics under the rubric "deconstruction and . . .": deconstruction and cultural studies, drugs, feminism, fiction, film, hermeneutics, love, a poem, the post-colonial, psychoanalysis, technology, and weaving! Less ambitious, I shall say a word about the vicissitudes of deconstruction in just a few domains.

Feminism/Gender Studies/Queer Theory

Though feminists have often been suspicious of deconstruction, as a typically male pastime of abstract and universalizing thought that in effect sought to deny, for instance, the authority of women's experience, various strands of feminist thinking have espoused a deconstruction of the opposition between men and women and a critique of essentialist notions of identity. As the translator of *Of Grammatology* and an eminent feminist, Marxist, and post-colonial critic, Gayatri Spivak has been a powerful voice articulating deconstruction with feminist and other concerns,[7] but the most prominent result of deconstruction has been the work of Judith Butler, who draws on Derrida and Foucault in her theorizing of gender and identity. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, *Bodies That Matter*, and other works challenge the frequent claim that a feminist politics requires an identity for woman (identity is the product or result rather than

[7]See also work by Johnson, Kamuf, Holland, and Elam.

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the source of action) and develop a performative concept of gender and sexual identity, modeled first on J. L. Austin's concept of performatives, which brings into being the entities to which they refer, but also on Derrida's argument about the iterability of the performative, which made possible this major inflection of the concept. Butler's influential *oeuvre* has done much to define contemporary gay and lesbian studies as well as feminism.[8]

Religion/Theology

As a critique of metaphysics, and specifically of the metaphysics of presence or the logocentrism of western culture, deconstruction seems a resolutely anti-theological enterprise, a critique of the theological motifs and structures that continue to undergird our thinking. But this devotion to uncovering the crypto-theological structure of western secular thought, especially philosophy, gives rise to the idea that deconstruction is a version of negative theology.

Some scholars, such as John Caputo, highlight the role of the concept of the messianic in Derrida's thought and seek to recover Derridean concepts for a theology, linking the motif of deferral to the waiting for the messiah that marks Christian eschatology and moving from the argument that deconstruction contains religious motifs and a critique of a triumphant secularizing reason to the conviction that in "religion without religion" or "the messianic without the messiah" deconstruction gives us not the impossibility of religion but a religion with deniability, religion without the flaws of actual religions.[9] But the distinction Derrida makes between the messianic and messianism is crucial, not a quibble: it is the difference between analyzing a structure of awaiting and deferral and believing in an actual messiah.

Discussions of deconstruction and religion seem divided between, on the one hand, those who want to bring religion to

[8]Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* and Lee Edelman's *Homographesis* are two seminal contributions to queer theory that undertake deconstructions of the opposition between hetero- and homo-sexual.

[9]See Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell.*

Derrida and deconstruction, show deconstruction to be, finally, religious in its structure and commitments, giving rise to an ethics that preserves what is most valuable in modern religious commitment, and, on the other hand, those who want to bring deconstruction to theology in order to make it more philosophically complex, sophisticated, and responsible. Must deconstruction assume atheism in order to function, or might it work within a theological context and help produce a theology that could "escape" philosophy? A third approach to deconstruction and religion, using deconstruction to critique religion and theology, would seem the most obvious, at least based on Derrida's early work, but it is generally absent from the literature. Derrida's own long contribution to the book *Religion* that he edited with the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo takes on not theology so much as religion itself, as a social and intellectual phenomenon, and shows that deconstruction does indeed have something different to bring to the discussions of matters religious.[10] But Martin Hagglund's *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* is a decisive rejoinder to those seeking to capture deconstruction for religion.

Architecture

Deconstruction and architecture? The conjuncture seems improbable, but the term *deconstruction* already contains an allusion to the built and to the analysis of how the constructed was constructed. Why should there not be a connection between deconstruction and the thinking of space, function, and ornament in the field of architecture?

In 1985 the architect Bernard Tschumi invited Derrida to collaborate on the design of a section of the Parc de la Villette in Paris, a large park surrounding new museums and exhibition spaces, in which design theory was to be staged in various ways. In Tschumi's plan, a series of large red cube-shaped spaces, the follies, were to be located at specific points; each cube was to be transformed through "deviation" into a folly, an explosion or expenditure of structure: the superimposition of different

[10] *Acts of Religion*, edited by Gil Anidjar, collects Derrida's writings on religion.

autonomous and logical structures subverted the notion of totality, and the design not only rejected the relation to context by which architecture is often justified but also, dislocating and deregulating meaning, rejected "the symbolic repertory of architecture as a refuge of humanist thought." "It aims," Tschumi writes, "at an architecture that means nothing."[11] Derrida collaborated with Peter Eisenman on designs, but by a principled decision the project was left unbuilt.

In 1988 Philip Johnson organized an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York titled "Deconstructivist Architecture." In this perspective, what makes architecture deconstructive is not any derivation from the deconstruction in philosophy but its ability to disturb our thinking about form. This architecture disturbs and subverts by uncovering the instabilities or dilemmas hidden in traditional form, exposing the unfamiliar hidden within the familiar.[12]

Politics, Law, Ethics

What is the relation between deconstruction and politics? Does deconstruction, for instance, have a politics, or is it thinking that can be deployed in various causes, at various levels, with all the unpredictability of politics, which "makes strange bedfellows," as the proverb says? Geoff Bennington notes that because Derrida's work in philosophy is so very radical, there has been an assumption in the English-speaking world that it should give rise to a politics or political philosophy that is equally radical, so Derrida can be faulted for not living up to the expectations of those for whom politics is the real.[13] While Derrida certainly has taken a position on many political issues and controversies, this sort of commitment to the left or appearing on the left has not

[11]Bernard Tschumi, "Parc de Vilette, Paris." *Architectural Design* 58, no. 3/4 (1988): 39. On Derrida's collaboration with Eisenman, see Mark Taylor, "Refusing Architecture." In *Re- Working Eisenman* (Berlin: Ernst & Sohn, 1993), 79–89.

[12]See Philip Johnson, and Wigley, Mark. *Deconstructivist Architecture* and Wigley's *The Architecture of Deconstruction: Derrida's Haunt*. There is a good deal of writing on this topic; see the selections on deconstruction and architecture in Culler, *Deconstruction*, vol. 3, 367–455. The collection *Deconstruction: Omnibus Volume* (ed. Papadakis) is a useful resource.

[13]Bennington, "Derrida and Politics." In *Interrupting Derrida*, 18–19.

been satisfying to many, who want a radical politics of another order that will change the world.

Derrida has written extensively about politics, both immediate political issues, such as apartheid, immigration law, the death penalty, and European integration, and political theory in the broadest sense, as in *The Politics of Friendship*, which approaches politics and democracy through the issues of friends and enemies, or *Specters of Marx*, which interrogates the legacy of Marxism and its importance for a post-Marxist world.[14] "Declarations of Independence" efficiently reads the American Declaration of Independence as exemplary of the violence of acts of foundation, in which performative and constative dimensions of language fail to coincide. Woven through Derrida's work is a reflection on decision and democracy summed up in the declaration, "no deconstruction without democracy, no democracy without deconstruction." A decision is a decision only if it cannot be programmed but occurs in a situation of undecidability; it must interrupt determination, which is nonetheless its condition of possibility.[15] And democracy, a structure based on counting—the counting of singularities—is a concept in the name of which we criticize every determination of democracy; it is in the name of a "democracy to come" that we deconstruct any given concept of democracy.

Deconstruction and politics is a topic about which a great deal has been written. Bennington's *Legislations: The Politics of Deconstruction* and Beardsworth's *Derrida and the Political* are important works about the topic, while deconstructive work on politics in the tradition of continental philosophy is carried out by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy; Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe have developed a post-Marxist Marxism inflected by deconstruction; and the American political scientists William Connolly, Bill Martin, and William Corlett, among others, have brought the thinking of the paradoxes of difference and the deconstruction of hierarchical oppositions to the discourse of political science. One should also place under the rubric of deconstruction and politics such work as Spivak's,

[14] *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971–2001*, collects a comprehensive range of Derrida's political interventions and reflections on the nature of the political.

[15] Bennington, "Derrida and Politics," 18–33.

Bhabha's, and Young's writing in post-colonial studies and Judith Butler's interrogation of the problem of hate speech in *Excitable Words*.

In the area of law the Critical Legal Studies movement, which has focused on conflicts between principles and counter-principles within the system of legal doctrine, has many affinities with deconstruction: critiques of the oppositions such as public versus private, essence versus accident, substance versus form, which are fundamental to the realm of law, and demonstrations that legal doctrine and argument are attempts to paper over contradictions, which nonetheless reassert themselves.[16] Derrida's own writing in this field has something of a different cast: his "Force of Law: the Mystical Foundations of Authority," for instance, explores the inextricability of foundational violence and justice.

The question of justice has been an important one for deconstruction and leads to debates about deconstruction and ethics. Since deconstruction has been associated with disrespect for established norms and traditions and embrace of a Nietzschean trajectory beyond good and evil, the last thing it might seem to provide is an ethics. Since the very idea of ethics, with the concepts of law, responsibility, duty, and decision, is derived from metaphysics, how could deconstruction not put these in question? But the very fact that I have formulated this as a matter of necessity or obligation draws attention to the possibility of asking what drives deconstruction. What sort of necessity, obligation, or commitment, ethical or not, is at work here, in the drive to deconstruct or in the sense of the importance of attending to deconstructions that happen?

This is a matter of ethics, perhaps *the* matter of ethics: what sort of value or obligation impels or compels one's actions? In the case of deconstruction, the question of ethics goes to the heart of the method. What impels deconstruction; why bother with it? "Because we cannot do otherwise," answers Simon Critchley. "The necessity which governs deconstruction derives from the wholly Other, *Ananke*, before whom I can refuse nothing and where my claims for liberty are sacrificed

[16]See Culler, "Deconstruction and the Law." In *Framing the Sign* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), 139–152.