

UNIT 19

Poststructuralism and deconstruction

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Poststructuralism and deconstruction transformed literary criticism in the 1970s and 1980s into something very different from the earlier practices of new criticism, formalism and structuralism. In these two decades literary criticism acquired a new complexity that many have seen in a negative light, an often jargonesque terminology, and an attitude of apparent self-importance at the expense of literature. Under the influence of poststructuralist ideas about language, literary texts were no longer seen as objects in their own right, with inherent form and content, but as things that could be constructed by other discourses in an almost infinite number of ways. Deconstructions were acts of criticism which did not really respect the idea of a text as something with objective properties, and seemed more interested in the method employed by a critical discourse to represent a literary text. The reading had become more important than the thing read.

Looking back this does not seem like a perverse or surprising change in emphasis. The ascending importance of readings and interpretations can be seen as part of a larger movement in criticism and literature: the decline of realism. There are two preliminary ways in which the ascent of reading can be linked to the decline of realism in literature. First, the non-realist literary text tends to produce much more ambiguous and multiple meanings than those that are rooted in the faithful representation of reality: they are open to and provocative of different interpretations and readings so that the burden of sense-making lies as much in the critic's construal of the text as in the literary text's construal of the world. Secondly, the decline of realism can be seen not so much as a turn away from realism by writers who favour non-realistic modes but as a process of questioning the viability of realism as a concept. Non-realist writing, new forms of realism and certain kinds of criticism have conspired to unsettle the concept of realistic literature by seeing it as a kind of reading – one among many. To view realistic literature as a kind of reading is to emphasize that reality is not prior to language and interpretation but a product of it, as well as to massively extend the scope of the term reading.

In the early twentieth century these two tendencies, of turning away from realistic modes and of unsettling the concept of realism, were gathering a momentum in literature and criticism, establishing the conditions and raising the questions that would result in the literary critical fashion for deconstruction in the

1970s and 1980s. This was a process of growing doubt about the ability of language to refer to a pre-existing reality. The modernist novel drew much of its experimental energy from the rejection of realistic conventions established in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and strongly endorsed the view of language as a condition rather than a reflection of experience. The Imagist and Vorticist poets of the modernist period developed a dense and opaque language that asserted the absolute inseparability of the form and content of a poetic text, thus rejecting the basis of realistic representation. One need only think of Joyce's collages of different styles and perspectives in *Ulysses* or the rigorous foregrounding of language itself in Pound's *Cantos* to glimpse the modernist origins of a poststructuralist sense of the importance of language in reading and constructing experience (see Units 16 and 17).

The decline of realism has been equally in evidence outside of literature, in Saussurean linguistics, and in various other formalist camps of literary criticism such as American new criticism and Russian formalism which doubted the validity of the representational model of language. Saussure aside, this doubt often began in relation to the problem of the realist novel and its apparent claim that language could evoke the outside world in a transparent and unproblematic way. New critics such as T.S. Eliot and the Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky were followed by a wave of critics in the middle of the century, such as Northrop Frye, Tzvetan Todorov, A.H. Greimas, Gérard Genette, Roman Jakobson and Roland Barthes, who broadly contended that realism was just a complex and collective way of agreeing what reality was like – a consensual illusion. Realism came to be seen as a kind of sham, as a discourse in which language effaced itself and so disguised its role in projecting shape and form onto the world (see Unit 18).

This was also the claim of Saussure in his *Course in General Linguistics* (1972), where words are seen as capable of reference only because they project their system of differences onto the non-linguistic world. Like literary realism then, language in general is a shared system we use to make sense of the world, but which we assume to be a reliable and transparent index, or reflection, of a pre-existing world. This is one of the most influential propositions of the century: that our knowledge of the world is given its shape and structure by language which we then assume is the objective shape and structure of the world. Its influence on post-structuralist thought is profound. It places us all in what Frederic Jameson called a kind of prison-house of language (Jameson, 1972). It means that everything is like a linguistic text, even if we assume otherwise. Above all, it raises a problem which is distinctly poststructuralist: that if language doesn't so much refer to a pre-existing world as project its structure onto it, what about language which is used to refer to other language (metalanguage), like criticism? Reference to a literary text, after all, is not different from reference to anything else, so that critical language, like language in general, invents or constructs its objects (literary texts) even while it assumes that it is being objective.

This is a good way of defining the difference between structuralism and poststructuralism. Structuralism was a kind of science and like most sciences it assumed that it could tell the truth about its objects. It assumed that its own language

was transparent and unproblematic, even when it was describing the way that language other than its own had an active role in constructing the things that it referred to and meant. Poststructuralism was really a way of turning structuralism's basic attitude to language back on itself, so that 'metalingual' discourses like linguistics and criticism are seen in the same light as discourses which claim to refer to the world: as dishonest claims to transparent objectivity.

Poststructuralist terminology for this problem is confusingly varied. As a philosophical issue, it is often expressed in terms of subject and object relations. The terminology of subject and object is a kind of dualism which sees knowledge, analysis and meaning as processes based on the opposition of a knowing subject and an object taken possession of in the act of knowing. Traditionally, language is perceived as a mediation in these processes. The poststructuralist claim, however, is that the role of language is much more fundamental than that of mere mediator: that the subject and object are in a sense simply facets of language, or that it is impossible to think about subject/object relations except as a problem thrown up by language. Poststructuralism sought to displace the dualism of subject and object with a monism in which a knowing mind and an object of knowledge were both inextricably determined by the structures of language.

The opposition of subject and object underlies much of the notorious jargon in poststructuralist writing. When critics and linguists talk about the *transparency* or *opacity* of language, the former term suggests the possibility that a subject can know an object by looking through language as one looks through a window, whereas the latter suggests either that the attention is arrested by language (as for example in poetry: see Unit 1, p. 3–5), or that we should realize that when we think we are looking through a window at objects we are in fact looking at language. Optical metaphors like this are particularly common in criticism, where poststructuralism is often seen as a tendency away from the *reflection* model of language and literature towards a *production* model: that a realistic novel, for example, does not reflect reality but produces a sense of transparency or faithful reflection by adhering to conventions of language use, degree of detail and linear sequence which are collectively deemed realistic. There is a sense here of language acting as a kind of shared subjectivity, where the *structure* of experience is seen not as objective properties of the real world but as an act of collective *construction*. The whole idea of seeing or reflecting a real world objectively is challenged by poststructuralist theory, which tends to favour the notions of opacity, production and construction.

There is a line of argument in poststructuralism that there is something unhealthy and dishonest in language use which assumes its own transparency, or effaces its own language. Paul de Man saw it as a kind of ideology based on the 'confusion of linguistic with natural reality, of reference with phenomenism' (de Man, 1986, p. 11); Roland Barthes used the term 'the unhealthy signifier' for language which did not draw attention to itself and its role in constructing the object being represented. There are two strong strains of poststructuralism aimed against the unhealthy signifier. The first is an attempt in poststructuralist discourse itself to make its own language opaque, self-conscious, often playful and poetic so as to avoid the structuralist problem of assuming the transparency of one's own language when denying it to others. Much of the difficulty of reading poststructuralist

philosophers and critics can be attributed to a strategy of trying to highlight language itself as the lens through which all objects are perceived and discussed. This strategy is often referred to as *reflexivity* or *self-consciousness*, and seen as a kind of self-subversion in the sense that any illusion of transparency to an object is quickly undermined. The strategy is often borrowed from literature, where a realistic illusion can be broken by a poetic quality in language or by some self-commentary which reveals the process of construction at work, or from philosophy – from Nietzsche's very literary way of expressing a philosophical idea, or from Heidegger's concept of *erasure*, in which a word is used and withdrawn in the same breath. The second strain is a critical preoccupation with those discourses seen as most unhealthy, where language is at its most self-effacing. Just as poststructuralism has tried to show that the realist novel is not as transparent to the world as it seems, so too it has turned its attention to non-literary discourses in which language tries to pass itself off as a transparent material, in areas such as history and science.

A confusing aspect of deconstruction is that it has devoted so much of its energy towards deconstructing metalingual discourses: texts which are about language itself rather than about some apparently extra-linguistic world. It is easy enough to accept the idea that objects are always constructed by language, but confusing when the object is language – that is, when language is an object which is itself constructed by language. One reason for the deconstructive obsession with metalingual discourses might be that they are, in a sense, the very model of the world that poststructuralists are advancing. Poststructuralism does not recognize the difference between a metalingual text and a realist one because, if everything is constructed by language, if everything is interpretation, any text will in a sense be a text about language. It is very common to read deconstructions which see even the most realist text as a metalingual text. A realist novel can often be difficult to recognize in a deconstructive reading because the novel is treated as if it were some kind of obscure linguistic tract on the nature of language. This is a common theme in deconstruction – the idea that a novel is somehow always about itself, that it narrates its own constitution, or is always self-referential even when it seems to be referring to something other than itself. This idea can be illustrated best by looking at deconstructions of manifestly metalingual texts in linguistics and literary criticism before looking at deconstructions of literary works themselves.

Perhaps the most common misunderstanding of deconstruction is that it is, at root, a theory of language. Deconstruction certainly engages with many issues in language theory and philosophy, but there is no systematic account of what language is or how it works. There are many observations made by structuralist linguists about the nature of language which poststructuralists seem to accept and modify, and it is worth exploring some of these as an approach to the question of poststructuralism's relation to structuralism, and to the role that language theory plays in deconstructive reading in general. The obvious place to start is in Saussure's concept of the sign. Saussure's basic insights about the nature of a linguistic sign were (a) that it is a two-sided entity which consists of a signifier (sound image) and a signified (a concept to which it refers), not a name and a thing; (b) that the relationship between the signifier and signified is arbitrary, 'united in the brain by an associative bond'; and (c) that the sign has no substantive content but generates meaning through the

system in which it is differentiated from all other signs. Taken together, these insights underlie Saussure's two most cited statements about language: that 'language is a form and not a substance' and that 'in language there are only differences without positive terms'. This emphasis on the relational identity of the sign, the idea that it does not have any content other than its relationship with other signs in the language system, is wholly accepted by poststructuralists. Indeed the only real problem with this account of the sign is that it does not go far enough in pursuit of its own insight.

Derrida, for example, claims that we should not think of the sign as a two-sided entity at all (Derrida, 1976). The whole idea of the sign as a signifier and a signified is, according to Derrida, a supposition inherited from the old, dualist idea of representation which can separate the 'thing itself' from the way that it is represented. For Derrida these things cannot be separated in the way that the binary concept of the sign suggests. When we encounter language we encounter only the signifier. When we try to explain the meaning of the signifier we can do so only with reference to other signifiers. In short, there is no such thing as a signified. For Derrida, the binary concept of a sign is an excellent example of the way that analysis unwittingly projects massive philosophical assumptions onto the things that it analyzes. In his early work Derrida often referred to these philosophical assumptions as 'the metaphysics of presence' – a whole philosophical paradigm based on what he calls a 'desire for presence'. The desire for presence is usually also a desire to get back to the origin of something – that genetic turn of mind that guides so much historical explanation. In the case of the sign, Derrida sees the signified as a notional origin of the sign, where the signifier is a second-order representation of that signified. It is a desire for the presence of meaning in a sign, when in fact we can only ever encounter signifiers and their relations with each other. The signified is, in Derrida's terminology, endlessly deferred, in the sense that we cannot point to what it is, to its presence, except as part of a signifying structure or as part of the language system:

There is no phenomenality reducing the sign or the representer so that the thing signified may be allowed to glow finally in the liminality of its own presence. The thing itself is always already a representamen shielded from the simplicity of intuitive evidence. The representamen functions only by giving rise to an interpretant that itself becomes a sign and so on to infinity. The self-identity of the signified conceals itself unceasingly and is always on the move. The property of the representamen is to be itself and another, to be produced as a structure of reference, to be separated from itself. (Derrida, 1976, p. 49)

This qualification of Saussure's concept of the sign is characteristically post-structuralist in the sense that it insists on the fact that the signified, the 'thing itself' or the conceptual content of the sign, has no independent existence at all, so that the distinction between signifier and signified is meaningless. It is a distinction with an in-built dualism, or a vestige of traditional theories of representation, which poststructuralism would like to replace with a more thorough monism.

Just as Saussure's insights about the relational identity of the sign lead him to a theory of *difference* as the principle by which signs generate meaning, so too

Derrida's modified account of the sign leads him to a modified account of difference. In the last quotation, Derrida states that the signified is 'always on the move'. This idea comes out of an objection to Saussure's decision to make his study of language synchronic, or frozen in time. The synchronic approach is quite effective in pointing to one of the ways in which the signified is not present in language – in the sense that the only way to explain the meaning of a sign is to refer to other signs which it is not: the idea that the meaning of a word is not really within it, but is also absent or spread across the other words in the language system on which the meaning of a sign depends. Terry Eagleton illustrates this principle with the idea of a dictionary (Eagleton, 1983). The dictionary definition of a word is stated by other words, so that if we did not know the meanings of the words used by the definition, we would have to look them up in turn. In each case, the definitions we would find would themselves be constituted by words which we would have to look up, and so on. We would end up in a labyrinth of words all making references to each other by way of explanation. However far we explored, we would encounter only signifiers; the signified would never be present. But for Derrida, there are other ways in which the signified is never present which a synchronic account of language cannot accommodate.

The term 'presence', which is so crucial in Derrida's writing, has both a temporal and spatial sense. An object can be spatially present, as opposed to absent, in the way that a student is spatially present or absent in a classroom, but also temporally present or absent in the sense of currency: present as opposed to past or future. Derrida wants to modify the structuralist notion of *difference* to be able to account for the temporal dimension of a sign, or the idea that a sign might bear the trace of the past and the future. A sign must be repeatable to have its meaning: we must be able to repeat words in the knowledge that they will mean the same thing, or preserve their differential relations with other words. Similarly, a word is usually combined with other words in a sequence, or sentence, so that any explanation of the word's meaning will have to take into account its context in the sequence, where it is modified and specified by the other words which surround it. The sign therefore bears the trace of those other words which precede and follow it in a sentence, so that its meaning is not self-contained or present. The meaning of a word is always on the move because it is always somewhere else – several other places at once – and can never be made to stand still. Derrida names this motion, this deferral of the signified meaning of a word, *différance*. *Différance* clearly invokes Saussure's spatial principle of *difference* but adds a time dimension – *différance* being a pun in French which combines the meanings of differ and defer, or put off until later. Meaning is not present in a sign then, both in the Saussurean sense that it depends on other words in the language system, but also in the sense that it is always determined or structured by temporal absences like prior uses or other words in a sentence. This is what is meant when poststructuralists say that meaning is endlessly deferred from signifier to signifier.

The term *différance* carries one other important implication which defines Derrida's qualification of structuralist theory. *Différance* is a pun which, in French, and like many other puns, cannot be heard. Because the pronunciation of *différance*

and *différance* are the same, it is only in writing that it can really be observed as a pun. The joke here is that this gives writing an extra power which speech does not have, and therefore implicitly rejects Saussure's decision in *Course in General Linguistics* to exclude writing from the study. The joke fits in with a constant theme in Derrida's work, argued at length in *Of Grammatology*, that speech enjoys a privileged status in relation to writing because it is perceived as being closer to the mind than writing. This is another kind of presence that Derrida's account of language rejects: the idea that language is under the control of the mind which produces it, or that it contains within it the presence of a signifying intention. The problem with writing in this respect is that it is seen as a way of allowing language to operate in the absence of the signifying intention – on sheets of paper, rather than coming out of the head which contains the mind which produced it. It may already be apparent that Derrida understands language and meaning as too complex and difficult to pin down to be understood as the successful communication of intended meanings to a listener. Against Saussure's focus on speech, Derrida often refers to language as 'writing' because it leaves out the supposition that the signifying intention is present in language. Writing, for Derrida, is the name of two absences: the absence of the referent and the absence of the signifying intention (Derrida, 1976). His account of language as writing therefore refuses to underpin meaning in either of these ways.

This elevation of the term *writing* in Derrida's work points to an important modification that poststructuralists have made to structuralist theory. Structuralist linguistics placed an enormous importance on the idea of the binary opposition as the basic meaning-generating unit in language: that a word often depends on its antonym, or opposite, as the basis of its intelligibility. Poststructuralists generally accept this, but claim that an opposition is not just an innocent structural feature of the language system. Instead, an opposition is usually a hierarchy, where one of the terms is primary and the other secondary, or one is seen as good and the other evil. One of the obsessions of deconstruction is with uncovering these hierarchies as they operate in arguments, analyzes and texts of all kinds. In this case, Derrida takes the opposition of speech and writing and shows that the privilege given to speech over writing, the idea that writing is a derivative and secondary form of language, is based on a metaphysical prejudice that speech is prior because of its proximity to the mind. Deconstruction is particularly interested in binary hierarchies of this kind because they are places where values are subtly projected onto an object of study while presenting themselves as neutral analytical distinctions. What Derrida does when he elevates the term writing to name all language is characteristically deconstructive. First, he challenges the distinction by arguing that speech is only distinguishable from writing on the basis of a presupposed privilege attributed to speech; secondly, he inverts the hierarchy between the two terms so that the secondary term is given priority, and in so doing, inverts the hidden value system that underlies the hierarchy. In this case, then, to deconstruct means to strip a text down to its most basic assumptions, to locate these assumptions in a hierarchical opposition, and to reverse this hierarchy as a strategic rejection of its inherited presuppositions.

Summaries like this one make deconstruction sound as if it is a theory of language, which it is not. It would not even be accurate to say that deconstruction is a way of reading which is based on linguistic premises. What Derrida does when he reads Saussure's text is an attempt to expose the ways that a text which is apparently transparent to its object – in this case language – actually construes its object on behalf of a philosophical paradigm. Thus, the oppositions which make Saussure's study of language possible, such as speech/writing, synchrony/diachrony and signifier/signified are far from innocent, and effectively determine and shape the object of study in advance: by excluding writing he implies the presence of a signifying intention, by excluding the temporal dimension of presence he reduces the complexity of language to a stable structure, and by distinguishing between signifier and signified he imports a dualistic concept of the relationship between a meaning and its representation.

But how did this kind of reading come to have an impact on literary studies? There are two basic approaches to this question. On one hand, there are consequences for literary studies that come out of the specific arguments about Saussure and structuralism which Derrida raises, mostly in *Of Grammatology*; and on the other, there are more general consequences which derive from the method of reading a text which is exemplified by Derrida's reading of Saussure. When Derrida published *De la grammatologie* in 1967, literary studies was very firmly, and particularly in France, under the influence of structuralist methods and Saussurean ideas. Derrida's writings represented a challenge to the authority of Saussurean linguistics, to the synchronic approach of literary structuralism, and to the idea of language and literature as static structures. Perhaps more importantly, Derrida's work was following through a line of thought that was emerging in literary structuralism which questioned the scientific authority of structuralism. The loss of confidence in science within structuralism would be complicated to chart. Perhaps it would suffice to point to Roman Jakobson's influential article 'Closing Statement', published in 1960, in which he calls for literary studies to be internalized within the field of general linguistics: 'Poetics deals primarily with problems of verbal structure. . . . Since linguistics is the global science of verbal structure, poetics may be regarded as an integral part of linguistics.' By the end of the decade, accounts of literary structuralism were no longer evangelizing criticism on behalf of a scientific authority: 'The unity of a science is not constituted by the uniqueness of its object. . . . It is hardly necessary to repeat that the method creates the object, that the object of a science is not given in nature but represents the result of an elaboration.' This reminder, written by Tzvetan Todorov in 1968, challenges Jakobson's call for a consensual science of literature with the more poststructuralist idea that different questions about an object will construct it in different ways. Derrida's work on Saussure, by exposing values that a scientific linguistics projects onto its object of study, by shaking the linguistic premises of structuralism, helped to break the authority of the scientific paradigm.

On a more general level, Derrida's way of reading suggested several new directions. The first is the idea of an immanent critique, a reading which sets a text against itself, or which seeks to show that a text undercuts its own positions. When

Derrida follows the 'tension of gesture and statement' in Saussure he suggests that the text somehow undermines its own claims about language, yet he also insists that this is not a weakness in the text, but a strength. The text is seen to have a kind of blind spot in which its most profound insights about language and its own attempts to systematize language are located. This is a very important principle for deconstruction because it values the ability of a text to yield meanings which are not intentional and which are often contradictions of the manifest purpose of the discourse. The deconstruction of literary texts is often a way of reading against the grain of the text, for contradictory meanings, gaps and exclusions which constitute the most profound insights that text has to offer. Reading against the grain like this can be seen as a perverse refusal to cooperate with the text, but deconstructionists would see this as a necessary perspective on its values. Deconstructionists argue that the critic is not just perversely seeking to subvert the text, but that the text is self-subverting, self-deconstructing. Criticism before deconstruction tends to look for textual qualities such as consistency, unity, development and coherence, ignoring evidence which disrupts the impression. In a sense deconstruction gets its own authority from the idea that qualities such as unity and coherence are critical structures of exclusion – that they exclude aspects of a text in order to construe it as a unity – and therefore that a deconstruction shows a greater respect for the complexity of a text without trying to smooth it over and present it as an unproblematic entity, or the vehicle of a single meaning. The idea of a self-deconstructing text is potentially misleading in that it seems to claim that a text is objectively contradictory and self-subverting, and that no intervention is required from a critic for deconstruction to occur. But this kind of objective authority is, as we have seen, unavailable to the poststructuralist critic. The idea of self-deconstruction has to be taken with a pinch of salt, but it does illustrate an important principle of many deconstructive readings: that the critic is a close reader who unravels the text from within, or that deconstruction is a process at work in literary texts, and in culture, whether we notice it or not.

One reason that the idea of self-deconstruction is unsatisfactory is that readings of this kind which locate blind spots and contradictions in a literary text very often do so in terms which are quite alien to the language of the text itself. Barbara Johnson and Paul de Man are critics who illustrate this point: both characteristically translate the binary hierarchies of literary texts into metalingual terms, so that moments of irresolvable doubt (*aporias*) and self-subversion are construed as insights into the nature of language rather than mere self-contradictions. Johnson's celebrated analysis of Melville's *Billy Budd* (Johnson, 1980), for example, involves seeing the contrasting characters of Billy and Claggart as representatives of different models of language and interpretation, literal and ironic. (Culler's discussion of this reading (Culler, 1983, pp. 235–42) offers an excellent account.) This translation of the story into metalingual terms allows Johnson to see the text as an elaborate allegory of its own possible readings, where these readings are seen as part of the text itself rather than anything that the critic has brought to it. Paul de Man's reading of Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* (de Man, 1979) is similar, translating a passage in which Marcel reflects upon the virtues of reading into a series of

statements 'claiming the priority of metaphor in a binary system that opposes metaphor to metonymy', statements which are later subverted by aspects of Proust's text which disrupt the opposition of metaphor and metonymy. In the case of Proust there is clearly some self-analysis taking place in the text in Marcel's contemplation of the act of reading, though not enough to justify de Man's transformation of the text into such outright metalingual terms as self-deconstruction. In both cases there is a dynamic at work between the idea of self-deconstruction and the idea of critical intervention, the confusion of which seems to militate against seeing criticism as subject and literary text as object.

Because deconstruction operates under the conviction that a literary text has no identity of its own, that its identity is constructed by reading, interpretation and its representation by criticism, the search for presuppositions, hierarchical oppositions, contradiction and structures of exclusion has been largely conducted in relation to critical and theoretical texts rather than in literary texts themselves. There is no doubt that the impact of deconstruction in literary studies has been more profound in theoretical discussions on the nature of literature and criticism than it has been in its reading of literary texts. In this way it is like literary structuralism, which was always accused of being a fascinating theory of meaning while having very little of interest to say about individual works of literature. It is true that a deconstruction of a literary text often reads its text through some philosophical or critical question which it seems more interested in than the text itself. A definition of literary deconstruction then faces the initial problem that deconstruction does not really believe that literature exists at all in its own right. Another difficulty is that deconstruction is not an abstractable system in the way that structuralism was. Deconstruction is not a method, or a theory which can be applied to any text, or imposed on it like a system. A deconstruction in a sense always emerges from within the rhetoric of a specific text, and not something which is imposed from the outside, from a critical distance. Indeed the distinctions between literary and critical acts, or between the theory and practice of reading, are placed in question by deconstruction, or left behind along with the more general model of subject and object relations to which they belong. Thus although the term deconstruction is taken from his work, Derrida has had to campaign against the way the term has been used by other critics whenever it seems to refurbish the model of subject and object relations as the basis of a critical engagement with a literary text. One example of this campaign is that Derrida has regularly insisted on the plural form of the term – deconstructions – to preserve the specificity of each reading and avoid the implication of some common denominator between readings which would make deconstruction a unified or consensual project which can be methodically applied to texts.

With these cautions in mind, we can turn to the question of how a literary critic can employ Derrida's critique of Saussure and his more general reading strategies in the analysis of a literary text. A good example is J. Hillis Miller's analysis of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (Miller, 1989). Conrad's story is modelled on a conventional 'grail quest', or a story in which the pursuit of a divine object gives the narrative its forward movement and its promise of some kind of ultimate revelation. In such a story, the quest for the grail becomes a quest for the meaning of the story,

where the discovery of the grail is the event which gives the whole narrative its significance. In *Heart of Darkness*, the journey undertaken by Marlow towards Kurtz's inner station in the Congolese jungle is seen in just such terms, as the journey to some revelation and towards the meaning of the narrative. The starting-point of Miller's analysis is that this kind of journey to revelation is the structure of a parable, in which a reader reaches some obvious and detachable moral at the end of the narrative such as 'crime doesn't pay' or 'honesty is the best policy'. What then interests him is the description that Conrad's external narrator gives of Marlow's method of story-telling:

The yarns of seamen have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut. But Marlow was not typical (if his propensity to spin yarns be excepted), and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the special illumination of moonshine. (Conrad, 1973, p. 8)

Miller finds in this commentary a theme closely related to Derrida's critique of the Saussurean sign, that the meaning of a sign is not really within it at all, but that it lies outside it in the structure to which it belongs. For Miller, a traditional parable, like the traditional yarns of seamen, advances a straightforward model of the relation of a tale to its meaning, where the story itself is 'the inedible shell which must be removed and discarded so the meaning of the story may be assimilated' (Miller, 1989, pp. 211–12). Marlow's story, however, does not see meaning in this way, on this model of the story as a shell within which its meaning is contained like a kernel. The darkness which lies at the heart of Conrad's tale is also something which envelops it, and which is metaphorically represented by the dark atmospheric conditions of Marlow's journey and by the dark clouds which hang above the Thames as Marlow narrates. The quest for meaning in Conrad's tale is a grailless quest in the sense that when we reach Kurtz all is not revealed – the meaning that we expect to discover at the heart of the narrative, the nature of the heart of darkness, the detachable moral towards which we think we are proceeding, remains obscure. At the climax of the novel, in Kurtz's dying words 'The horror! The horror!', the expectation of revelation is dashed and we are left looking only at words the meaning of which is, at best, left suspended, suggestively spread across the tale and its images of the darkness which envelop Marlow's quest.

The Derridean themes are clear in this reading. The grailless quest for meaning in *Heart of Darkness* is the quest for presence of meaning in a sign – a quest which never comes to rest, or which never finds its grail in some kernel content. For Derrida, the desire for presence is a desire to escape from language as pure exteriority and identify an inner meaning, to reach beyond the signifier to the signified, or to find in the container a contained meaning. Thus, Derrida saw writing, which is traditionally conceived as the exterior container of meaning, as the condition of all language, or as the prison house from which no escape is possible, and indeed Conrad's text seems to advance the same model. To illustrate this, Miller points to the failure of Marlow's narrative not only to reveal its meaning through

Kurtz, but also to support ideas of language which assume the presence of a signified content, such as the idea of communication or of reference to an outside world. Marlow's narrative regularly falters in moments of fear that the narrative cannot convey his experience, and at such moments both the referential and the communicative models of language are explicitly questioned:

He was just a word for me. I did not see the man in the name any more than you do. Do you see him? Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream – making a vain attempt because no relation of a dream can convey the dream sensation. . . . No, it is impossible; it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence – that which makes its truth, its meaning – its subtle and penetrating essence. (Conrad, 1973, p. 39)

Both Marlow and the reader are stuck in the exteriority of language, and in the impossibility of expression. We cannot see Marlow, or experience Kurtz directly any more than Marlow can penetrate the meaning of Kurtz's final words, because ultimately our experience as readers is of written words and exterior signifiers. In this way, any assumptions of the transparency of language are undermined by such reminders of its inescapable opacity.

Even in this skeletal account of Miller's essay it is probably clear that *Heart of Darkness* is a particularly cooperative example of a narrative for a poststructuralist, in that it seems itself to have a deconstructive sensibility. (See Unit 16, pp. 447–50, for a more conventional reading of *Heart of Darkness*.) But what happens when a text does not indulge so explicitly in self-commentary, does not so obviously doubt the ability of language to communicate, or does not so conveniently thematize language and narrative in terms of its inside and outside? Much of Miller's own work on less cooperative novels of the nineteenth century (e.g. Miller, 1982) would serve as an answer to this question. Another interesting case is Paul de Man, whose readings often find these Derridean thematics in the most unlikely places. Whereas Miller finds a deconstructive logic in Conrad's narrative which upsets the traditional scheme of the inside and outside of language, there is a sense in which de Man brings this logic with him to the reading of a text. In the introduction to *Allegories of Reading*, for example, de Man begins from the same problem: 'The recurrent debate opposing intrinsic and extrinsic criticism stands under the aegis of an inside/outside metaphor which is never being seriously questioned' (de Man, 1979, p. 5). Intrinsic criticism is criticism which operates on the internal mechanisms of form and structure in a text, whereas extrinsic criticism brings external and contextual knowledge to bear on its text. As such, the distinction imposes a metaphor similar to Conrad's shell and kernel in that intrinsic criticism generally supposes the meaning of a text to be contained within it like a kernel where extrinsic supposes that its meaning is context-bound. Characteristically, de Man reads a text through the lens of this inside/outside metaphor in order to deconstruct it, or to show that the text does not cooperate with it. Such a reading usually proceeds by isolating fundamental hierarchical oppositions of a text and exploring the ways that these oppositions unwittingly prop up the inside/outside metaphor. De Man then deconstructs these oppositions in a manner akin to Derrida's deconstruction of Saussurean oppositions,

by finding evidence in the text which contradicts this hierarchy. By inverting the hierarchy in an opposition, or conflating the terms of a distinction, de Man's readings pull away the prop he has established for the inside/outside metaphor in criticism, and therefore uses the reading to support metalingual propositions which radically reject this metaphor: 'the paradigmatic linguistic model is that of an entity which confronts itself'; or 'the trope is not a derived, marginal or aberrant form of language but the linguistic paradigm par excellence'; or 'the paradigm for all texts is that of a figure and its deconstruction'. De Man's deconstructions of hierarchical oppositions generally defy summary, and are usually organized to demonstrate that texts advance incompatible models of language which a reader cannot decide between. De Man can find in the structure of a single image an undecidable oscillation between literal and figurative meanings which render the image too complex to conform to the either/or choice of intrinsic and extrinsic approaches, as for example in his reading of the closing image of Yeats's poem 'Among School Children' (de Man, 1979, pp. 11–12). In fact the co-presence of different meanings in a single image, for de Man, is often used as the basis for an argument that language does not really refer to the outside world at all, because that referential meaning is in collision with some uncontrollable figurative meaning which cannot simply be banished by the critic for the sake of a coherent interpretation. A text, for de Man, is always in a sense an allegory of the impossibility of reading it in any single way. This means, first, that a text is always partly about itself, even when it does not indulge in self-commentary, and consequently there is no obligation to find cooperative texts to find concepts of the inside and outside of meaning at work.

De Man's phrase *allegory of reading* is deliberately ambiguous to this effect: does the allegory belong to the reading or is it an allegory about reading? This ambiguity is another kind of undecidability as to whether an allegorical meaning can be located in the object text or whether it is part of the reading. This can be seen as an example of the broad poststructuralist conviction that an object and its construction by an analytical discourse are categorically inseparable: in this case that a literary text and its reading are facets of the same process. There is always a kind of irony in de Man's readings, that he is capable of translating them into unrecognizable allegories about the ability of language to refer and communicate while claiming that he is not really doing anything to them at all. Deconstruction, de Man says, 'is not something we have added to the text but it constituted the text in the first place' (de Man, 1979, p. 17). The idea that a reading constitutes a text is a clear example of the way that deconstruction has tried to escape the metaphysics of presence which is inherent in any analysis which clearly separates the subject from the object.

The influence of this kind of thinking in literary studies has been profound. The introduction of a new and difficult linguistic terminology in criticism aside, the impact of this thought can be seen in terms of a departure from the inside/outside model in criticism. Derrida's own readings of literary texts have endlessly problematized the relation between a text and its reading. In 1984, when asked to address the Ninth International James Joyce Symposium in Frankfurt, Derrida produced a long and apparently rambling account of his own journeys round the

world prior to the conference, making only comic and fragmented references to his text, *Ulysses*. On closer reading, Derrida's text is an elaborate parody of *Ulysses* which appears to digress into external irrelevancies in the act of locating itself ironically within Joyce's. The influence of this kind of parodic critical act has been to challenge the boundary between fiction and criticism, so that an act of criticism can be a literary creation no less than a fiction can have a critical function. Much of the fiction of the 1980s and 1990s can be seen as operating within a poststructuralist paradigm in the sense that it is fiction with a critical function, fiction which deconstructs other fiction through parody. Criticism-as-fiction of this kind is deconstructive in the sense that it is criticism which is neither outside nor inside literature, criticism which doubts the ability of criticism to stand outside of its object texts and refer to them transparently.

It is probably true to say that deconstruction as such gave way, in the middle of the 1980s, to new critical fashions such as new historicism and various forms of cultural criticism. The influence of deconstruction on these subsequent developments, which cannot be explored here, lies in the profound shift away from the idea that language and discourse are capable of transparently reflecting their objects towards the view that discourses actively construct our world. Critics who now focus on issues in the representation of history or cultural identities tend to do so from a textualist point of view, that is from the belief that history and culture are themselves discourses which interpret the world, and discourses which can be deconstructed. The legacy of deconstruction in literary studies has been above all to extend the scope of criticism beyond literature, and to extract criticism from an age-old opposition between formalist and historicist approaches to literature. When history and culture are seen as texts, as elaborate systems of representation, reading becomes elevated to a new status in which political, ideological and philosophical positions are defined. As in literary studies, so in culture, the reading has become more important than the thing read, the representation more important than the representamen, because, in Derrida's words, 'il n'y a pas de hors-texte'. Deconstruction then entails the entextualization of everything and the demonstration that texts are always too complex to be reduced by interpretation to unproblematic entities.

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