

## A Note on Deconstruction · *Russell Fraser*

“THIS ISN’T WRITTEN, as the French say,” said Plekhanov, turning back young Lenin’s slapdash polemic. But Lenin, focussed on content, didn’t know what his editor was talking about. The word revenges itself on writers who despise it, and his content no longer occupies many. Modern deconstructionists, once number one but sliding down in the charts, comment on these observations.

For example, Paul de Man: “A deconstruction always has for its target to reveal the existence of hidden articulations and fragmentations within assumed monadic totalities.” He is telling us that language qualifies what it says. Deconstructionists, keen on “sub-texts” promoted by the unconscious, think it does this involuntarily. They don’t give the writer much credit. But literary language at its highest reach (poetry), often testifies against itself, wittingly too. Life, endlessly tangled, is the poet’s business, and the questions it raises need yes-and-no answers. You won’t catch de Man & Co. putting it that way, however.

Still, the “hidden” meanings part, though turning literary study into a parlor game, gets two cheers from me. At least it improves on thus-we-see critics who make the text redundant except for its punch line. Husserl, a spokesman for deconstruction’s German wing, calls their ideational kernel *Bedeutung*. (Less sophisticated readers call it the “moral.”) He and associates agree that its version of meaning is partial. The opposite of partial isn’t plenary, though, not on their reading, and deconstruction’s ideal text is amorphous.

Derrida’s “Des Tours de Babel” (1985), evading the rigid structures *Bedeutung* insists on, sponsors more meanings than we know what to do with. This plenitude, or rather surfeit, is “post-structuralist” exactly and sees to it that meaning dies “of its own too much.” “Des” is “some,” also “from the” or “concerning,” while “tours,” meaning “towers,” means “twists” and “turns,” including “turns of phrase.” Put the first two words in the title together and they sound like “detour,” descriptive of the text. “Babel” is a place name, that is, itself alone, but signifies the confusion of tongues. You can’t clear it up, either: “no theorization, inasmuch as it is produced in a language, will be able to dominate the Babelian performance.” But check out Derrida’s approximation and see.

This disordered performance, different from poetry's, doesn't aggrandize but darkens the truth. Overloading the text—not a “hermeneutics,” philological in the first place, but a feeling-good “erotics”—it stuns the reader with an exploding scoreboard of signs. Julia Kristeva calls this pulsing register the geno-text. Content is what it offers, a cornucopia's worth. But the “contingent flashes” that light up the scoreboard, though given off by the word, don't illuminate the word, rather the play of all those things it isn't.

New Critical theorists (but they didn't have a theoretical bone in their body) used to softpedal content, saying something like, “It's what's up front that counts.” Ransom, Blackmur, and Tate, all of them poets, thought you got at the content through form. They part company with their successors, however, caring more for *gnosis* than *praxis*. The distinction is Aristotle's, where the first term means knowing things and the second means making them cash. Deconstructionists have an ax to grind, and their criticism serves an agenda.

Put briefly, it wants to erase the world we live in, building another in the white space. Up-to-date practitioners don't limit themselves to a “neutralization,” but according to Derrida must “practice an *overturning . . . and a general displacement of the system*” (“Signature Event Context,” 1972). Kristeva has them joining “in the process of capitalism's subversion,” facing down “the machine, colonial expansion, banks, science, Parliament,” and so on. Linguistics is their field but partly a surrogate, and “violence, surging up through the phonetic, syntactic, and logical orders,” aims at bigger game, “technocratic ideologies.” Many in the professoriate, out of love with a polity that doesn't use or respect them, share the same animus and goals.

Signing on with deconstruction earns them a bonus: escape from the text and its artificial constraints. “Artificial” as I use it isn't a pejorative, and the text, being literary, i.e. one of a kind, doesn't lend itself to codification. This fills most professors of literature with dread. By temperament intellectualizing, not the same as intellectual, they prefer a world of abstractions. Deconstruction plays to their preference and, declining to close with the text as written, does a little dance in the margins. Off-the-point activity, it only sounds frivolous, and readers out for entertainment will want to look elsewhere.

Sobersided, like orthodox Christians without the Christianity, most

deconstructionists aren't long on laughter. Though *jouissance* is one of their words, the only entertainment they admit is heuristic. Derrida says in a recent interview: "I was interested in the possibility of fiction, by fictionality, but I must confess that deep down I have probably never drawn great enjoyment from fiction, from reading novels, for example, beyond the pleasure taken in analyzing the play of writing, or else certain naive moments of identification. I like a certain practice of fiction, the intrusion of an effective simulacrum or of disorder into philosophical writing." The fun, if fun there is, lies in showing up the simulacrum or highlighting the disorder, a dagger at the heart of our so-to-say reality.

Politics comes first in deconstruction's manoeuvres. Denying integrity to the words on the page, it evacuates meaning or a finite range of meanings. Overloading does the same, an infinity of meanings working out to none. Either way, the book, an archive of things past, loses its privileged position. No longer yielding up truth, it luxuriates in "the unmotivated play of developing symbols" (Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 1976). "Unmotivated, implying disinterestedness, isn't quite right, though. Connectives (like "so" or "therefore") hold together the old systems of thought respectful or superstitious readers kowtow to, and deconstruction ruptures the chain.

One of its offshoots, reader-reception theory, decides that what the symbols stand for is moot. Though I am the student and you the docent, possibly the author, my interpretation has as much value as yours. But losing ourselves we find ourselves—this is the proposition—and the indeterminacy that describes our state of mind sets us free. Making up our minds, however, we load ourselves with fetters, reduction, reification, other bad things. Or we honor the old days, still infectious in the present and the prologue of bad times to come. Trashing the word, deconstruction's acts of violence mean to discredit history in favor of a *tabula rasa*. Only get rid of history and the future is there for the taking.

You spot the political bias in Jacques Lacan, muttering asides like "the brazen face of capitalist exploitation." The psychoanalyst as wiseacre, always getting at colleagues who haven't seen deeply enough into Freud, he demonizes language, as incriminating as dreams (none of them innocent, Freud tells us). Conscience, a bugaboo of the underclass, is "the senseless oppression of the superego." A willing tool of the oppressor, speech reorders "past contingencies by conferring on them the sense of necessities to come." (I follow *Écrits*, 1966, tr. 1977.) This "conferring" or imposing

says that language is primarily forensic. It functions “not to inform but to evoke.”

Gottlob Frege—he founded modern mathematical logic, and deconstructionists go back to him often—has words to this effect. E.g., “in the denotation of the sentence, all that is specific is obliterated” (“On Sense and Reference,” collected 1892, tr. 1960). Frege’s “specific,” making trouble for us, isn’t concrete but suggests the penumbra words carry with them. This “coloring” (he calls it) varies with every reader, and to determine meaning you need a head count. Through-and-through egalitarian, modern literary theory necessarily lands us up in the dark.

But though skeptical of truth according to our fathers, when speaking for its own truth it favors dogmatic pronouncing. Kristeva packages the dogma in her *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974, tr. 1984), a summons to action whose purport in last things is like Marx’s. Both are millenarian and see light at the end of the tunnel. Unlike Marx, who lives in a noumenal world (if he ever looked at his adopted England, he doesn’t let on), Kristeva reads poetry, anyway quotes it, so gets my hopeful attention. But her prose, not reader-friendly, bristles with made-up words the dictionary isn’t much help with. *Hyle* is one, said to present the moment of Husserlian phenomenology that deviates from syntactic or predicative closure. “I think,” you hear her saying. “Let the reader read.” It takes a lot of effort to do this.

Implications are clear, however, and evidently “closed” is a no-no. “Open,” on the other hand, earns our approval—as in open texts, temporal, not spatial, in their perspective. Kristeva means to commend their indifference to niceties of style. Also they don’t presume to legislate meaning, foisted on us by bossy authors and critics. Against the past, chiseled in stone, deconstructionists pin their hopes to the future, unblotted like an ellipsis.

Just at present, though, “we are delivered to the sentence,” says Roland Barthes. Hierarchical, it lets us in for subjection, as when the subject is father to the object and this adjective depends on this noun, etc. Barthes himself, off duty in Tangier, is “a public square, a *sook*,” reverberating with discontinuous sounds. “*Outside the sentence*,” they thumb their nose (if sounds can do that) at predicative syntax, canonized by classical linguistics. Appealing to ideology like any completed utterance, it dictates the future by imposing form on flux. The form is tyrannical, and taking my cue from

Barthes, a cartoonist among the philosophers, I see a busty dowager or a plutocrat grinding the faces of poor folk.

Both are arbiters and prescribe our social mores. Straitened like the sentence, they close off the road to fulfillment. “Loosen up!” is Barthes’ idea, first of all in letters. If you drop the pilot—meaning—you get a *jouissance*, or candy store, of meanings. Its pleasure is like orgasm, and most acute when perverted. Why should that follow? In Barthes’ answer, sexual preference merges with language theory, begetting his political stance. Opposed to “sanctioned sexuality” (it risks bearing fruit), he rejoices in “perversion, which shields bliss from the finality of reproduction” (*The Pleasure of the Text*, 1973, tr. 1975).

The culprit is finality, politically obnoxious if you want to turn the world upside down. Looking away from the closed or finished thing, modern poetry in French—Kristeva’s special subject—honors process. Old-fashioned poetry is a product, however, in this case of the “established bourgeois regime.” (Nobody has told her that the old shibboleths won’t do anymore.) Challenging “none of the subjects of its time,” older poetry reduces “to a decorative uselessness.” But our business, says Marx, isn’t decoration, much less contemplation, but “sensuous activity, practice.” This famous passage, from the “Theses on Feuerbach,” gives deconstruction its charter.

Philosophers used to explain the world, but “dialectical materialism, by contrast, wants to change it.” Kristeva is laying out a *modus operandi* for its new subject, socialist man. Different from the old one, “he *transforms* the real.” Deconstruction hopes to do this, so calls conventional reality in question. The in-your-face mode of writing is part of its program, a deliberate affront to civilized discourse. Hard on accepted verities and tickled by their demise, it adopts a relativistic point of view, shading to Pyrrhonist. Like that old Pyrrho, a baffled philosopher who threw up his hands, it says we can’t know anything for sure.

Lacan has a vision of the Tower of Babel gathering to itself “the darkness of the *mundus*.” He likes the darkness, confusion’s nurturing place, and nails “*méconnaissance*” (misconstruction) to his masthead. In his solipsistic world, the signifier (“I”) has lost objective status. This ego that denotes us is a great pretender, however, and though “opaque to reflexion,” still pretends to primacy in literary productions. But the text it signs its name to knows better. Authorship is only an idea, “formulated by and appropriate to the

social beliefs of democratic, capitalistic society.” That is Barthes, celebrating “The Death of the Author” (tr. 1977). “What Is an Author?” asks Michel Foucault (1969, tr. 1977), and answers: he is the one who “limits, excludes, and chooses,” and this is why he must go.

Late Freud, a great culture hero, feels much compassion for our poor ego. Wanting to cope with the world, it does that only fitfully, and he chronicles its failures and regrets them. Modern literary theorists make a totem of failure, noting with approval how it mocks self-conscious behavior. No part of our purview, the unconscious governs, especially for discourse, so all of us act out a lie. But the signified thing, only a product of the signifier, has no reality either. Poets from old times know that beauty, ugliness too, lives partly in the mind—“engendered” there, says the well-known song in Shakespeare. Speaking for our time, structuralism ratifies this truth by assigning priority to language. It doesn’t suggest that language creates reality, only our impressions of same. Post-structuralism, dissolving the world we live in, runs the two together.

“The world of words,” says Lacan, “creates the world of things.” All ad men and undertakers (“morticians”) hope for that kind of creation, also some characters in novels and plays. One is Shakespeare’s learned funny man Holofernes. Feeding on the dainties bred in a book, he eats paper, drinks ink. This replenishes intellect, and the pedant gilds the world, “improving” it as he belies it. Deconstruction means to destroy the world, nothing substantial out there and no meaningful speech, only chatter. Of course the deracinating is supposed to precede better days.

Terry Eagleton, an English Marxist, thinks that with ingenuity you could invent 1,000 different readings of a single sentence. Not my sentence, I want to tell him. I stand for “thrift in the proliferation of meaning” (Foucault, reprehending the author). Deconstruction calls this posture penny-wise and pound-foolish. “The absence of an ultimate meaning opens an unbounded space for the play of signification” (Derrida in *Writing and Difference*, 1967). Abandoned to play, postmodern texts don’t care whom they sleep with, and their promiscuity gives them their value.

In Barthes’ linguistic paradise, “a kind of Franciscanism invites all words to perch, to flock, to fly off again.” Subordination flies out the window, and “a generalized asyndeton seizes the entire utterance”: and . . . and . . . and, like a parody of Hemingway. Where Lacan is dyspeptic—only look at his photographs—and Kristeva a bookish Mme. Defarge, Barthes has a sense of

humor and at least his whimsicalities make us smile. He isn't kidding, however.

Cacaphony, "a sanctioned Babel," describes the text of pleasure. Careless of illogicalities, all barriers and classes, "it doesn't deny anything." This resembles it to Freud's unconscious, a free-for-all where "we never discover a 'no'." Out of its scrimmaging comes poetry as Kristeva reads it, the "expenditure and implementation of the unconscious." Welling up from the permissive world, it attacks our reigning tyrannies by assuming and unraveling their logic.

"Unraveling," Kristeva's word, is deconstructing precisely. Taking in poetry but going beyond its supposed disintegrating-in-the-service-of-change, it breaks down old oppositions like mine and thine. I once had a student who stayed in my house when I went away for the summer. Living in a time warp, the sixties, he thought his was mine and the other way round. But his was slim pickings, and drinking up all my liquor, he left behind a stack of I.O.U.'s.

Binary oppositions, though key for private property, don't organize literature, not the kind that lasts. A sophisticated critic, Eagleton dispenses with them in his introduction to literary theory (1983). More lucid than the modern masters he interprets to the world, he knows himself in the presence of the literary when texture, rhythm, and the resonance of words are in excess of their abstractable meaning. This proposition is deconstruction's principal insight. Describing excess plus "rupture and scission" as poetry's hallmarks, it makes them transitive, however. Poets are kinetic, even more efficient than Shelley's celebrated model, and lead us, Kristeva thinks, to throw off the dead hand of the past.

Those who don't are only tunesmiths, for example Andrew Marvell. Eagleton, whose vice of style is wryness, isn't aware how responding to this poet around the seminar table might transform the mechanized labor of wage slaves. Kristeva, giving higher marks to poetry, allows it a transforming power. But making us over, it doesn't appeal to the author's ipse dixit, like Dickens when he changes his born-again reprobates, bad today, good tomorrow. Change "seeps in through prosody, preventing the stasis of One meaning, One myth, One logic." This is auspicious.

Avid for distinctions, Marvell in his Horatian Ode damns the Protector, while acquitting the King, as his accent falls in one place, not another:

*He* nothing common did or mean  
Upon that memorable scene.

The distinction is more and less than political, though. Entertaining it, Kristeva stumbles on criticism, a fortunate fall. Mostly, however, formal considerations defer to prepossession, and the stakes she plays for are penny-ante.

Her texts are a battlefield and across it opposing parties, “semiotic” and “symbolic,” struggle for hegemony. Not a narrowing down to signs, semiotic = expansive. Contrary to expectation, symbolic is tyrannous, denying plurality. Identified with the Law of the Father, it takes sadistic delight in its repressive activity. Separating from the mother, the infant “confines his *jouissance* to the genital”; too bad and a theme for Norman O. Brown.

But the growing child, though he dwindles as the prison house shades close about him, still trails clouds of glory, saying where he came from. Poetry (“‘artistic’ practices”) recalls this pristine glory. Barthes locates its special pleasure in “an excess of the text, to what in it exceeds any (social) function and any (structural) functioning.” He sat in on Kristeva’s doctoral exam at the University of Paris, and said he got a good deal from her performance.

Foucault, though scourging authors who pretend to real existence—on his view, we don’t need them or want them—argues for excess in *Madness and Civilization* (“Folie et déraison,” 1961, tr. 1967). This seems inconsequent, but wait. Recalling Artaud and the Marquis de Sade, two prophets of his, he doesn’t rein in but throws the reins on the horse’s neck. (The horse is like Plato’s, always on the rampage, Freud’s *Id*, or Shakespeare’s “rude will.”) Madness isn’t a disease, or not altogether, until the Enlightenment invented a pathology, supplementing this with a cure. But the cure loses for us, dissipating the power of our dark chthonic side. Art (or violence or sexual perversion), on intimate terms with darkness, reclaims this power.

So art, the “semiotization of the symbolic,” keeps our kettle on the boil. Doing away with “*igitur*” (therefore), it provokes Kristeva’s “wild panic of reason.” Some of this is fun, but once you get past the emperor’s new clothes, deconstructionists are apt to strike you as latecomers to Bohemia, reinventing Max Bodenheim. *Plus ça change*, and their impatience with the medium as message is an old story with poets. Louis Althusser doesn’t



know that, and repudiating history, thinks it begins with him. “Our age is marked,” says this teacher of Foucault’s at the École Normale in Paris, “by the most dramatic and difficult trial of all, the discovery of and training in the meaning of the ‘simplest’ acts of existence: seeing, listening, speaking, reading.” Only a handful have been in possession of these “staggering knowledges,” and he mentions Marx and Freud, adding Nietzsche (*Reading “Capital,”* 1968, tr. 1970).

Living in the fag end of the Age of Reason, the modern world—I mean the big one, not the little world of theory—casts a cold eye on semiotization, so keeps the artist on a short tether. “Logocentric,” it restricts language to exclusive meanings. For Derrida, exclusive is masculine, and “logocentric” is a term of reproach. His word for our world is “phallogocentric,” cocksure. My word is univocal, as when either/or readers boil down a poet’s range of possibilities to one. Some pedantic editors of the texts I teach in class, committed to ratio, do that routinely. I wouldn’t call them sadistic, though, only impoverished.

Covering the waterfront, authors like Woolf and Joyce elude or transcend one-to-one correspondences. Character for both is a skein of contradictions, and Joyce’s hero Daedalus is sometimes a fool. Kristeva detects in their ambivalent fictions an “air or song beneath the text.” Chauvinistically, she assigns this wayward strain to the female (if the author is male, to the other and better half of his not-yet bifurcated apple). I detect it too, but it isn’t female, much less feminist, a word involving *parti pris*. Shakespeare’s characters salute it in *The Tempest*, “music on the waters.” Accommodating sweetness, barking watchdogs, and “the strain of strutting chanticleer,” it enlivens all art worth the name.

This concordant-discordant music makes room for gratuities the prose paraphrase takes no account of. Modern theory puts it that the signs composing the text overrun exact meaning and beget a babel of sounds. But babel, meaning confusion, is wrong for this context, and the surfeit of sounds or signs—more than paraphrase, rehearsing tidy meanings, requires—is the index of poetry’s truth. Half a century ago, John Crowe Ransom saw how this saving increment protected the poem from *id est* formulations, the stock-in-trade of single-minded critics, beginning with the first “euhemerists.” Skip the window dressing, they said: Chronos is time, nothing left over.

New Criticism's elder statesman—Old Crow, Blackmur called him, both liking their glass—Ransom wanted to distinguish the figure the poem makes from the prose core, sufficient for readers in-a-hurry. What was “the differentia, residue, or tissue” that prevented “mere” meaning from precipitating out of the poem? Ransom answered: “That is, for the laws of the prose logic, its superfluity; and I think I would even say, its irrelevance” (“Criticism, Inc.” in *The World's Body*, 1938). For example, Prospero's farewell to art (*Tempest*, 5.1.33-57). Replete with detail, the great speech much exceeds its occasion. Weak helpers, elves and demipuppets, helped the hero create his art, and propriety suggests that he name them. However, he does more than that.

E.g., he has them making “green sour ringlets,” darker in color than the English countryside often shows you. An adverbial phrase, evidently not dispensable, says they do this “by moonlight.” The fairy rings taste “sour,” though, and cattle, grazing the meadows, leave them alone. This information, properly surplusage, gets omitted in *Cliff Notes*. But Prospero's magic, the roughness included, and his “heavenly music,” fail of a hearing without it. Criticism's job is to say why, and all criticism that declines to is only treading water.

The music isn't “ethical,” like Plato's, or modern marching songs, and doesn't impel us to action. So back to the drawing board, says Eagleton to Shakespeare. Literature's reason for being, on his view and deconstruction's, going “far beyond the sensitive reading of *King Lear*,” is to radicalize the social context. Well-intentioned moderns like Leavis and the *Scrutiny* crowd made a stab at this kinetic enterprise, and though they failed, not estimating enough how the transforming power of literature is vitiated by the world we grow up in, at least they answered the question, Why read it at all? In a nutshell, they said we read literature, or ought to, because it makes us better men and women.

Eagleton comes out in the open (and speaks for the cohort), winding up his exegesis of modern critical theory. Brecht is exemplary because he sees that deconstructing (“the dismantling of our given identities through art”) is only step one, en route to the production of a new kind of human subject. This subject needs to know not only “internal fragmentation but social solidarity,” and experiencing “the gratifications of libidinal language,” must rejoice also in “the fulfillments of fighting political injustice.” Literature earns its keep as it prosecutes the fight. Most literary professors,

brimming with good hope or only at their wits' end, think it does this, or something like it. The associating of art and moral uplift is hardly contemptible, and on my salvationist side I wish the association held true.

Though smelling of the Yellow Nineties, deconstruction has this side and, treading down the powers of darkness, wants us to win the well-fought day. Readers who go back a ways will catch in its secular evangelists echoes of the old humanist credo, art as the means to an end. Already in Shakespeare's time, when humanism was getting started, a poet-philosopher said what the end was and wasn't: "not *gnosis* but *praxis* must be the fruit."

But form, trueing up distressful content, fosters acquiescence. This is the death of *praxis*. All credentialed art, though working a sea change in those who take it to heart, celebrates the world it describes. This, for instance, from *King Lear*, at the lowest point of fortune: "Oh, our lives' sweetness! / That we the pain of death would hourly die / Rather than die at once!" Lenin, his revolutionist's impulse blunted by the Appassionata, closed his ears against it. Elsewhere he complained that "good writing is counterrevolutionary." I think we agree, some of us more equably than others.