Literary Theory: A Historical Survey

Part 3: The Linguistic Turn

Lecture 9:

Constructive and Deconstructive Readings

1) Recap Deconstruction

2) A Poem

3) Deconstructing the Poem (J. Hillis Miller)

4) Construing the Poem (M.H. Abrams)

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1) Recap Deconstruction

- deconstruction is not a method but an ethos of the greatest possible exactitude in reading
- deconstruction observes how texts observe and describe (deconstruction = reconstruction; second-order observation)
- all texts promise something and 'mis-speak' it at the same time (double meaning of the German '[etwas/sich] versprechen')
- deconstruction is subversive in that it engages with a text without observing any limits (such as, for example, the hermeneutical/New Critical assumption that everything is contained within the text's/work's organic form)
- deconstruction re/deconstructs discourses in a gesture of immanent critique which nevertheless obliterates the boundaries between individual texts and an all-pervading (inter-)textuality

<div align="right">(cf. Hörisch)</div>

2) A Poem

A slumber did my spirit seal;
I had no human fears:
She seemed a thing that could not feel
The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees;
Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,
With rocks, and stones, and trees.

(written by William Wordsworth in late fall or early winter 1798-99 during his
 miserable stay at Goslar with his sister Dorothy)

3) Deconstructing the Poem (J. Hillis Miller)

"A metaphysical method of literary study assumes that literature is in one way or another referential, in one way or another grounded in something outside language. This something may be physical objects, or 'society', or the economic realities of labor, valuation, and exchange. It may be consciousness, the Cogito, or the unconscious, or absolute spirit, or God. An anti-metaphysical or 'deconstructive' form of literary study attempts to show that in a given work of literature, in a different way in each case, metaphysical assumptions are both present and at the same time undermined by the text itself. […] The argument […] is that the literary and philosophical texts of any period of Western culture contain […] both what I am calling metaphysics and the putting in question of metaphysics." (101)

Binary oppositions in the poem:

slumber	vs.	waking	
male	vs.	female	
sealed up	vs.	open	
seeming	vs.	being	
ignorance	vs.	knowledge	
past	vs.	present	
inside	vs.	outside	
light	vs.	darkness	
subject/spirit/consciousness	vs.	object/natural world	
emotion	vs.	touch	
human	vs.	inhuman (?) fears	
thing (girl)	vs.	thing (object)	
years	vs.	days	
hearing	vs.	seeing	
motion/self-propulsion	vs.	force/compulsion	
mother/sister/daughter	vs.	mistress/wife	
life	vs.	death	(102)

first stanza	vs.	second stanza
past tense	vs.	present tense
(innocence/ignorance	vs.	knowledge/experience)

"The second stanza […] speaks in the perpetual 'now' of a universal knowledge of death. […] The structure of the poem is temporal. It is also allegorical […] The meaning of the poem arises from the interaction of two emblematic times. These are juxtaposed across an intervening gap. They are related not by similarity but by radical difference. The ironic clash between the two senses of 'thing' is a miniature version of the total temporal allegory which constitutes the poem." (104)

"The play on the word 'thing' exists, it happens, also in German."

→ **Intertextuality 1:**

Martin Heidegger, "Der Ursprung des Kunstwerks" (1950)

A man is not a thing. It is true that we speak of a young girl who is faced with a task too difficult for her as being a young thing, still too young for it, but only because we feel that being human is in a certain way missing here and think that instead we have to do here with the factor that constitutes the thingly character of things. We hesitate even to call the deer in the forest clearing, the beetle in the grass, the blade of grass a thing. We could sooner think of a hammer as a thing, or a shoe, or an ax, or a clock. But even these are not mere things. Only a stone, a clod of earth, a piece of wood are for us such mere things.

→ sexual difference!

→ "This lightness of the maiden thing, which makes a young girl both beneath adult male knowledge and lightheartedly above it […] makes her both immeasurably below and immeasurably above laughable man with his eternal questions." (105)

"As the reader works his or her way into the poem, attempting to break its seal, however, it comes to seem odder than the account of it I have so far given. My account has been a little too logical, […] an analogical oversimplification." (105)

→ **Intertextuality 2: 'Wordsworth' (= Wordsworth's writing)**

- the death of Wordsworth's parents (when he was 8/13)
- 'Lucy' = daughter, mistress, embodiment of feelings for Dorothy
- fantasy of (re-)establishing a/the bond

→ the poem "dramatizes the impossibility of fulfilling this fantasy […] in a structure of words in which 'thing' can mean both 'person' and 'object', in which one can have both stanzas at once, and can, like Lucy, be both alive and dead, or in which the poet can be both the dead-alive girl and at the same time the perpetually wakeful survivor" → "to have it" (107)

"Whatever track the reader follows through the poem he arrives at blank contradictions. These contradictions are not ironic. They are the co-presence of difference within the same […] The reader is caught in an unstillable oscillation unsatisfying to the mind and incapable of being grounded in anything outside the activity of the poem itself." (108)

"Lest it be supposed that I am grounding my reading of the poem on the 'psychobiographical' details of the poet's reaction to the death of his parents, let me say that it is the other way round. Wordsworth interpreted the death of his mother according to the traditional trope identifying the earth with a maternal presence. By the time we encounter her in his writing she exists as an element in that figure […] This incorporation exists both in Wordsworth's language and in the Western tradition generally, both before and after him. To put this as economically as possible, [the poem] […] enacts one version of a constantly repeated occidental drama of the lost sun. Lucy's name of course means light […]" (110)

"This loss of the radiance of the logos, along with the experience of the consequence of that loss, is the drama of all Wordsworth's poetry […] The words waver in their meaning. Each word in itself becomes the dwelling place of contradictory senses, as if host and parasite were together in the same house. […] The tracing out of these differences within the same moves the attention away from the attempt to ground the poem in anything outside itself. It catches the reader within a movement in the text without any solid foundation in consciousness, in nature, or in spirit. As groundless, the movement is, precisely, alogical." (110)

4) Construing the Poem (M.H. Abrams)

Problems with the new direction of criticism (from a traditional perspective):
- questioning of the boundaries of literature
- questioning of the subordinate function of criticism
- indeterminacy of meaning (127-128)

"The 'battle' between the earlier, metaphysic-bound reading and the deconstructive reading, Miller says, is joined in the alternative answers they offer to the question 'What does this given poem of passage *mean*?' Early on in answering this question, he shows that the poem means to him very much what I and other oldreaders have hitherto taken it to mean." (143)
→ "he accepts the historical evidence"
→ "Miller takes it that [… the poem] can be understood as an entity complete in itself"
→ "Miller takes the two sentences […] to be the utterance of a particular lyric
   speaker"
→ "Miller takes the assertions in the first sentence plainly to imply that the girl was
   then alive, and the assertions in the second sentence (augmented by the stanza-
   break) to imply that the girl is now dead. […]" (144f.)

"[F]orced, he asserts, by an 'inassimilable residue' in the text itself" Miller "disperses the meaning that he has already construed as 'apparently simple' [… into further] significations":

→ an "obscure sexual drama"

→ "a reenactment of the loss of 'that direct filial bond to nature' which his mother, while alive, had established for him"

→ Lucy as a "virgin 'thing'"

→ the speaker is "dispersed not only into a 'he' (the knowledgeable male), but also into a 'she', a 'they' (Lucy and his mother), and, as the representative of nature, an 'it'.

→ "the occidental drama of the lost sun"

► Miller is converting the "text-as-construed into a pre-text for a supervenient over-reading that [he] calls 'allegorical'. (148)

Interpretive Moves:

1) identify in the text an 'interrelated set of binary oppositions'
2) dissolve the 'unifying boundaries' of the poem as a linguistic entity so as to merge the eight-line text into the textuality constituted by all of Wordsworth's writings, taken together by conflating the reference and relations of the 'I' and 'she' in the poem with other passages
3) generalize even further with the help of "doctrinal bridges, whose validity Miller takes for granted" ("underwriters": Derrida, Freud, recent feminist criticism, Heidegger) until the poem is merged into the textuality constituted by all occidental languages taken together (148-153)

Problems:

1) "[F]or all the surprising new readings achieved en route, I do not see how Derrida's counterphilosophical strategy, when transposed to the criticism of literature, can avoid reducing the variousness of literary works to allegorical narratives with an invariable plot."
2) deconstructive practice will have to be based on excellence in primary reading to which will then have to be added the deftness, wit and wordplay of the secondary type, which, however, embody literary rather than scholarly values
   → which values are more important?

'Lucy' by Divine Comedy
(William Wordsworth/Neil Hannon) (*Liberation,* 1993)

I travelled among unknown men,
    In lands beyond the sea;
Nor, England! did I know till then
    What love I bore to thee.

'Tis past, that melancholy dream!
    Nor will I quit thy shore
A second time; for still I seem
    To love thee more and more.

Among thy mountains did I feel
    The joy of my desire;
And she I cherished turned her wheel
    Beside an English fire.

Thy mornings showed, thy nights concealed,
    The bowers where Lucy played;
And thine too is the last green field
    That Lucy's eyes surveyed.   (1801; 1807)

She dwelt among the untrodden ways
    Beside the springs of Dove,
A Maid whom there were none to praise
    And very few to love:

A violet by a mossy stone
    Half hidden from the eye!
- Fair as a star, when only one
    Is shining in the sky.

She lived unknown, and few could know
    When Lucy ceased to be;
But she is in her grave, and, oh,
    The difference to me!   (1798; 1800)

A slumber did my spirit seal;
    I had no human fears:
She seemed a thing that could not feel
    The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;
    She neither hears nor sees;
Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,
    With rocks, and stones, and trees.   (1798; 1800)

Bibliography Lecture 9:

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