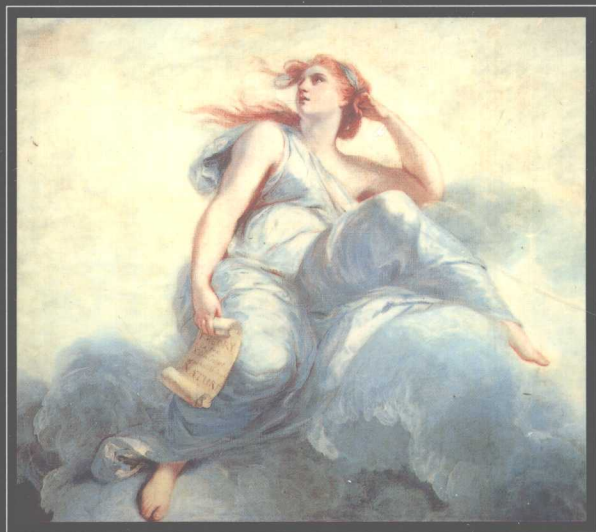


THE BUCKNELL LECTURES IN LITERARY THEORY

# *The Wake of Deconstruction*



Barbara Johnson



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Barbara Johnson



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*The Wake of Deconstruction*



THE BUCKNELL LECTURES IN LITERARY THEORY  
*General Editors: Michael Payne and Harold Schweizer*

The lectures in this series explore some of the fundamental changes in literary studies that have occurred during the past thirty years in response to new work in feminism, Marxism, psychoanalysis, and deconstruction. They assess the impact of these changes and examine specific texts in the light of this new work. Each volume in the series includes a critical assessment of the lecturer's own publications, an interview, and a comprehensive bibliography.

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In memory of Nietzsche  
1980-1992

## Preface

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Fundamental and far-reaching changes in literary studies, often compared to paradigmatic shifts in the sciences, have been taking place during the last thirty years. These changes have included enlarging the literary canon not only to include novels, poems, and plays by writers whose race, gender, or nationality had marginalized their work, but also to include texts by philosophers, psychoanalysts, historians, anthropologists, and social and religious thinkers, who previously were studied by critics merely as 'background.' The stance of the critic and student of literature is also now more in question than ever before. In 1951 it was possible for Cleanth Brooks to declare with confidence that the critic's job was to describe and evaluate literary objects, implying the relevance for criticism of the model of scientific objectivity, while leaving unasked questions concerning significant issues in scientific theory, such as complementarity, indeterminacy, and the use of metaphor. Now the possibility of value-free scepticism is itself in doubt as many feminist, Marxist, and psychoanalytic theorists have stressed the inescapability of ideology and the consequent obligation of teachers and students of literature to declare their political, axiological, and aesthetic positions in order to make those positions conscious and available for examination. Such expansion

and deepening of literary studies has, for many critics, revitalized their field.

Those for whom the theoretical revolution has been regenerative would readily echo, and apply to criticism, Lacan's call to revitalize psychoanalysis: 'I consider it to be an urgent task to disengage from concepts that are being deadened by routine use the meaning that they regain both from a re-examination of their history and from a reflexion on their subjective foundations. That, no doubt, is the teacher's prime function.'

Many practising writers and teachers of literature, however, see recent developments in literary theory as dangerous and anti-humanistic. They would insist that displacement of the centrality of the word, claims for the 'death of the author,' emphasis upon gaps and incapacities in language, and indiscriminate opening of the canon threaten to marginalize literature itself. On this view the advance of theory is possible only because of literature's retreat in the face of aggressive moves by Marxism, feminism, deconstruction, and psychoanalysis. Furthermore, at a time of militant conservatism and the dominance of corporate values in America and Western Europe, literary theory threatens to diminish further the declining audience for literature and criticism. Theoretical books are difficult to read; they usually assume that their readers possess knowledge that few who have received a traditional literary education have; they often require massive reassessments of language, meaning, and the world; they seem to draw their life from suspect branches of other disciplines: professional philosophers usually avoid Derrida; psychoanalysts dismiss Freud as unscientific; Lacan was excommunicated even by the International Psycho-Analytical Association.

The volumes in this series record part of the attempt at Bucknell University to sustain conversation about changes in literary studies, the impact of those changes on literary art, and the significance of literary theory for



the humanities and human sciences. A generous grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation has made possible a five-year series of visiting lectureships by internationally known participants in the reshaping of literary studies. Each volume includes a comprehensive introduction to the published work of the lecturer, the Bucknell Lectures, an interview, and a comprehensive bibliography.

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## Introduction

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### I

In the introduction to her translation of Derrida's *Dis-sémination*, Barbara Johnson notes that Derrida's new reading of various ancient and modern philosophers announces 'a revolution in the very logic of meaning' (xiii). Her own work carries this revolution into questions of identity and difference, first in their literary forms and more recently in explicitly racial, sexual, and political contexts. The subtle moral force of Johnson's work, its love of the minute particulars of difference, and its relentless pursuit of difficulty, owes a political debt to the 1968 May revolution in France, which demanded, as she writes, a 'liberation of the signifier, the rebellion against idealist repressions, and the unleashing of the forces of difference and desire against the law and order of identity.'<sup>1</sup> Her two most influential books, *The Critical Difference* (1980) and *A World of Difference* (1987)<sup>2</sup> underscore, through the repetition of 'difference' in their titles, Johnson's desire to differ – that is, to subvert the law and order of identity. As she points out, 'Nothing could be more comforting to the established order than the requirement that everything be assigned a clear meaning or stand' (*WD*, 30–1). Some of Johnson's subversive interest seems to express itself in numerous word plays and puns, as for example in her essay titles

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'Mallarmé as Mother,' 'Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion,' 'Les Fleurs du mal armé,' 'Allegory's Trip-Tease,' and in the titles of her books, *The Critical Difference* and *A World of Difference*, where the playfulness of words, their alliterations and duplicities, their always poetical correspondences – even when they have political assignments – mark the fortuitous and subversive nature of signification.

The introductions to both books announce that the readings of texts will proceed by exposing and dismantling 'the illusion created by the workings of differences,' because difference presupposes identity, and identity is inevitably based on a repression of differences. The word 'individual' itself marks this repression in its negation of divisibility. Perhaps tragically, it is the very repression of difference within and the positing of unity and identity that allows the creation and function of binary differences.

Allowing for two motivating forces for that repression, Johnson asks: Is difference determined by 'the complexities of fact or out of the impulses of power?' Is it a matter of 'description or disagreement, information or censure'? (CD, x) Johnson's most explicit answer to these questions is offered in the penultimate chapter of *A World of Difference*, where, in an essay on Zora Neale Hurston, she points out that 'What Hurston rigorously shows is that questions of difference and identity are always a function of a specific interlocutory situation – and the answers, matters of strategy rather than truth' (WD, 178). Similarly, in her essay on Melville's *Billy Budd*, 'The legal order which attempts to submit "brute force" to "forms, measured forms," can only eliminate violence by transforming violence into the final authority' (CD, 109).

In order to trace the authority of political violence to its smallest linguistic source and denominator, Johnson un.masks that violence in 'the warring forces of signifi-

cation' itself (*CD*, 5). For even 'as tranquil a notion as metaphor' is inherently violent (*CD*, 6). However, when in *The Critical Difference* she follows her intimations of a war within words into such pacific concepts as 'the poetic,' 'cooking,' 'hair,' and 'syntax,' these intimations might appear – in light of the subsequent book – as somewhat overdramatized by the canonical and aesthetic contexts in which they are discussed. By her own admission, in her revealing, but at the same time only seemingly straightforward introduction to *A World of Difference*, her earlier book, *Critical Difference*, had masked that violence 'within the sameness of the white male Euro-American literary, philosophical, psychoanalytical, and critical canon' (*WD*, 2). Surely, the implication here is that the 'sameness' of this canon is fictional and constructed, otherwise one would be somewhat perplexed to find Johnson ascertaining a 'sameness' on such large grounds, when in the same book it was not granted to a hair.

While in *The Critical Difference* questions about difference and identity are thus posed in a largely canonical and aesthetic context, her essay on Hurston exemplifies what the introduction to *A World of Difference* announces as a 'transfer [of] the analysis of difference . . . out of the realm of linguistic universality or deconstructive allegory . . . into contexts in which difference is very much at issue in the "real world" ' (*WD*, 2). However, the very conclusion reached in her essay on Hurston reconfirms the impression that even in a wider, non-canonical, politicized context, her project is still (as the subtitle of the earlier book had announced) a 'rhetoric of reading,' a matter of interlocutionary situation and verbal strategy. It seems that 'linguistic universality' remains the privileged center of Johnson's deconstructive project. If her transfer of 'deconstructive allegory' were intended to respond to Christopher Norris's charge that Johnson's work 'might yet become a kind of negative theology,

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perpetually rehearsing – or allegorizing – its own critical difference,<sup>3</sup> then the charge seems not to have been refuted in *A World of Difference*.

But perhaps it cannot be. This conclusion, at least, appears anticipated in the 'Opening Remarks' to *The Critical Difference*, where Johnson assigns such attempts to 'go beyond' as already mired in logocentric assumptions: 'a binary opposition between oneself and what one attempts to leave behind' (CD, xi). The introduction to *A World of Difference*, therefore, presents its ideological transfer in the most circumspect of terms, highlighting in an exemplary manner the difficulties both in committing deconstructive readings to political action and, conversely, of disentangling political action from precisely those linguistic patterns that structure it and which in turn invite deconstructive readings.

The concepts of identity and difference between linguistic universality and the 'real world' thus establish for Johnson only 'some semblance' which allows her both to affirm and to doubt 'a progression' from *The Critical Difference* to *A World of Difference*. 'Linguistic universality' and the 'allegories of deconstruction' remain throughout the sixteen chapters of *A World of Difference*, as well as throughout the seven chapters of *Critical Difference*, 'an integral part of action' – including the action of the transference from deconstructive allegories to the world itself. Indeed, that 'transference' – Johnson's choice of this Freudian term seems strategic – is as interminable as were Freud's attempts to separate past events from present accounts.

The differences between Johnson's earlier and later work appear to dissolve as well in the admission that the last essay of her most recent book was anticipated eight years earlier in her first book *Défigurations, du langage poétique* (WD, 5). Johnson's admission of 'some semblance of a progression . . . from white male long-standingly canonical authors to white or black female authors'

proves likewise a self-consciously sceptical moral pilgrimage as those authors 'are rapidly being canonized even as I write' (WD, 4). Like the differences between the masculine and the feminine or between literature and criticism or sexuality and textuality in *The Critical Difference*, which merely offer themselves as initial lures 'with a promise of comprehension' (CD, x), the differences between linguistic universality and the 'real world' serve only as the steps of a ladder that is later to be discarded.

The 'real world' to which we turn in the pages of *A World of Difference* thus always appears under erasure, in quotation marks. It is always a written world, though no less real for being so conceived. And while differences are inscribed by the violence of figuration in larger than linguistic, social, and political circumstances, even there they still appear, as Johnson points out, only 'as if' they had 'referential validity' (WD, 2). Predictably, then, the same deconstructive allegories apply, revealing that the warring forces of signification encode a 'politics of violence' (WD, 184) and that the political context is 'structured like, and by, the contours of figurative language' (WD, 6).

Conversely, the most apparently harmless figurative language – that of poetry – inhabits and shapes political realities. For if 'Poetry makes nothing happen,' as Johnson admits, at the same time 'poetry makes *nothing* happen.' In the first, unitalicized instance it is purportedly 'outside the political,' but in the second it is 'the stuff of the political' (WD, 30). Johnson allows poetry an aesthetic respite from the world 'if and only if one is attempting to follow an imperative not to stop there' (WD, 31). The imperative takes its authority from a rejection of an aesthetic solipsism, a stopping by woods on snowy evenings or upon Westminster bridges, because these inward forms of otherness permit an idealization and neutralization of an otherness that would

amount to a synthesis of what always remains, and should remain, an unbridgeable difference within.<sup>4</sup> The italicized '*nothing*' thus reverberates for Johnson with political duplicity, or indeed with Kant's *Zweckmässigkeit ohne Zweck*, a purposeless purposefulness assigned to the aesthetic which has been accused of a reactionary complicity with the always deplorable status quo.

The privileges of such poetic ambiguity and undecidability might appear arch-conservative. But 'conservative,' in Johnson's work, has, predictably, a different meaning. When Johnson asks in one of her chapter titles, 'Is Writerliness Conservative?', the question remains undecidable because the word 'conservative' itself acquires radicality and a bit of ambiguity: 'writerliness itself is conservative only in the sense that it is capable of inscribing and conserving messages the radicality of which may not yet have been explored' (WD, 31). But the 'not yet . . . explored' promises itself a semblance of a progress; if it is to avoid the lure of comprehension, 'not yet' ought perhaps to mean never. If the writerly text conserves its secrets forever, it is not because it 'lies beyond the limits of knowledge, some unreachable, sacred, ineffable point toward which we vainly yearn' (CD, xii), but because 'cognition itself becomes an act of violence' (CD, 106); and in its very fever to quantify, 'knowledge becomes the obstacle to knowing' (WD, 85). The inscriptions and conservations of *le scriptible* remain thus like that fugitive hint of a story in Poe's tale 'The Purloined Letter,' always in sufferance. If these infinite impracticalities of writerliness seem equally (ir)relevant, as Johnson notes, 'not only to the left, but also to the right' (WD, 30), the sure and certain positioning of the Left and the Right on the political spectrum betokens only the violence of their certitude. Precisely by virtue of that violence, political radicality harbors a deeply conservative motive.

Such conservatism is implicit even in as innocent and 'not inherently exciting a subject' as syntax, which



necessitates (one reads with some astonishment) that 'I did as any student of poetics would do: I went to see what Mallarmé said about it' (CD, 67). The artlessness of this canonical intention implies the possibility that a study of Mallarmé's syntax might be no more justifiable than what Terry Eagleton once called 'another study of Robert Herrick.' Yet, the simplicity of Johnson's introductory sentences to this chapter on syntax is deceptive. Syntax is 'like skin – which, as everyone knows, is a thing that when you have it outside, it helps keep your insides in –, syntax is a thing that when you have it in your surface structure, it helps keep your deep structure deep' (CD, 67). Which is to say, syntax prevents that deep structure from surfacing, in turn implying that the actions authorized by speech are also authorized by the repressions made possible by syntax.

If the messages of syntax are thus inscribed on a palimpsest, 'to preserve [an] absence by bringing it to speech,' as Blanchot puts it beautifully,<sup>5</sup> the roots of political radicality are yet deeper and more conservative; for they have their firm anchorings not merely in conserved silences and in their always potentially unwelcome rupturing effects, but in the very repression of this potential.

That this is the deepest, eternal site of the 'penultimate' (WD, 30), where one must follow an imperative not to stop, seems to me most insightfully examined in Johnson's exemplary piece of deconstructive criticism, 'Melville's Fist: The Execution of *Billy Budd*.' With the same provocative conservatism with which she otherwise conscripts Mallarmé's poetry to political action, Johnson conversely announces here that she will examine not the political, the moral, or the legal, or indeed the human, but 'the linguistic implications of [a] murder' (CD, 85). These implications rise to the surface when the law requires 'the forcible transformation of ambiguity into decidability' (CD, 107). For when the law assumes