

Literary Theory: A Historical Survey

Part 3: The Linguistic Turn

Lecture 8:

Poststructuralism and Deconstruction

1) Poststructuralism

2) Deconstruction

3) Deconstruction in the US: Yale Deconstructionists

4) Retrospective Assessments

1) Poststructuralism

- emerged at the end of the 1960s from critical discussions within structuralism
- **shared assumptions:**
 - 1) language is constitutive for human dealings with reality
 - 2) the world is a world of signs, and signs are arbitrary (de Saussure)
- **departures:**
 - 1) Lotman: Natural language as 'primary modelling system'
vs. 'secondary modelling systems' (culture)
 - 2) Barthes: language + secondary systems of signification

Barthes: signifiant (...) / signifié
Saussure: signifiant/signifié

- the signifié of the secondary (tertiary ...) level is never fixed
→ meaning production (semiosis) as a never-ending process
>> poststructuralism

→ a new angle appeared with regard to the referential dimension of linguistic signs:

structuralism

- > the unity of the sign

- > meaning resides in the sign, but the idea of reference persists (as a 'transcendental signified')

- > explanation/understanding (i.e. fixing) as aims

poststructuralism

- > gap between signifiant and signifié (only the material dimension of the sign is accessible, meaning is problematic)
- > the cultural practice of using signs does not point beyond itself (there is no signified beyond semiosis)
- > openness and instability meaning as fundamental assumption

→ the structuralist idea of providing a scientific basis for the humanities by describing the laws and constants of the symbolic activity of the human mind had to be abandoned

→ the belief in the possibility of final explanations appears as a logocentric illusion brought about by the ontological self-deception of Western culture (Derrida)

- originally a French movement (Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Francois Lyotard)
- enthusiastic reception in the US where it takes the place of the New Criticism as the dominant paradigm in literary studies
- reluctance in GB ("frenchified jargon currently fogging the pages of many a literary journal" Terence Hawkes in *TLS* 1994)

2) Deconstruction

- philosophical position developed by Jacques Derrida (1930-2004)
- philosophical discourse in the 20th century: relativity/reflexivity
- all theories can only avoid their inherent contradictions by blocking out certain aspects of their own position ('blind spot')
 - constructive discourse
- 'blind spots', inherent contradictions and aporias can be uncovered from an external perspective (e.g. Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Derrida)
 - deconstructive discourse
- deconstructive discourse is necessarily parasitical, it must remain negative

Basic Terms:

The logocentric illusions of Western philosophy:

- a) presence:
the idea of an immediately given reality represented in language
- b) identity:
the direct correspondence between word and referent;
the essential oneness of the thinking subject

→ constitutive (and symptomatic) factor:
the primacy of spoken language in Western thought

Derrida:

a) écriture:
there is no reality without writing

b) différance:
there is no identity, only difference

→ meaning is never given and stable, but the effect of a never-ending dynamics of signifiers pointing at each other ('to defer') and mutually defining each other in a structure without centre ('to differ')
→ no sign means anything 'in itself'

c) dissémination/semiosis:
the fermentation of meaning as process

example:
a monolingual dictionary in which every definition of the meaning(s) of a word consist of other words which point to new definitions consisting of yet more words...
→ every decoding is another encoding

Derrida:
"There is nothing outside the text."

→ meaning cannot be determined, criticised or evaluated by reference to external factors

d) text:
the presence of the absent through the nostalgia of/for presence
(re-presentation in a literal sense)
→ traces of meaning

What to do with texts?

- construing vs. deconstructing:
the rhetorical structure of a text opens up possibilities of constructing an apparently 'present' truth
(→ weak/transcendental readings)
and of deconstructing these truths by laying open their linguistic foundations
(→ strong readings)
- the belief in the text as an objectively given structure is replaced by a view of the individual text as part of a larger intertextuality the boundaries of which are linguistically, culturally and ideologically determined but nevertheless mutable

Consequences:

- the traditional Western belief in the power of reason and in the possibilities opened up by knowledge is replaced by an emphatic celebration of the liberating effects of acknowledging plurality, contradictions, difference
(→ playful postmodernism vs. mournful modernism)
- rejection of the notion of 'centre' at the heart of traditional thinking
- teleological models of history are rejected as logocentric illusions, history appears to be a universal, chance-ridden game that manifests itself in processes of intertextuality

Problems:

- What are the ideological implications of deconstructionist discourse?
Is it nihilistic?
Is it a-political?
- Focus on language/text/discourse leads to a neglect of reality/history/material foundations: there is a gap between the radical implications of epistemological reflection and its possible relevance in social contexts.
- However, if the potential for cultural criticism is realized, there is a strong urge towards constructive discourse which can hardly be avoided.
- The radical implications of deconstructionism delegitimize the academic contexts in which it flourishes.
- The boundaries between literature and criticism are permeated.

3) Deconstruction in the US: Yale Deconstructionists

- final dismissal of the New Criticism, the 'Triumph of Theory'
- the new approach de-mythologizes both literature and the notion of the literary work of art whose status as an autonomous entity is destroyed by a discursive and intertextual de-centring which favours rather than controls the proliferation of meaning
→ two roles of ambiguity:
 - 1) Enriching the structure/unity (New Criticism)
 - 2) Dissolving the structure/unity (Deconstruction)

- affinity to postmodernist literature plus strong showings in Romantic and modernist studies

but

- literature keeps its exalted status as a privileged medium of knowledge production and model case of textuality
→ continuity with New Criticism, even greater distance to reality, new mystification

Critics:

Harold Bloom, Geoffrey Hartman, J. Hillis Miller, Paul de Man, Barbara Johnson

Waning of deconstruction from the second half of the 1980s onwards (to be replaced by more pragmatic approaches such as New Historicism, Gender Studies etc.)

but:

Fundamental importance of difference/textuality/mediality for all approaches after the 1980s

→ poststructuralism/deconstruction as a necessary transitional stage

4) Restrospective Assessments

The perspective of deconstruction fails (or partially fails) to acknowledge the specific productivity of writing: its active capability to transform exteriority, lack and culture into interiority, depth and nature. [...] A mediology [...] does not address the problem of having to prove that all metaphysical identities cancel themselves through never being able to fully control the semiotic sphere from which they derive. [Mediology] is not particularly interested in doubting all claims of origin, totality, identity and truth from an immanently philosophical point of view, albeit by stepping out on the logical margins of philosophy. Instead, [mediology] wants to address the question how such phantasms – and it accepts the premise that these claims are phantasms, though not in a psychological or plainly ideological sense – *positively function* and how they can acquire the power of a social and technical reality principle.

(Koschorke 1999, 344-5, my translation)

Dekonstruktion ist keine Methode, sondern nicht mehr und nicht weniger als das praktizierte Ethos äußerster Genauigkeit (Kritiker meinen: hypertropher Genauigkeit) bei der Lektüre von Texten, die Aufschluß über relevante Themen und Probleme (Wahrheit, Sinn, Gerechtigkeit, Verständigung, Kommunikation, Präsenz, Tod) versprechen. [...] Dekonstruktion beobachtet, wie die von ihr rekonstruierten Texte Sachverhalte, Probleme und Themen beobachten und beschreiben. Dabei macht sie immer erneut und immer anders [...] eine auf- und anregende Entdeckung: Nicht nur, aber gerade auch Texte, die Aufschluß über letzte oder vorletzte Dinge wie das Ganze, die Wahrheit, den Sinn, das Sein, die Geschichte, unhintergehbare Individualität, herrschaftsfreien Diskurs oder Letztgewissheiten aller Art versprechen, versprechen sich. [...] Dekonstruktion ist [...] tatsächlich in dem Maße subversiv, indem sie sich vorbehaltlos, ganz und gar auf Konzepte, Texte und Theorien einlässt, die über innere Widerspruchsfreiheit oder gar Letztbegründungsqualität zu verfügen versichern und sich damit rettungslos übernehmen. [...]

[W]as unter anderen Motiven mehr die Dekonstruktion für helle Köpfe so attraktiv macht: ihr Design ist es nicht, weitere Theorien polemisch, kritisch oder erweiternd neben andere zu stellen. Sie re/dekonstruiert vielmehr in der Tat vorhandene Diskurse, indem sie sich völlig dem Gestus der immanenten Kritik verschreibt. [...]

Derrida hat der Versuchung widerstanden, Dekonstruktion zur Methode oder zum System auszubauen. In einer [...] Fülle von Einzelstudien [...] hat er die Kunst vorgeführt, Texte in all ihrem verborgenen Reichtum zum Sprechen zu bringen, noch das zu hören und zu lesen, was keine Autorintention fokussierte [...]: Sprache ist ein Medium der Herrschaft und der Befreiung zugleich.

(Hörisch, *passim*)

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