

DECONSTRUCTION

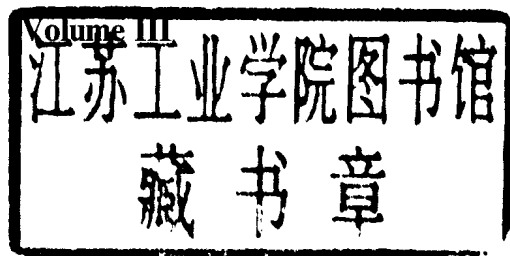
CRITICAL CONCEPTS
IN LITERARY
AND CULTURAL STUDIES

Edited by
JONATHAN CULLER

DECONSTRUCTION

Critical Concepts in Literary and
Cultural Studies

Edited by Jonathan Culler



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Part 5

PSYCHOANALYSIS

DECONSTRUCTION AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

Maud Ellmann

Source: N. Royle (ed.), *Deconstructions: A User's Guide*, New York, Palgrave, 2000, pp. 211–37.

Addressing a group of psychoanalysts in 1981, Jacques Derrida characterized himself as a ‘foreign body’ in the institution of psychoanalysis (Derrida, 1991, pp. 202–3).¹ A foreign body infiltrates the body of its host but can be neither rejected nor assimilated; its effects may be beneficent, like the bacteria that aid digestion, or baneful, like the virus that destroys the vital functions. As a foreign body in the corpus of psychoanalysis, deconstruction performs the role that Derrida, in ‘Plato’s Pharmacy’, attributes to the *pharmakon* – both poison and remedy – that heals what it harms, revitalizes what it violates. For deconstruction, by its own admission, is parasitic on the works of Freud and other thinkers, and yet it seems to reinvigorate the works it vampirizes.

In his earlier writings, Derrida tends to underplay his own dependency on Freud, while stressing Freud’s dependency on metaphysics. All Freudian concepts, ‘without exception’, he declares, ‘belong to the history of metaphysics, that is, to the system of logocentric repression’ (Derrida, 1978, p. 197). Logocentrism (to recapitulate a now-familiar argument) is the repression of writing in favour of speech, a repression that Derrida regards as the founding subterfuge of metaphysics. Writing, he contends, has always been perceived as dangerous because it betokens absence in the same way that speech betokens presence. In speech the speaker must be present to the interlocutor; in writing, the writer may be absent from the reader; speech is associated with the breath of life, writing with the waste of death, the corpse of words. Writing consists of material traces deracinated from their source and working their effects regardless of authorial intention. Thus the writer (to paraphrase James Joyce) is necessarily ‘a ghost by absence’ or ‘a ghost by death’ from the moment that the written word embarks upon its independent odyssey (Joyce, 1993, p. 181). This condemnation of writing is as old as Western philosophy: in the *Phaedrus* Plato condemns writing as a bastardized copy of speech,

liable to give rise to misunderstanding because the writer is not present to explain his meanings (Plato, 1973, pp. 95–99; 140–41). Written signs may be quoted, or misquoted, anywhere, by anyone, irrespective of the author's purposes.

Derrida deconstructs this age-old opposition between speech and writing, not by reversing its terms, or by claiming on behalf of writing the priority traditionally accorded to the spoken word, but by showing that the menace attributed to writing is equally imputable to speech. This menace lies in the repeatability of writing, its quotability or 'iterability'; for this capacity to be repeated anywhere implies its defection from its point of origin and, by extension, its perfidy to all beginnings, to the very concepts of primacy, originality, authority. Yet this dangerous quotability, Derrida demonstrates, is also the precondition of speech: the spoken word must be used repeatedly by others in order to acquire social meaning, or else it would revert into an unintelligible (albeit ordinary) grunt. In the beginning was the quotation – or so Derrida's argument implies. Speech, like writing, is composed of reiterable marks destined to desert the speaker and to stray, promiscuously, from voice to voice and ear to ear, in a process that Derrida has termed 'dissemination'. Thus speech – supposedly pure, present, primary, immediate – is fraught with the effects of writing: effects of absence (the author is no longer there); mediation (the conventional mark intervenes between the thought and its articulation); materiality (the transparency of thought is converted into sounds or traces); difference (the trace gains significance only through its negative or differential relation to other traces, so that its meaning is a warding-off of other meanings rather than a positive endowment); death (the trace implies the extinction, whether past or future, of its author).

If Western metaphysics is indeed based on the repression of writing, this means that philosophical discourse must conceal from itself its own writtenness, the excremental traces of its abstract musings, the tomb of print in which its insights are interred. Yet this repression invariably fails – and the symptom of this failure, Derrida argues, is the metaphor of writing that haunts philosophical discourse as the reminder of all it tries to forget (Derrida, 1978, p. 196). In accusing psychoanalysis, however, of perpetuating this repression, Derrida is not so much refuting as out-Freuding Freud: the terms 'repression' and 'return of the repressed' are of course derived from Freud himself, although for Derrida the threat to be repressed is writing rather than incestuous desire. In view of Derrida's appropriation of Freudian terms and Freudian stratagems, it is tempting to describe deconstruction as the application of psychoanalysis to the history of philosophy, and to dismiss Derrida's protests to the contrary as a repression, on his own part, of the influence of Freud (Melville, 1986, p. 84). In his early essay on psychoanalysis, 'Freud and the Scene of Writing' (1966), Derrida insists that 'despite appearances, the deconstruction of logocentrism is not a psychoanalysis of philosophy' (Derrida, 1978, p. 196). In psychoanalytic terms, this declaration looks suspiciously

like a 'disavowal' that admits what it ostensibly denies. It belongs, however, to an early phase of deconstruction, which Samuel Weber has termed the 'classical' phase, when Derrida was still attempting to remain untainted by the texts that he interpreted. A more recent form renounces this delusion of aloofness to become instead 'an example of that of which it speaks or writes' (Weber, 1984, p. 44). It is in this latter phase that deconstruction assumes its fate as foreign body in the quick of Western thought, entrammelled in the problems that it brings to light.

'The interest deconstruction takes in psychoanalysis is permanent and complex', Stephen Melville has observed; 'the continuing rediscovery of this interest is of a piece with its continuing rediscovery of itself and its project of radical self-criticism' (Melville, 1986, p. 84). It is also of a piece, I shall argue, with the interest that deconstruction takes in literature. In 'Freud and the Scene of Writing', Derrida insists that there has not yet emerged 'a psychoanalysis of literature respectful of the *originality of the literary signifier*. . . . Until now, only the analysis of literary *signifieds*, that is, *nonliterary* signified meanings, has been undertaken' (Derrida, 1978, p. 197). The opposition between signifier and signified, assumed in this early formulation, is one that Derrida would now eschew. Yet the statement indicates that his intention is (or was) to bring the literary signifier to the fore – the written or acoustic texture of the word, as opposed to its semantic content – particularly in texts that disavow their 'literariness', including most philosophical writings. In these texts the literary qualities of style, tone and rhetoric tend to be regarded at best as decoration, at worst as encumbrances befuddling the purity of thought. Deconstruction, by contrast, insists that the meaning of these texts cannot be abstracted from the rhetorical ploys by which they both elicit and frustrate the wish for meaning.

Although Derrida would deny that deconstruction is a formalism, his concern with the specificity of the literary signifier links him to a tradition that reaches back through the Russian Formalists to the French Symbolists, and the repeated efforts of these thinkers to determine the uniqueness of the literary artefact. The Russian Formalists defined 'literariness' as the primacy of the aesthetic over the communicational function of language. In practical communication, where words are used as vehicles of information, their specific weight and shape and sound and density can only interfere with the message they convey. In the words of the poet Paul Valéry: 'the form – that is, the physical, the concrete part, the very act of speech – does not last; it does not outlive understanding; it dissolves in the light; it has acted; it has done its work; it has brought about understanding; it has lived' (Valéry, 1972, p. 257). In poetry, by contrast, the message cannot be abstracted from the medium; referential meaning is suspended, and the word is swept instead into the 'incessant play of meaning upon meaning' (Jakobson, 1988, pp. 31–57). Where ambiguity in practical communication is merely an annoyance to be crushed, in poetry it is a resource to be plundered to the full.

When Derrida argues that psychoanalytic criticism fails to attend to the originality of the literary signifier, he means that it ignores the form in an obsession with the content of the literary text. Characteristically the psychoanalytic critic overlooks the verbal surface of the text in order to expose the Freudian motifs – e.g. the Oedipus complex – supposedly encrypted in its depths. In his famous dispute with Lacan over Poe's detective story 'The Purloined Letter' (discussed in more detail below), Derrida argues that Lacan disregards the story's literary properties in his eagerness to loot its psychoanalytic 'truth' (Derrida, 1988, pp. 173–212). Derrida insists that literature eludes this avarice for truth: like the purloined letter itself, the meaning of the literary text can never be pinned down. Not that the meaning is ineffable (Derrida would abhor the imputation of aesthetic mysticism), but that it circulates among the readers of the tale, much as the letter does among Poe's characters, slipping out of their covetous grasp. Nor is this errancy of meaning restricted to texts conventionally classified as literary: Derrida's readings of Freud chart the ways in which the writerly features of Freud's work – the play of metaphor, the ruses of narrative, the reminiscences of myth, the idiosyncrasies of style – open forth a range of implications that exceed the limits of his logocentric premises.

Derrida's writings on psychoanalysis may be divided into three large groups: those concerned with Freud and the metaphysical tradition; those belonging to the controversy with Lacan; and those promulgating the work of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok. These divisions are to some extent arbitrary, since the texts thus parcelled out continually overlap, conversing with each other and with briefer references to psychoanalysis bestrewn throughout Derrida's work; yet they provide useful signposts to the route the foreign body of deconstruction has pursued through the sprawling corpus of psychoanalysis. Underlying all these encounters runs a continuous debate with Freud, in which Derrida's one-upmanship gradually gives way to admiration for the deconstructive potency of the Freudian *oeuvre*, its uncanny foreshadowings of Derrida's own methods. As opposed to the Oedipal son, dismantling the teachings of the father, Derrida increasingly adopts the role of 'hypocrite lecteur' (the famous apostrophe that T. S. Eliot, in *The Waste Land* (1922), borrows from Baudelaire) – becoming brother, intimate, accomplice, even double of the theories that he deconstructs ('You! hypocrite lecteur! – mon semblable – mon frère!'). By acknowledging the affinities between his enterprise and Freud's, Derrida comes to recognize that all readers are hypocrites, particularly those who claim to fathom meanings and motives of which the text is unaware. Freudian critics are notoriously prone to such pretensions. Yet psychoanalysis can also foster humility by showing that the reader necessarily conspires in the text's imaginings; that the act of reading is a process of mutual seduction in which the reader and the read arouse each other's fantasies, expose each other's dreams (Forrester, 1990, pp. 264–65).

As we shall see, the story of Derrida's relationship to Freud is the story of his changing attitude to reading, his progress from 'boa-deconstructor' (in Geoffrey Hartman's words) to foreign body embedded in the systems that he takes apart (Davis, 1988, p. 144).

The following pages trace the vicissitudes of Derrida's relationship to psychoanalysis, proceeding in roughly chronological order through his early work on Freud, his contretemps with Lacan, his reading of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) in *The Post Card* (1980), and his commentaries on the work of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok. This tour – brief as it must be – indicates how Derrida progressively insinuates his work in Freud's (and in a chosen few of Freud's successors') until the psychoanalytic and the deconstructive enterprises often seem to coincide. Does this mean that Derrida is a plagiarist? No – for the very concept of plagiarism relies on a belief in the plenitude of origins that Derrida (following Nietzsche) holds to be self-contradictory (Culler, 1994, pp. 86–8). What the likeness between Freud and Derrida reveals is not a simple pattern of priority but a web of intertextuality in which forerunner and latecomer are equally enmeshed. Within this web the rules of sequence and causality no longer hold: another temporality emerges, fraught with strange prolepses, deferrals, premonitions, survivals, reversions, advances, and arrears, in which the future may anticipate the past, the precursor hark back to the successor.² Coined by Julia Kristeva, the term 'intertextuality' means that texts are tissues of quotation, shaped by the repetition and transformation of other textual structures. A text (in Derrida's words) can no longer be conceived of as 'a finished corpus of writing, some content enclosed in a book or its margins, but a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces' (Frow, 1990, p. 49). The concept of intertextuality therefore implies that creditors and debtors, proprietors and thieves, originators and imitators belong to vast concatenations of indebtedness extending far beyond the reach of legislation.

Referring to James Joyce, Derrida complains, 'He's read us all, and pillaged us, that guy'; the same might be said of Freud, who shares this knack of echoing the works that his descendants have not yet composed (Derrida, 1984a, p. 151).³ When Derrida resembles Freud it is rarely because he is directly raiding him but because both writers' works are echo chambers reverberating with the voices of the philosophical tradition. Both rely on binary oppositions inherited from that tradition, such as mind and body, self and other, consciousness and mechanism, while exposing the osmosis that erodes those separations. Rather than tallying up Derrida's debts to Freud – an impossible audit in any case – the present essay takes the humbler task of probing Derrida's ambivalence towards psychoanalysis. For Derrida alternately rejects and reincorporates the psychoanalytic enterprise within his own, like the child with his bobbin in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

Freud and the mystic writing-pad

Derrida's earliest essay on psychoanalysis, 'Freud and the Scene of Writing', explores Freud's lifelong quest to devise a thermodynamic model of the workings of the mind, a quest that began with the *Project for a Scientific Psychology* (1895) and culminated in the short 'A Note upon the "Mystic-Writing Pad"' (1925). According to Derrida, Freud's attempts in these and other works to explain the operations of memory after the manner of the natural sciences repeatedly give way to an uncanny vision of the psyche as a writing-machine. Freud's problem is to understand how the psyche can retain permanent memory traces and, at the same time, offer 'an unlimited receptive capacity' to new impressions (Freud, 1925, p. 227). In the unfinished *Project for a Scientific Psychology*, Freud invents a 'neurological fable' of startling complexity to account for this double functioning. To summarize (and inevitably to simplify), Freud envisages the psyche as a field of forces competing with resistances embodied in the form of mental neurones. He postulates that such experiences as pain forge pathways through these neurones, leaving 'a map of breaches', 'a topography of traces' etched into the psychic apparatus. The degree of force exerted on the neurones, and the level of resistance they oppose to it, determines the itinerary of the memory-trace. What fascinates Derrida about this model (and reveals his structuralist inclinations) is that it constitutes a system of differences without positive terms: 'It is the difference between breaches which is the true origin of memory, and thus of the psyche. . . . Trace as memory is not a pure breaching that might be reappropriated at any time as simple presence: it is rather the ungraspable and invisible difference between breaches'. Since each trace presupposes previous traces, 'the very idea of a *first time* . . . becomes enigmatic'; and indeed in *The Interpretation of Dreams* Freud dismisses the idea of primariness as a 'theoretical fiction'. As opposed to a first time, a primary inscription, Freud's model of the mind implies originary repetition: in the beginning was *re-tracing*.

Derrida believes that Freud's insistent metaphors of scratching, breaching, engraving, and imprinting open forth a vista of the psyche as a 'landscape of writing', a 'forest of script'. But writing, in this context, can no longer be understood in the ordinary sense as a transcription of pre-existent speech – 'a stony echo of muted words' – but must be re-imagined as 'a lithography before words', a (re)tracing prior and even recalcitrant to meaning (Derrida, 1978, pp. 199–207). To claim, as Lacan notoriously does, that the unconscious is 'structured like a language' is to attribute too much substance to these contentless inscriptions that canalize the psychic apparatus (Lacan, 1977, p. 234). Since logocentrism is based on the repression of writing, Derrida argues that Freud's metaphors of writing represent a return of the repressed: they are instances in which Freud's speculations overshoot the 'logocentric closure' of his mode of thought. Never content with his paradigms, moreover, Freud

produces metaphor after metaphor, 'obstinately substituting trace for trace and machine for machine', in a 'dreamlike renewal of mechanical models' – as if his own prose were a machine for mass-producing writing-machines (Derrida, 1978, pp. 198, 229).

The last – and best – of these machines is the 'Mystic Writing-Pad', a child's toy consisting of three surfaces: a wax slab, covered by a thin translucent sheet of waxed paper, overlaid by a transparent piece of celluloid. To write on this pad, Freud tells us, is to revert to the ancient method of writing on tablets of clay or wax: a pointed stylus is used to scratch the celluloid, producing the hollows or depressions in the lower strata that constitute the writing. To erase what has been inscribed, the two covering sheets are lifted up, and the traces, though preserved in the wax slab, disappear from view, leaving the surface clear of writing and ready to receive fresh imprints (Freud, 1925, pp. 228–9). According to Derrida, this model of the psyche does away with the 'punctual simplicity' of the classical subject (Derrida, 1978, p. 226). For Freud's metaphors of psychic writing exclude the possibility that the ego could be master of its mansion, or that the subject could command the contents of the mind. The memory trace, a furrow driven through a field of force, is not a 'thing' that ever was or could be present; nor is it a possession that a subject could remember – or forget. The subject of the mystic writing-pad is several rather than unitary, dilatory rather than 'punctual', its existence a flicker between surfaces: between the outer film that registers impressions, the inner sheet on which they are transcribed, and the lower surface, inaccessible to consciousness, where traces are preserved in perpetuity.

Samuel Weber has argued that 'Freud and the Scene of Writing', with its enthusiastic programme of purifying psychoanalysis of its naive reiteration of philosophy, belongs to the classical or triumphalist phase of deconstruction, when Derrida was still trying to preserve his distance from the texts he scrutinized (Weber, 1984, pp. 41–4). Yet even in this early essay Derrida adopts Freudian terminology, most notably the 'trace', thus anticipating later works where he allows himself to be ventriloquized by that which he interprets, miming the figures and rhythms of the texts he reads. Another set of metaphors that Derrida derives (at least in part) from Freud is that of pellicular surfaces – the skins, membranes, films, crusts, veils, folds, envelopes, tympanums, parchments, phylacteries and hymens that weave through the rhetoric of deconstruction. In particular, the foreskin – or more precisely its dismemberment – looms over both Derrida's work and Freud's. For Freud, the Jewish ritual of circumcision symbolized castration and thus explained the violence of anti-Semitism. For Derrida, circumcision represents an archive imprinted on the skin, a prosthetic memory borne upon the body yet radically inaccessible to consciousness: 'that singular and immemorial archive called *circumcision* . . . which, though never leaving you . . . is no less exterior, *exterior right on your body proper*' (Derrida, 1996, p. 26).⁴ Other