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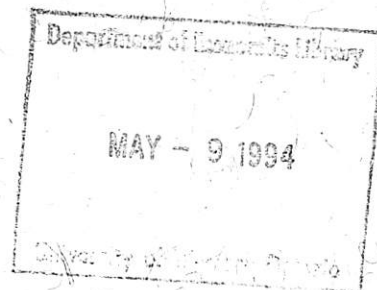
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# PAPERS IN POLITICAL ECONOMY

**Paper No. 49**

**“Deconstruction: Whence It Came  
And Whither It Tendeth”**

**Leon Surette**



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DECONSTRUCTION

WHENCE IT CAME AND

WHITHER IT TENDETH

by

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The term, "deconstruction" is a coinage of the French philosopher, Jacques Derrida, who first used it in a book called *Of Grammatology* (*De la Grammatologie* 1967; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, Trans. Gayatri Spivak 1976). "Grammatology" is another of Derrida's coinages, and it means the science or study of language as writing (the *grammé*) as opposed to speaking (the *phoné*). The word "deconstruction" occurs on page 10 of the Spivak translation in a sentence characterizing the cognitive consequences of the invention of writing: "Further, it [writing] inaugurates the destruction, not the demolition but the *de-sedimentation*, the *deconstruction*, of all the significations that have their source in that of the logos."

The claim is that the *inscription* of language (writing) alters the way in which it means or signifies by breaching, severing, or "*deconstructing*" the link between meaning and the word (*logos*). By "*logos*" Derrida means especially the spoken word whose meaning is attached to, or constructed by, the identity of a speaker or *subjectivity*. With spoken language that subjectivity is always present before the hearer. Speech is thus communication between two subjectivities. Written language, by contrast, subsists independently of speakers and hearers. Thus the meaning of written language cannot be authorized by an appeal to an *author*. Those who subscribe to the old *phonocentric* model in which language is an *instrument of communication* are said to be "*logocentric*." The deconstructor, thinks of language as *the site of meaning* rather than as an *act* of communication between a sender and a receiver.

The problem of the absence of the speaker/author has been a focus of discussion and speculation within German philology and hermeneutics since the early in the nineteenth century. The most important figures are the Protestant theologians Friedrich Schleiermacher

(1768-1834) and Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911), both of whom were concerned to put the interpretation of Scripture (the *word* of God) on sound methodological grounds. Their method had two principal components: 1. the application of the "hermeneutic circle," and 2. a contextualization of the text within the time of its inscription.

The hermeneutic circle is the non-vicious circle of interpretation in which the "value" (word meaning) of an element is dependent upon its functional position in the whole (the sentence) and the meaning of the whole (the sentence) is dependent upon the meanings of the elements. Contextualization acknowledges that the values of words (and even of syntactical practices) are to some extent relative to time and place.

Hence, within German hermeneutics, the labour of interpretation places upon the interpreter a heavy responsibility to *reconstruct* original, authorial meaning, and this in the face of the perception that linguistic meaning is by nature unstable and shifting.

*Deconstruction* accepts the hermeneutic axiom positing the instability of linguistic meaning, but rejects the project of *reconstruction* on grounds of its theoretical impossibility, and its ideological undesirability. For deconstruction meaning must always be constructed by a reader, and a sentence -- and *a fortiori*, a text -- will have as many meanings as it has readers.

A more secular strain of German philology adopted an hypothesis about linguistic meaning often called "the Whorff-Sapir hypothesis" after the private scholar Benjamin Lee Whorf,<sup>1</sup> and the eminent American linguist, Edward Sapir. One of the more famous

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<sup>1</sup> See Benjamin Lee Whorff, "Language, Mind and Reality" in John B. Carroll, Language Thought and Reality: Selected Writings of B.L. Whorff, New York: John Wiley & Sons 1956 (first published in The Theosophist Madras, India, 1942). He asserts that "the study of

expressions of this hypothesis-- which is a variety of *reflexivity* -- is from the pen of Schleiermacher's contemporary, Karl Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835), and long predates Whorff and Sapir:

Man lives with his objects chiefly -- in fact, since his feeling and acting depends on his perceptions, one may say exclusively -- as language presents them to him. By the same process whereby he spins language out of his own being, he ensnares himself in it; and each language draws a magic circle round the people to which it belongs, a circle from which there is no escape save by stepping out of it into another. (Humboldt, cited by E. Cassirer, Language and Myth New York: Dover 9.)

Where Schleiermacher was concerned with the problem of *reconstructing* in German the word of god expressed in Hebrew, and transmitted in Greek and Latin, Humboldt was struck by the fact that language *constructs* the world we know and *ensnares* us in it. These days the most famous exponent of Humboldt's position is Thomas Kuhn, who has applied it to the positive sciences themselves.<sup>2</sup>

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language ... shows that the forms of a person's thoughts are controlled by inexorable laws of pattern of which he is unconscious. These patterns are the unperceived intricate systematizations of his own language ... And every language is a vast pattern-system different from others, in which are culturally ordained the forms and categories by which the personality not only communicates, but also analyzes nature, notices or neglects types of relationships and phenomena, channels his reasoning, and builds the house of his consciousness."

Whorff continues in a manner that reveals the mystical component of his position (a mysticism that Davidson identifies in note #7): "This doctrine is new to Western science, but it stands on unimpeachable evidence. Moreover, it is known, or something like it is known, to the philosophies of India and to modern Theosophy. ... The linguistic order embraces all symbolism, all symbolic processes, all processes of reference and of logic." (252)

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Kuhn applies a version of the Humboldtian principle of reflexivity to the history of science in The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (Chicago 1962). In the preface to

Deconstruction does not invoke Humboldt, but bases its arguments on the structuralist theories of the French-speaking Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913). Saussurean linguistics had a great vogue in French philosophical circles in the immediate post-war. Among the first<sup>3</sup> to pick him up was the philosopher, Merleau-Ponty, who sketched out a resolution to the peculiar difficulty in which French Marxist intellectuals found themselves after the Allied victory of 1945. As Marxists they were committed to an historical -- if not historicist -- view of things, but recent history was something neither the French nor the Germans wanted to discuss or think about.

Merleau-Ponty struck upon a resolution to this dilemma in his address to the 1951 International Colloquium of Phenomenology in Brussels, "Sur la Phénoménologie du Langage." He pointed out that Saussure had shown that meaning or "value" in language arises from a system of oppositions, discriminations or differences rather than from any capacity of words to name, or refer to, objects and events in the world (such as was maintained by Frege, Russel, and Logical Positivism). Meaning is thus fundamentally *arbitrary* and *relative* as opposed to *natural* and *positive*.

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this work he acknowledges the importance of the American hermeneutic scholar, A.O. Lovejoy and also of Benjamin Lee Whorff to the development of his thought, but not Humboldt, who is very little read today (vi).

<sup>3</sup> Merleau-Ponty was followed closely in the adoption of Saussure by the anthropologist, Claude Lévi-Strauss who suggested that cultural anthropology could become "scientific" by the adoption of Saussurean canons in "The Structural Study of Myth" (Journal of American Folklore 78 1955). Lévi-Strauss learned of Saussure from Roman Jakobson, whom he knew during his years at Cornell. Structural anthropology enjoyed a vogue of several decades. Lévi-Strauss is one of the antagonists Derrida engages in Of Grammatology.



Saussure's target had been the attachment of utterances to utterers insisted upon by philology and hermeneutics, but Merleau-Ponty's target was a Sartrean dualism of subject and object. Saussure allowed him to argue that the world is not projected by a subjectivity, nor even by a language (as Humboldt argued) but by a *system* common to *all* languages, and a very simple one at that -- *binary discrimination*.<sup>4</sup> Hence one need not concern oneself with the historical (the "*diachronic*" in Saussurean argot), nor even the national, but only with the systematic (the "*synchronic*"). The past (the war) and individual responsibility were both exorcised in the name of philosophy, science, and truth.

Another component of Saussurean linguistics adopted by Deconstruction is its anti-essentialism. Saussure attached his theory of linguistic meaning to economics where "value" is

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<sup>4</sup> "Binarism" is a term of great currency and considerable polyvalency. Saussure does not use it, but it is implied in his principle of simple discrimination. It is most fully developed as a phonological principle by Roman Jakobson. For Jakobson phonemic sets are constructed out of *binary pairs* -- such as plosive, voiced "d" and unvoiced fricative "th" which are thought of as minimally discriminated, and arranged into privileged and unprivileged.

However, there is also the principle of logical binarism most famously articulated by Alan Turing. A "Turing machine" is a logical device with only two (hence binary) marks -- usually described as 1 and 0 -- but which is capable of performing any calculation whatever. Digital computers are instantiation of a Turing machine insofar as they employ only two notational marks -- 1 and 0, or on and off.

A good deal of confusion has resulted from the indiscriminate application of "binarism" as indifferently Jakobsonian or Turingian. Jakobsonian binarism, of course, permits -- indeed generates -- a repertory of marks such as the phonemes of a language or an alphabet, whereas Turingian binarism generates no such repertory, but only "strings" or statements. Both varieties, however, are digital or discrete.

It is also not uncommon for "binarism" to be employed as a synonym for "dualism." Of course, dualism is the contrary of binarism, for it is essentialist in that "dualism" means that the pair are somehow opposed due to their nature. Binary pairs are pure discriminates; no properties that do not contribute to their discriminability are pertinent. The opposite is the case for dualism. Good and evil are dual pairs; "I" and i" are binary pairs (an unbroken and a broken line) as are "b" and "d" (right-facing and left-facing). Turing's binarism implies no pairs, but "strings" upon which "operations" or computations are performed.

similarly relative. Modern economics has long since discarded the intrinsic or commodity theory of value, and more recently the *fiat* or labour theory of value subscribed to by Ricardo and Marx. Saussure thought that linguistics should do the same. For him linguistic "meaning" is not intrinsic to either the physical properties of the word, nor even the history of its use, but is purely a function of its *exchangeability* -- that is, of its place in a *structure of differences*. To underline the economic paradigm of his system, he referred to linguistic "value" in preference to "meaning."

A consequence of Saussure's application of the economic paradigm to linguistics is that linguistic meaning is now absolutely imprisoned within a featureless *system of differences* as opposed to a rich, articulated "magic circle" of myth, religion and history that Humboldt and Whorff postulated. The marriage of a Saussurean arbitrary system of differences to hermeneutic reflexivity casts the language dweller adrift in a Kafkaesque world of endless, meaningless displacement, a hermeneutic *mise en abîme*. Derrida calls this the play of "*differance*," which he explains as follows:

*The (pure) trace is differance.* It does not depend on any sensible plenitude, audible or visible, phonic or graphic. It is, on the contrary, the condition of such a plenitude. Although it *does not exist*, although it is never a *being-present* outside of all plenitude, its possibility is by rights anterior to all that one calls sign (signified/signifier, content/expression, etc.), concept or operation, motor or sensory. This differance is therefore not more sensible than intelligible and it permits the articulation of signs among themselves within the same abstract order ... (62-3).

The word, "*differance*" is a neologism formed as an omnibus word combining "defer" and "differ." By it Derrida combines the Saussurean principle of empty discrimination, with the Jakobsonian principle of privilege in such a way that "differance" has an axiological or hierarchical component. This differing deferral is said to underpin Western "*logocentric*" thought in which words "defer" to things and concepts (signifiers to signifieds).

Invoking a principal attributed to Saussure and to the American pragmatist, Charles Sanders Peirce<sup>5</sup>, Derrida blends the Saussurean axiom that meaning or value arises from the system or structure (the totality of language), and not from its components (words *or* sentences) with Humboldtian/Kuhnian reflexivity. Now not only language (and its cultural products), but also the positive sciences are seen to be "magic circles" we spin from out of ourselves. Although not Marxist, this principle is easily compatible with Marxist theories of ideology or "false consciousness," and is habitually blended with them. With a little help from Levi-Straussian cultural anthropology, all human behaviour can be seen to come under linguistics (or "semiology," the study of signs) -- from mating behaviour to economic exchange, from rock music to DNA, from traffic regulations to moral prohibitions. This perception was seized upon by Roland Barthes, and turned into a minor industry of cultural

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<sup>5</sup> Derrida discusses Peirce's "semiotics" in Of Grammatology (48-9) and claims that he "goes very far in the direction that I have called the de-construction of the transcendental signified." He bases this claim on a passage from Peirce he cites: "it is only out of symbols that a new symbol can grow" (p.48). However, for Peirce the symbol is only one variety of sign. The other two -- icons and indexes -- do have for Peirce origins that transcend the system.

interpretation which he called "Structuralism." Others -- notably Thomas A. Sebeok -- called similar interpretive attention to cultural entities "Semiotics."<sup>6</sup>

It happens that these linguistically grounded insights line up perfectly with Marxist analysis of capitalist society. Instead of speaking of ideologies, we can now speak of languages, or codes, or semiotic systems. Understanding a language is like understanding an ideology, one must turn to a "science" outside of, or transcendent to, the ideology. With Marxism that science is Marxism itself, with Deconstruction, it is Saussurean linguistics. There is, of course, a crucial difference. Marxism regards itself as possessing positive knowledge. Deconstruction denies the possibility of positive knowledge. All that is possible is to discredit false knowledge.

Broadly speaking Marxism and Deconstruction agree that the natural and social sciences tell us nothing about the world, but only about the scientists or their culture.<sup>7</sup> In

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<sup>6</sup> See Thomas A. Sebeok, The Play of Musement (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1981). Sebeok is one of the more radical practitioners of semiotics. He asserts in the opening pages of this collection that "the pivotal motive pervading [this work] ... is my absolute conviction that semiotics begins and ends with biology and the the sign science and the life science ineluctably imply each other" (4). Sebeok derives his practice from C.S. Peirce, rather than Saussure.

<sup>7</sup> This scepticism is often attached erroneously to Thomas Kuhn's argument that the history of the natural sciences is a story of the successive displacement of one *paradigm* or "world view" by another in "scientific revolutions" -- of which the Newtonian and Einsteinian revolutions are prototypical cases.

Donald Davidson articulates the distinction between Kuhn's position and its contrary in "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" (in Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1984):

In giving up dependence on the concept of an uninterpreted reality, something outside all schemes and science, we do not relinquish the notion of objective truth -- quite the contrary. Given the dogma of a dualism of scheme and reality, we get conceptual relativity, and truth relative to a scheme. ... In giving up the dualism of scheme and world, we do not give up the world, but re-establish unmediated touch with the

other words, science is not to be distinguished from the other stories we make up to amuse ourselves and to influence the behaviour of others. Scientific theories are just especially boring and rebarbative stories.<sup>8</sup> A happy corollary of this position is that literary criticism becomes the master discipline. This aggrandizement of the hermeneutic "sciences" is exactly the position adopted by Schleiermacher and Dilthey, and which is represented today by philosophical hermeneutics as elaborated by Hans Georg Gadamer, the most prominent student of Martin Heidegger.<sup>9</sup>

Structuralism claimed the same sort of privilege for itself. But Derrida applied Marxist critical theory to "de-sediment" or "deconstruct" Saussure's system of neutral oppositions. As we have seen, Derrida reinterpreted Saussurean differences to produce "*differance*." This small shift instituted Deconstruction by imputing a value scale (an "axiology," as Deconstructors say) to "logocentric" understanding of signifying systems, which erroneously thought of the sign as secondary, as a "deferral" of the genuine and authentic "presence" of the thing signified and/or of the speaker, and which required that the sign "defer" or "stand

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familiar objects whose antics make our sentences and opinions true or false. (198) There is no doubt that Whorff (see note #1), and Heidegger adopt the second hypothesis (the contrary of Kuhnian relativism) that Davidson describes here. It is more difficult to be confident if Derrida does or not. He is often thought to verge on the Kabbalistic position that there is literally nothing transcendent of language, that scripture embraces reality, but he himself denies it.

<sup>8</sup> This is to say that the scientific theories of Einstein and the literary and cultural theories of T.S. Eliot are only different stylistically. At its most absurd and extreme, Deconstruction would hold that the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were signs -- as if dropping papers with  $E = Mc^2$  written on them would have had the same effect.

<sup>9</sup> See Hans Georg Gadamer, "The Origins of Philosophical Hermeneutics" in Philosophical Apprenticeships, trans Robert R. Sullivan, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press 1985 177-93.

aside for" the thing, concept, or intending subjectivity. Saussure and Structuralism had not gone far enough from empirical realism or *logocentrism*!

The story now engages political science and attaches itself to a strain of Neo-Marxist thought associated with the Frankfurt School, which -- somewhat surprisingly -- was located in New York City round and about Columbia University. That is where Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and others ended up after fleeing Frankfurt and the Nazis in the 1930s.<sup>10</sup> The Frankfurt School's *Critical Theory* has had an enormous influence on radical thought in the United States throughout the sixties. As we have seen classical Marxism's notion of "false consciousness" is similar to hermeneutic reflexivity in that both deny that theories and beliefs are grounded on evidence external to those theories and beliefs. The Frankfurt school wedded Marxism with hermeneutics.

These European Marxist refugees from Nazism, confronted with the contented prosperity of the American masses, despaired of destroying capitalist false-consciousness through violent revolution. Their response was to to invent "consciousness raising," that is, an alteration of "false consciousness" by critical analysis of the false consciousness itself -- in Marxist terms, by altering the *superstructure* directly instead of indirectly through a revolutionary alteration of the *base structure*. In a somewhat debased form Critical Theory

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<sup>10</sup> A striking (and telling) feature of Deconstruction -- an undoubtedly Continental European "school" with strong hermeneutic and phenomenological roots -- is that much of its history takes place in the USA. For example, the Russian linguist, Roman Jakobson introduced the French anthropologist, Claude Levi-Strauss to Saussurean linguistic when both were teaching in New York in the 1940s. Jacques Derrida pursued graduate studies at Harvard (1956-57), and launched deconstruction at the "International Colloquium on Critical Languages and the Sciences of Man" at Johns Hopkins in October of 1966.

became the philosophy of the hippie movement, whose members sought to alter the world by raising their own consciousnesses

Such a theory of action must appear as absurd to empirical realists *aka* "essentialists." However, it is a version of the theory of reflexivity of Continental hermeneutics -- that is, the principle that reality can be known only *under description*, and hence our knowledge is irretrievably perspectival and multiple. In a strong version of this view, it is held that we can change an uncomfortable or undesirable "reality" merely by altering our perspective, our "mind set." The Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci, is another well-known formulator of the view that a change of heart can produce a change in material conditions. Radical feminism also subscribes to the view that "mind sets" as embedded in language produce social practices insofar as it maintains that feminine traits are the consequence of social and cultural factors rather than biological ones.

Derrida's "Deconstruction" was instituted as a practice rather than a theory. He described it as the "de-sedimentation ... of all the significations that have their source in that of the logos" (Of Grammatology 10). Of course, it turns out that *all* signification has its source in the logos. The whole of Western thought is "logocentric," in which "spoken words are the symbols of mental experience and written words are the symbols of spoken words" (Of Grammatology 11). Deconstruction cannot erect an edifice, but can only burrow under and destabilize ones already in place (24):

The movements of deconstruction do not destroy structures from the outside. They are not possible and effective, nor can they take accurate aim, except by inhabiting those structures. Inhabiting them *in a certain way* [D's emphasis], because one

always inhabits, and all the more when one does not suspect it. Operating necessarily from the inside, borrowing all the strategic and economic resources of subversion from the old structure, borrowing them structurally, that is to say without being able to isolate their elements and atoms, the enterprise of deconstruction always in a certain way falls prey to its own work. This is what the person who has begun the same work in another area of the same habitation does not fail to point out with zeal. No exercise is more widespread today and one should be able to formalize its rules. (Of Grammatology 24)

This long citation both describes and illustrates the technique of deconstruction as Derrida instituted it. Firstly it is *subversive*; it destroys structures from the inside. Secondly it is parasitic. It has no methodology of its own but borrows its "strategic and economic resources" from its host. And finally, it is not transcendent, not a "meta" discourse, but "always in a certain way falls prey to its own work." It is thus immune to criticism, even to deconstruction, for it is always already self-denouncing. The last remark is slightly facetious, for no rules of negativity can be formulated. Derrida reveals this last card only at the end of Part I. Once again, a long citation is required:

Indeed, one must understand this *incompetence* of science which is also the incompetence of philosophy, the *closure* of the *épistémè*. Above all it does not invoke a return to a prescientific or infra-philosophic form of discourse. Quite the contrary. This common root, which is not a root but the concealment of the origin and which is not common because it does not amount to the same thing except with the unmonotonous insistence of difference, this unnameable movement of



*difference-itself*, that I have strategically nicknamed *trace*, *reserve*, or *differance*, could be called writing only within the *historical* closure, that is to say within the limits of science and philosophy [Derrida's emphasis throughout]. (93)

What this amounts to is the negation of what we have -- science and philosophy -- and the refusal to replace it with a substitute. It is a more long-winded restatement of the conclusion to the preface (called "Exergue"):

The future can only be anticipated in the form of an absolute danger. it is that which breaks absolutely with constituted normality<sup>11</sup> and can only be proclaimed, *presented*, as a sort of monstrosity. For that future world and for that within it which will have put into question the values of sign, word, and writing, for that which guides our future anterior, there is as yet no exergue [Derrida's emphasis].

(5)

Deconstruction has entered the house of the academy largely through the perpetually open window of literary criticism. From there it has spread like a wet spot on the carpet to philosophy, law, sociology, political science, and the Lord alone knows what else. It should be remembered, that since the early years of this century, literary criticism in the academy has

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<sup>11</sup> I call this position "epochalism." It is endemic in German cultural thought from Hegel on, but is especially powerful in Nietzsche and those he has influenced. Fundamentally it is the hypothesis that cultures are totalities which supervene, mature, and die, a cultural version of the hermeneutic circle. If the value of the elements of a sentence, or a discourse, or a culture is determined by the total sentence, discourse or culture, and the sense of the totality is a product of the elements, then analysis is impossible. Understanding must arise from "indwelling." Thomas Kuhn's theory of paradigm shifts is a special case of this sort of epochalism. He argues that paradigms shifts in science are always (and properly) resisted by the practice of "normal science," but those who adopt the shift do not do so piece-meal, but all-at-once (*cf* The Structure of Scientific Revolutions 157-8).

been almost exclusively an interpretive or hermeneutic practice. "New," "Freudian," "Archetypal," "Marxist," "Existential," "Structural," and "Phenomenological," critical schools all preceded Deconstruction, and have all been largely swallowed by it. They offered techniques by which a reader could seize hold of a work (or "text," as poems, plays, and novels were usually called) and persuade it to yield its secret meaning or sense. If there is any constant element in literary criticism, it is the conviction that poems, plays, and novels are fields for interpretation; a text is always an opportunity for a reader to discover, uncover, disclose, expose, or reveal, a sense, meaning, or significance that other readers have failed to discern.

Deconstruction is a doctrine, practice, or philosophy which suits the corporate culture of academic literary criticism to a "T," -- indeed, it is something like a "Mr. T" -- for it maintains that neither authors, nor texts themselves have any *authority* within the interpretive exchange. It is language itself that determines "meaning," and language is a labyrinth, or prison without locks, in which we are all enclosed.

Obviously this is very heady stuff for literary scholars. From time immemorial teachers and critics have been scorned as creatures much inferior to author-geniuses like Shakespeare, John Locke, and Adam Smith. Thanks to deconstruction any reader -- whether a sophomore, graduate student, Assistant Professor, or Emeritus -- is now the full equal of such alleged "authors." Professor Smith's article on *Ulysses* has a status equal to any text attributed to James Joyce; hence there is no need for her to "do justice" to *Ulysses*. The very notion that there is something determinate and stable "out there," something transcendent of

her essay on *Ulysses* -- such as the novel or the author -- to which justice could be done or not done is exposed as a laughably naïve and *logocentric* prejudice.

Paul de Man, a Belgian professor of French Literature at Johns Hopkins University, was a crucially important figure in the dissemination of deconstructive practice. His two collections of essays -- *Blindness and Insight* (1971) and *Allegories of Reading* (1979) -- formulated and popularized Deconstruction as a literary critical practice. Instructed by personal contact with Derrida, De Man absorbed the whole mix of Saussurean Structuralism, Peircean pragmatism, Derridean grammatology, philosophical hermeneutics, and Frankfurt *critical theory*.

De Man provided literary critics with a model of deconstructive practice in the 1975 essay, "Semiology and Rhetoric."<sup>12</sup> Here he showed how any "discourse"<sup>13</sup> can be reduced to a play of "*differance*" -- which turns out to be just Jakobsonian ranked pairs, such as those in his title. "Rhetoric," he explains, is the art of speaking well. Its "*differant*" is

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<sup>12</sup> It may be that Donald McCloskey's article, "The Rhetoric of Economics" [Journal of Economic Literature XXI (June 1983) 481-517] derives distantly from this influential essay even though De Man does not appear in his bibliography. Of course, McCloskey's understanding of the place of rhetoric is classical and Aristotelian, and not at all in agreement with de Man's position. McCloskey's argument is that the *manner* of expression can have important consequences for the *matter* -- that form affects matter. I am in entire agreement with this point. However, it is not the point of people like Rorty, Feyerabend and Derrida as McCloskey imagines. They deny the possibility of any distinction between manner and matter, between medium and message, between rhetoric and logic. McCloskey clearly would not be willing to go so far.

<sup>13</sup> "Discourse" is the deconstructive term which displaces the New Critical and structuralist term, "text." The old term designated a work as a determinate entity about which one could speak. The new term avoids suggesting that language can be divided up into discrete bits -- such as poems, plays, and novels. Instead whatever horizons one puts on one's discourse -- such as the horizons marking Hamlet of from "Semiology and Rhetoric" are understood to be just unavoidable conveniences.

"semiology," the science of signs and sign systems in which the speaker has only an incidental role to play. In semiology, "language speaks us" -- as Martin Heidegger famously put it in the 1949 "Letter on Humanism" -- rather than an orator speaking language, as in rhetoric. The *logocentric* thinker, De Man observes, would seek to reconcile these apparent contraries, semiology and rhetoric -- either we speak language, or language speaks us, but not both. The deconstructor by contrast "celebrates" the "play of contraries" wherever he finds them -- and he finds them everywhere.

In De Manian Deconstruction, then, contradictions are not difficulties or problems to be resolved or explained away. On the contrary, self-contradiction and incoherence are seen to be authentic reflections of the fact that language is a labyrinth from which there is no issue or escape. A corollary of this fact is that those discourses -- such as physics, political science, and economics -- which pretend to resolve, surmount, or enclose difficulties are duplicitous. They must have a bad conscience otherwise they would admit their ignorance and confusion. Such discourses are to be either interrogated, and their hidden *logocentric* faith in the false doctrines of truth, essence and principle exposed, or -- more faithfully to Derrida -- to be subverted and undermined by "inhabiting" them.

Since most of the canonized works of Western civilization do, in point of fact, pretend to resolve, surmount, or delimit contradictions, difficulties, and opacities, some have found the Deconstructive requirement of opacity or "*canniness*" a little difficult to accept. The acknowledged -- but regrettable -- tendency of Western culture to value perspicuity and coherence, has produced two quite distinct responses from the, by now, rather broad and inchoate movement to which the label, "Deconstruction," has been attached.

One response -- recognizably Marxist in inspiration -- attributes the unfortunate tendency to "*closure*" (as the privileging of perspicuity and non-contradiction is sometimes called) in Western literature to Eurocentrism, Patriarchalism, Logocentrism, Capitalism, Speciesism and the like. All of these position are said to be tainted by "*subjectivism*" in that a "*centred*" *ego* or Cartesian *cogito* presumes to "think about" some other, that is to say, a *subject objectifies* that about which it thinks and speaks. The remedy is to scrap the tainted works of adult, white, straight males -- such as Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Newton, Locke, Kant, and Einstein, and replace them with works by one or all of those who have been illegitimately objectified by their discourse. The list is indeterminate but typically includes Africans, Arabs, Asians, Amerindians, females, and gays.<sup>14</sup> Some cynics criticize this response as a blatant effort by the young and other minorities to destroy the intellectual capital of the entrenched (and middle-aged) white majority.

An alternative -- and more Derridean -- response is to expose the internal coherence of the discourses of Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Newton, Locke, Kant, and Einstein. If these canonical discourse can be shown to be internally incoherent, contradictory, and unresolved then they are alright, and can continue to be studied. Some cynics criticize this response as a blatant effort of middle-aged, white, heterosexual males to preserves the *status quo*.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> It will be noticed, that in this argument, the author seems somehow to have crept back into the equation, despite having been banished at an earlier stage. However, it should be remembered that consistency and coherence are vicious attributes of logocentrism, and therefore any imputed inconsistency or incoherence only tends to validate the arguments exhibiting these traits.

<sup>15</sup> The American philosopher, Richard Rorty, is the most prominent figure faulted in this way. See, in particular, Contingency, irony, and solidarity Cambridge: Cambridge UP 1989. The following passage gives some sense of Rorty's co-optation of deconstruction in order to

The movement's *anti-essentialism* is, I think, the key to its success. If there are no essences, no natural kinds, then anything is possible -- or perhaps nothing is possible. In any case, effective action is a theoretical impossibility. This is a comfortable doctrine in a period of great social, political, economic, and ideological stress.

Michel Foucault, author of *Madness and Civilization*, and one of Derrida's university teachers. Himself a radical intellectual much admired by Deconstructors, Foucault was treated to a deconstruction of his influential book by Derrida in 1963 lecture which Foucault attended, "Cogito et l'histoire de la folie" (reprinted and translated in *Writing and Difference* trans. Alan Bas, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1978). Foucault responded several years later. He pointed out the blatant misrepresentations of his own text and Descartes' of which Derrida was guilty, and concluded with an assessment of deconstruction that would be difficult to improve upon:

I shall say that what can be seen here so visibly is a historically well-determined little pedagogy. A pedagogy which teaches the pupil that there is nothing outside the text, but that in it, in its gaps, its blanks and its silences, there reigns the reserve of the origin; that it is therefore unnecessary to search elsewhere, but that here, not in the words,

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save the *status quo*:

A liberal society is one which is content to call "true" (or "right" or "just") whatever the outcome of undistorted communication happens to be, whatever view wins in a free and open encounter. This substitution amounts to dropping the image of a preestablished harmony between the human subject and the object of knowledge, and thus to dropping the traditional epistemological-metaphysical problematic. (67)

In short we should give up notions of truth and knowledge and rest content with majority opinion as the best we can get -- and good enough withal.

certainly, but in the words under erasure, in their *grid*, the "sense of being" is said. A pedagogy which gives conversely "to the master's voice" the limitless sovereignty which allows it to restate the text indefinitely. ("My Body, This Paper, This Fire" *Oxford Literary Review* 4 Autumn 1979 9-28. p. 27)