

On Deconstruction

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Structuralism

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The public sector is a complex and diverse organisation, and it is difficult to define what it is. The public sector is often defined as the part of the economy that is owned and controlled by the state. This includes the government, local authorities, and public corporations. The public sector is also often defined as the part of the economy that provides public services. This includes the health service, the education system, and the social security system.

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Theory and Criticism after Structuralism

JONATHAN CULLER



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CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----|
| PREFACE | 7 |
| INTRODUCTION | 17 |
| Chapter One. READERS AND READING | 31 |
| 1. New Fortunes | 31 |
| 2. Reading as a Woman | 43 |
| 3. Stories of Reading | 64 |
| Chapter Two. DECONSTRUCTION | 85 |
| 1. Writing and Logocentrism | 89 |
| 2. Meaning and Iterability | 110 |
| 3. Grafts and Graft | 134 |
| 4. Institutions and Inversions | 156 |
| 5. Critical Consequences | 180 |
| Chapter Three. DECONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISM | 227 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY | 281 |
| INDEX | 303 |

AUTHOR'S NOTE

PORTIONS of Chapter Two, section 1, appeared in *Structuralism and Since*, ed. John Sturrock (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), and a shorter version of Chapter Two, section 2, was published in *New Literary History*, 13 (1982).

References are given parenthetically in the text. Where two page numbers are separated by a slash, the first is the reference to the French text and the second to the English translation. Details of works cited are given in the bibliography. I have silently modified translations where it seemed appropriate.

PREFACE

THIS BOOK is a sequel to my *Structuralist Poetics*, though both the method and conclusions are different. *Structuralist Poetics* set out to survey comprehensively a body of critical and theoretical writings, to identify their most valuable proposals and achievements, and to introduce them to an English and American audience that had little interest in continental criticism. Today the situation has changed. Introductions have been performed and quarrels have broken out. To write about critical theory at the beginning of the 1980s is no longer to introduce unfamiliar questions, methods, and principles, but to intervene in a lively and confusing debate. The pages that follow provide an account of what I have found most vital and significant in recent theoretical writing and undertake an exposition of issues that often seem poorly understood.

One of these issues is the status of theoretical debate and of the genre of writing to which this book belongs. English and American critics often assume that literary theory is the servant to a servant: its purpose is to assist the critic, whose task is to serve literature by elucidating its masterpieces. The test of critical writing is its success in enhancing our appreciation of literary works, and the test of theoretical discussion is its success in providing instruments to help the critic provide better interpretations. "Criticism of criticism," as it is sometimes called, is placed at two removes from the object of concern and is thought useful when it helps to keep criticism on the proper track. This view is widespread. Wayne Booth, a man of considerable

PREFACE

achievement in the realm of literary theory, finds it appropriate to apologize for what he does. "Who would really want to write a long book of what current jargon might well call meta-meta-meta-criticism?" he asks in the preface to a long work of literary theory. "But I see myself as having been forced into deeper and deeper waters simply by trying to face the situation of literature and criticism at the present time" (*Critical Understanding*, p. xii).

If critical theory is often seen as an attempt to establish the validity or invalidity of particular interpretive procedures, this view is doubtless the legacy of the New Criticism, which not only instilled the assumption that the purpose of literary study is the interpretation of literary works but also implied by its most memorable theoretical project—the effort to define and combat the intentional fallacy—that literary theory is the attempt to eliminate methodological errors so as to set interpretation on its proper course. Recently, though, there has been increasing evidence that literary theory should be conceived differently. Whatever their effects on interpretation, works of literary theory are closely and vitally related to other writings within a domain as yet unnamed but often called "theory" for short. This domain is not "literary theory," since many of its most interesting works do not explicitly address literature. It is not "philosophy" in the current sense of the term, since it includes Saussure, Marx, Freud, Erving Goffman, and Jacques Lacan, as well as Hegel, Nietzsche, and Hans-Georg Gadamer. It might be called "textual theory," if *text* is understood as "whatever is articulated by language," but the most convenient designation is simply the nickname "theory." The writings to which this term alludes do not find their justification in the improvement of interpretations, and they are a puzzling mixture. "Beginning in the days of Goethe and Macaulay and Carlyle and Emerson," writes Richard Rorty, "a kind of writing has developed which is neither the evaluation of the relative merits of literary productions, nor intellectual history, nor moral philosophy, nor epistemology, nor social prophecy, but all of these mingled together in a new genre" ("Professionalized Philosophy and Transcendentalist Culture," pp. 763–64).

This new genre is certainly heterogeneous. Its individual works are tied to other distinctive activities and discourses:

Gadamer to a particular strand of German philosophy, Goffman to empirical sociological research, Lacan to the practice of psychoanalysis. "Theory" is a genre because of the way its works function. The practitioners of particular disciplines complain that works claimed by the genre are studied outside the proper disciplinary matrix: students of theory read Freud without enquiring whether later psychological research may have disputed his formulations; they read Derrida without having mastered the philosophical tradition; they read Marx without studying alternative descriptions of political and economic situations. As instances of the genre of "theory," these works exceed the disciplinary framework within which they would normally be evaluated and which would help to identify their solid contributions to knowledge. To put it another way, what distinguishes the members of this genre is their ability to function not as demonstrations within the parameters of a discipline but as re-descriptions that challenge disciplinary boundaries. The works we allude to as "theory" are those that have had the power to make strange the familiar and to make readers conceive of their own thinking, behavior, and institutions in new ways. Though they may rely on familiar techniques of demonstration and argument, their force comes—and this is what places them in the genre I am identifying—not from the accepted procedures of a particular discipline but from the persuasive novelty of their re-descriptions.

In the development of this genre in recent years, Hegel, Marx, and Freud have eclipsed Macaulay and Carlyle, though Emerson and Goethe from time to time play honorable roles. There are no obvious limits to the subjects works of theory may treat. Recent books whose theoretical power may bring them into the genre include Michael Thompson's *Rubbish Theory*, Douglas Hofstadter's *Gödel, Escher, Bach*, and Dean MacCannell's *The Tourist*. If this domain, which takes up the most original thinking of what the French call *les sciences humaines*, is sometimes called "critical theory," or even "literary theory," rather than "philosophy," this is owing to the recent historical roles of philosophy and literary criticism in England and America. Richard Rorty, himself an eminent analytical philosopher, writes, "I think that in England and America philosophy has already been displaced by literary criticism in its principal cultural func-

PREFACE

tion—as a source for youth's self-description of its own difference from the past. . . . This is roughly because of the Kantian and anti-historicist tenor of Anglo-Saxon philosophy. The cultural function of teachers of philosophy in countries where Hegel was not forgotten is quite different and closer to the position of literary critics in America" (*Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 168).

Literary critics, who are more accustomed to accusations of irrelevance and parasitism than to the admiration of youths clamoring for descriptions of their difference from the past, may well be skeptical of this claim, and doubtless Rorty would be less swift to assert that criticism has displaced philosophy if he were a critic rather than a philosopher. One might suspect, for example, that for descriptions of its difference from the past youth turns to advertising and popular culture rather than to literary theory. There are, though, two indications that might support Rorty's claims. First, the frequency with which attacks on theoretically-oriented criticism condemn graduate students for mechanically imitating certain models, for taking on ideas they are too ignorant and immature to handle, and for rushing to adopt a spurious or faddish novelty, suggests that the threat of recent critical theory is linked to its specific appeal to the young. For its opponents, theory may be dangerous precisely because it threatens to play the role Rorty ascribes to it, as the source of intellectual youth's attempt to differentiate itself from the past. Second, it does seem true that recent European philosophy—Heidegger, the Frankfurt School, Sartre, Foucault, Derrida, Serres, Lyotard, Deleuze—has been imported to England and America by literary theorists rather than philosophers. In this sense, it is literary theorists who have done most to constitute the genre of "theory."

Moreover, whether or not the claims Rorty makes for criticism are justified, there are several reasons why it would not be inappropriate for literary theory to play a central role in the emerging genre of "theory." First, since literature takes as its subject all human experience, and particularly the ordering, interpreting, and articulating of experience, it is no accident that the most varied theoretical projects find instruction in literature and that their results are relevant to thinking about literature. Since literature analyzes the relations between men

and women, or the most puzzling manifestations of the human psyche, or the effects of material conditions on individual experience, the theories that most powerfully and insightfully explore such matters will be of interest to literary critics and theorists. The comprehensiveness of literature makes it possible for any extraordinary or compelling theory to be drawn into literary theory.

Second, because of its exploration of the limits of intelligibility, literature invites or provokes theoretical discussions that draw in or draw upon the most general questions of rationality, of self-reflexivity, and of signification. The social and political theorist Alvin Gouldner defines rationality as "the capacity to make problematic what had hitherto been treated as given; to bring to reflection what before had only been used; to transform resource into topic; to examine critically the life we lead. This view of rationality situates it in the capacity to think *about* our thinking. Rationality as reflexivity about our groundings premises an ability to speak about our speech and the factors that ground it. Rationality is thus located in metacommunication" (*The Dialectic of Ideology and Technology*, p. 49). Given the ability of literary works to foreground what might previously have been taken for granted, including the language and categories through which we articulate our world, literary theory is inexorably caught up in problems of reflexivity and meta-communication, trying to theorize the exemplary self-reflexiveness of literature. Literary theory thus tends to bring into its orbit diverse speculations on the problems of framing, communication about communication, and other forms of *mise en abyme* or infinite regress.

Third, literary theorists may be particularly receptive to new theoretical developments in other fields because they lack the particular disciplinary commitments of workers in those fields. Though they have commitments of their own that will produce resistance to certain types of unusual thinking, they are able to welcome theories that challenge the assumptions of orthodox contemporary psychology, anthropology, psychoanalysis, philosophy, sociology, or historiography, and this makes theory—or literary theory—an arena of lively debate.

In these circumstances, the discussion of a decade's literary theory cannot be comprehensive—the range of theoretical writ-

PREFACE

ings drawn into literary theory is too vast. In taking deconstruction as my focus, I am suggesting not only that it has been the leading source of energy and innovation in recent theory but that it bears on the most important issues of literary theory. I devote much space to Jacques Derrida because I have found that many of his writings require and sustain exposition, which I hope readers will find valuable. These writings are not, of course, literary criticism or literary theory; but I might justify my focus by appealing to a self-styled historian of the critical scene, Frank Lentricchia, who writes:

Some time in the early 1970s we awoke from the dogmatic slumber of our phenomenological sleep to find that a new presence had taken absolute hold over our avant-garde critical imagination: Jacques Derrida. Somewhat startlingly, we learned that, despite a number of loose characterizations to the contrary, he brought not structuralism but something that would be called "post-structuralism." The shift to post-structuralist direction and polemic in the intellectual careers of Paul de Man, J. Hillis Miller, Geoffrey Hartman, Edward Said, and Joseph Riddel—all of whom were fascinated in the 1960s by strains of phenomenology—tells the whole story. [*After the New Criticism*, p. 159]

This is not, of course, the whole story—the straining prose is a symptom of the desire to make a history at all costs—but this mythification of Derrida as a new absolute presence suggests that one might use deconstruction to focus a number of problems: about structuralism and post-structuralism, poetics and interpretation, readers and critical metalanguages. Though writing about theory in the past decade, I have neglected many important figures—Roland Barthes, for example. In his case I can cite in mitigation an extensive discussion in another book, but for others I have no excuse and can only note that critics within the orbit of deconstruction may suffer the same neglect as those without.

Any discussion of contemporary critical theory must, however, confront the confusing and confused notion of post-structuralism, or more specifically, the relation of deconstruction to other critical movements. The Introduction approaches this question in one way, Chapter One in another. Structuralist, phenomenological, feminist, and psychoanalytic critics have

the 1990s, the number of people who are employed in the service sector has increased in all countries. The increase is most pronounced in the United States, where the service sector has become the dominant sector of the economy. In the Netherlands, the service sector has also become the dominant sector, but the increase is less pronounced than in the United States.

The increase in the service sector is due to a number of factors. One of the main factors is the increase in the number of people who are employed in the service sector. This is due to a number of factors, including the increase in the number of people who are employed in the service sector. Another factor is the increase in the number of people who are employed in the service sector. This is due to a number of factors, including the increase in the number of people who are employed in the service sector.

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The public sector is a complex organisation, and it is difficult to understand how it works. This paper aims to provide a simple and clear explanation of the public sector, and to show how it is managed and funded. The paper is divided into three main sections: the public sector, the public sector and the economy, and the public sector and the public.

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concluded recently in emphasizing readers and reading, and analysis of problems that arise in these accounts of reading sets the stage for the discussion of deconstruction that occupies Chapter Two. I have not attempted a chronological or systematic survey of Derrida's writings but have drawn upon them in discussing a range of topics and their bearing on literary criticism and theory. In the course of this extended exposition, I have risked repetition for the sake of clarity and apologize to readers if I have miscalculated. Chapter Three analyzes a range of studies from the growing store of deconstructive literary criticism in order to identify its major features and axes of variation.

I am grateful to all those who have discussed these matters with me over the years or answered my questions about their writings. The issue of responsibility in situations of this sort is highly problematical, and readers will see that there can be no question of holding one Jacques Derrida responsible for the implications I draw from works he has signed. I would insist, however, that this book owes much to the advice of several Cornell colleagues, Laura Brown, Neil Hertz, Mary Jacobus, Richard Klein, Philip Lewis, and Mark Seltzer, but most of all Cynthia Chase, whose writings stimulated this work and whose readings corrected it. I thank the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation for a Fellowship during which this work was begun but not, alas, completed.

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