
Derrida & Deconstruction: Some Key Points

- I think Deconstruction is best understood as a textual strategy. Considering how to translate the term, Jacques Derrida notes that "it is to ... use value that I am now going to try to give some precision and not some primitive meaning or etymology sheltered from or outside of any contextual strategy" ("Letter to a Japanese Friend," emphasis mine).
- Although I'm hardly a Derridean, his work intrigues me because of how it can account for the resilience of literary and other texts--their ability to adapt to new readers and contexts. As someone who did undergraduate work in creative writing, I also appreciate the way his writing refuses to accept a distinction between "literature" and "criticism."
- Although Derrida is specific that deconstruction is not reducible to a method, at least in literary studies, critics influenced by Derrida's work tend to focus on recurring concerns:
 - Exploring (and excavating) specific tensions and instabilities within a text (including social and cultural "texts"). Deconstruction is not something critics do to a text, but a way of highlighting things that texts do to themselves and each other.
 - Questioning the priority of things which are set up as original, natural, and/or self-evident.
 - Charting how key terms, motifs, and characters are defined by binary oppositions within a text, how the oppositions are hierarchical (one term is prioritized and the other treated as derivative or subordinate), and demonstrating that these oppositions are unstable, reversible, and mutually dependent on one another. (The verb "deconstruct" most often refers to this kind of reading, as in "Frank Miller's work deconstructs the opposition between hero and villain by treating Batman as a specific type of villain --a vigilante.")
 - Attending to how texts subvert, exceed, or even overturn their author's stated purposes.
- In current literary studies, deconstructive readings are usually part of a larger interpretive strategy (feminist, new historicist, queer theory, etc.), and often put in the service of destabilizing hierarchical oppositions (between male and female, elite and popular culture, straight and gay, etc.).
- Deconstruction is not the centerpiece of Derrida's work, and he has been somewhat dismayed by attempts to formalize it into a system, movement, or school. (For example, nobody I've ever met "in the know" refers to "deconstructionism.") Furthermore, he is a living, evolving thinker, whose work does not end with those texts which literary critics most often read (*Of Grammatology*, *Dissemination*, and a couple of others). Making blanket statements about his thought or influence is not something I'm willing to venture.
- I think it's a mistake to treat deconstruction as synonymous with post-structuralism (and, while, I'm drawing distinctions, to conflate post-structuralism with Postmodernism). Post-Structuralism is a philosophical development which Derrida's work is associated with, and deconstruction is a term within his work.
- In the past, many debates about Derrida have been intense, but also juvenile, with detractors not bothering to read Derrida's (admittedly difficult and time-consuming) work, and those influenced by Derrida (admittedly, often impatient with responding to the same tired objections) snootily dismissing questions as cloddishly naive.