

MARXISM AND DECONSTRUCTION

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Der der, deary didi! Der? I? Ere? Da! Deary da!
Der I, didida; da dada, dididearyda. Dadareder, didireader.
Dare I die dearyda? Da dare die didi. Die derider!
Didiwriter. Dadadidididada. Aaaaaaaa! Der i da.
(Oedipal fragment)

In discovering that “men make history,”¹ the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie kicked out from under themselves the very transcendental signifiers they needed to legitimate that history ideologically. But this damage could be contained by a simple fact: in pulling the metaphysical carpet out from under themselves, they pulled it out in the same stroke from under their opponents. Do we find the latest rehearsal of this maneuver in the confrontation between deconstructionism and Marxism?

Consider the following epistemological option. Either the subject is wholly on the “inside” of its world of discourse, locked into its philosophico-grammatical forms, its very struggles to distantiate them “theoretically” themselves the mere ruses of power and desire; or it can catapult itself free from this formation to a point of transcendental leverage from which it can discern absolute truth. In other words: when did you stop beating your grandfather? For that this option is itself an ideological double-bind is surely obvious. How then does deconstruction negotiate it? Everybody rejects tran-

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¹An ideological “discovery,” of course. If history has a subject then it is not, as Louis Althusser points out, “men,” nor “men and women,” nor even “classes,” but the *class struggle*. One does not escape a bourgeois problematic of the “subject” by simply collectivizing that subject, as much Hegelian Marxism would seem to believe.

scendental subjects, but some reject them more than others: deconstruction leans heavily towards the first option, but qualifies it with a curious form of catapulting—or perhaps, more precisely, a modest backward flip—characteristic of the second. We move on the inside of the discourses which constitute us, but there are vertiginous moments, moments when the signifier floats and falters and the whole top-heavy system swims and trembles before our eyes, when it is almost possible to believe that what we have perceived, through some figurative fissure in the smooth wall of meaning, is nothing less than the inconceivable shape of some nonmetaphysical “outside.” By pressing semiosis to its “full” potential, by reading at once with and against the grain of a text which denegates its deep wounding with all the cheerful plausibility of a West Point war casualty, we can know a kind of liberation from the terrorism of meaning without having for a moment—how could we?—burst through to an “outside” which could only be one more metaphysical delusion.

It is not, then, *really* a question of “outside” and “inside:” that opposition, as an ex-student of mine was told of Marxism on arriving at Columbia, we deconstructed a few years back. Or did we? Let us consider a case where the metaphysical opposition “inside/outside” seems to be in practice alive and well. Social democracy believes in working on the “inside” of the capitalist system: persuaded of its omnipotent, all-pervasive, as it were “metaphysical” presence, it seeks nonetheless in humble fashion to locate and prize open those symptomatic points of “hesitancy,” negativity, and incompleteness within the system into which the thin end of a slim-looking reformist wedge may be inserted. The forms of political theory and practice known to Marxism as “ultra-leftism,” by contrast, will have no truck with this feeble complicity. Equally convinced of the monolithic substance of the system as a whole, they dream, like the anarchist professor of Conrad’s *The Secret Agent*, of some unutterably radical enterprise which would blow a black hole in the whole set-up and forcibly induce its self-transcendence into some condition beyond all current discourse.

The familiar deadlock between these two positions (Italian left politics might provide an interesting example) is one which Marxism is able historically to understand. Social democracy and ultra-leftism (anarchism, adventurism, putschism and so on) are among other things antithetical responses to the failure or absence of a mass revolutionary movement. As such, they may parasitically interbreed: the prudent reformist may conceal a scandalous Utopian, enamoured of

some ultimate negation which must nonetheless be kept clear of *Realpolitik*. “Inside” and “outside” may thus form strange permutations: in the figure of an Adorno, for example, a “negative dialectics” allergic to the slightest trace of positivity can combine with an objectively reactionary stance. For traditional Marxism, the epistemological problems of “inside/outside,” transcendental subjects and subjects who are the mere play of power and desire, Althusserian scientisms and Foucaultian relativisms, subjects who seem unhealthily replete and subjects of an alarming Lacanian leanness—these problems cannot possibly be understood, let alone resolved, outside of the historical epoch, the specific modalities of class struggle, of which they are at once product and ideological instrument. (Nor, for that matter, can any “theory of the subject” hope to succeed if it has repressed from the outset that familiar mode of existence of the *object* known to Marxism as “commodity fetishism.”) What deconstructs the “inside/outside” antithesis for Marxism is not the Parisian left-intelligentsia but the revolutionary working class. The working class is the agent of historical revolution not because of its potential “consciousness” (Lukács), but because of that location within the capitalist mode of production ironically assigned to it by capitalism itself. Installed on the interior of that system, as one product of the process of capital, it is at the same time the class which can potentially destroy it. Capitalism gives birth to its own gravedigger, nurturing the acolyte who will one day stab the high priest in the back. It is capitalism, not Marxism, which has decreed that the prime agent of its own transformation will be, not peasants, guerillas, blacks, women, or intellectuals, but the industrial proletariat.

Hardly anybody *believes* this nowadays, of course, at least in the academies, and deconstructionism is among other things in effect of this despair, scepticism, indifference, privilege, or plain lack of historical imagination. But it has not, for all that, abandoned trying to think through and beyond the “inside/outside” polarity, even if it is fatally unable to deconstruct itself to the point where it could become aware of the historical determinants of its own *aporia*. Deconstruction is in one sense an ideology of left-reformism: it reproduces, at the elaborate level of textual “theory,” the material conditions in which Western hegemony has managed partially to incorporate its antagonists—in which, at the level of empirical “consciousness,” collusion and subversion are so tightly imbricated that all talk of “contradictions” falls spontaneously into the meta-

physical slot. Because it can only imagine contradiction as the external warring of two monistic essences, it fails to comprehend class dialectics and turns instead to *difference*, that familiar ideological motif of the petty bourgeoisie. Deconstruction is in one sense an extraordinarily modest proposal: a sort of patient, probing reformism of the text, which is not, so to speak, to be confronted over the barricades but cunningly waylaid in the corridors and suavely chivvied into revealing its ideological hand. Stoically convinced of the unbreakable grip of the metaphysical closure, the deconstructionist, like any responsible trade-union bureaucrat confronting management, must settle for that and negotiate what (s)he can within the leftovers and stray contingencies casually unabsorbed by the textual power-system. But to say no more than this is to do deconstruction a severe injustice. For it ignores that other face of deconstruction which is its hair-raising *radicalism*—the nerve and daring with which it knocks the stuffing out of every smug concept and leaves the well-kempt text shamefully disheveled. It ignores, in short, the *madness* and violence of deconstruction, its scandalous urge to think the unthinkable, the flamboyance with which it poses itself on the very brink of meaning and dances there, crumbling away the cliff-edge beneath its feet and prepared to fall with it into the sea of unlimited semiosis or schizophrenia.

In short, deconstruction is not only reformist but ultra-leftist, too. Nor is this a fortuitous conjuncture. Minute tenacity and mad “transcendence” are structurally related moments, since the latter is the only conceivable “outside” to the closure presumed by the former. Only the wholesale dissolution of meaning could possibly offer a satisfactory alternative to a problematic which tends to see *meaning itself* as terroristic. Of course, these are not the practical, working options for the deconstructionist. It is precisely because texts are power-systems which ceaselessly disrupt themselves, sense imbricated with non-sense, civilized enunciations which curse beneath their breath, that the critic must track a cat-and-mouse game within and across them without ever settling quite for either signifier or signified. That, anyway, is the ideology; but whoever heard of a deconstructionist as enthralled by sense as (s)he was by its disruption? What *would* Hillis Miller do with a piece of agitprop? Not that such “literature” doesn’t positively bulge with metaphysical notions, to an embarrassingly unambiguous degree. Characters are continually stomping upon stage and talking about justice. Feminist theatre today is distressingly rife with plenary notions of oppression,

domination, exploitation. Brecht, it is true, deconstructed himself a bit from time to time, but only got as far as dialectics; pre-Derridean that he was, he failed to advance beyond rudimentary metaphysical oppositions, such as the proposition that some social classes rip off others. He failed, consequently, to grasp the heterogeneity into which such antinomies can be dissolved, known to Marxism as bourgeois ideology. Viewing such dramas, the deconstructionist would no doubt wait, pen in hand, for the moments when literal and figurative discourses glided into one another to produce a passing indeterminacy. (S)he would do so because we *know*, in a priori fashion, that these are the most important elements of a text. We just do know that, as surely as previous critics have known that the most important textual elements are plot or mythological structure or linguistic estrangement. Indeed we have been told by Paul de Man himself that unless such moments occur, we are not dealing with *literature*. It is not, of course, that there is any “essence” called literature—merely that there is something called literature which always and everywhere manifests this particular rhetorical effect. Deconstruction does indeed attend to both sense and non-sense, signified and signifier, meaning and language: but it attends to them at those points of juncture the effect of which is a liberation from the “tyranny” of sense.

Deconstruction is not, of course, a system, or a theory, or even a method. It disowns anything one might call a “program.” It is, admittedly, a little difficult to appreciate this fact when confronted with de Man’s assertion that the deconstruction of a certain “naive metaphorical mystification” in literary texts “will in fact be the task of literary criticism in the coming years”²—one could wish that he had been a little more indeterminant—but one should not rush to convict deconstruction of a method. The fact that, in its analyses of literary texts, it consistently focuses upon certain moments of indeterminacy and consistently discovers that the most significant point about the text is that it does not know what it is saying should be taken as a set of coincidences—perhaps a matter of “style” or “idiom”—rather than as anything as shabbily positive as a “method.” Perhaps deconstruction is not a method in the sense that you cannot read off from its techniques exactly what it is going to do

²“Semiology and Rhetoric,” in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, ed. Josué V. Harari (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1979), p. 138.

with them at any given point, unlike, say, Marxist criticism, where you can of course deduce the whole content of its discourse on a text, every detailed twist and turn, from its founding presuppositions about the historical mode of production. Nor is deconstruction concerned with blaming anybody, since this would presumably entail the kind of transcendental vantage point from which definitive judgements could be delivered. In discussing those critical approaches which are deluded enough to believe that literary texts have relations to something other than themselves, de Man tells us that he wishes to consider this tendency "without regard for its truth or falseness or for its value as desirable or pernicious" (p. 122). "It is a fact that this sort of thing happens again and again in literary studies," he informs us, with the weary resignation of a Victorian headmaster commenting on the incorrigible sexual proclivities of his boys. A symptomatic reading of de Man's text might discern a certain suggestive indeterminacy between the wise neutrality of his disavowment and the tone in which he discusses historical, biographical, and other "referential" forms of criticism, a tone which might certainly convey to the odd reader that he regards such methods as irritatingly irrelevant and just plain wrong. But since we deconstructed the "truth/falsity" opposition some years ago, it is unlikely that the tone, in any literal or positive sense, can actually be "present."

The mad anarchist professor of *The Secret Agent* has achieved the ultimate transcendence: he is prepared to blow himself up in the act of destroying others. Thoroughly implicated in the general holocaust, he nevertheless transcends it by having set it in motion himself. The deconstructionist, similarly, is prepared to bring him/herself down with the piece of cliff (s)he perches on. Deconstruction practices a mode of self-destruction which leaves it as invulnerable as an empty page. As such, it merely rehearses in different terms a gesture common to all ideology: it attempts to vanquish its antagonist while leaving itself unscathed. The price it has to pay for such invulnerability, however, is the highest of all: death. The collapse of classical epistemology has discredited those victories over the object which presuppose an untouched transcendental subject; now the one surviving mode of security is to be contaminated by the object even unto death. **Deconstruction is the death drive at the level of theory: in dismembering a text, it turns its violence masochistically upon itself and goes down with it, locked with its object in a lethal complicity which permits it the final inviolability of pure negation.** Nobody can "outleft" or outmaneuver a Derrida because there is noth-

ing to outleft or outmaneuver; he is simply the dwarf who will entangle the giant in his own ungainly strength and bring him toppling to the earth. **The deconstructionist never lieth because he nothing affirmeth.** Like Polonius, (s)he is at once fool and state-lackey, eccentrically digressive yet a dispenser of metaphysical discourse. Either way you disown a “position:” by putting the skids under others, or by being—unlike Polonius—a *reluctant* metaphysician, acknowledging the ineluctability of that discourse, “blaming” the very system you impudently subvert for your inability to produce a positive standpoint. It is possible to spend quite a long time crossing from one of these fronts to the other, depending on the direction of the fire.

Yet it is not, of course, anything as final as death. Metaphysics will live on, bloody but unbowed; and deconstruction, as a “living” death, will regroup its forces to assault anew. Each agonist is ever-slain and ever-resurrected; the compulsion to repeat, to refight a battle in which the antagonist can never be destroyed because he is always everywhere and nowhere, to struggle towards a (self-)killing which will never quite come, is the propelling dynamic of deconstruction. Because there is neither outside nor inside, because the metaphysical enemy is always already within the gates, deconstruction is kept alive by what contaminates it, and can therefore reap the pleasures of a possible self-dissolution which, as one form of invulnerability, is mirrored by another, the fact that it can never die because the enemy is within and unkillable. The nonsense of “I killed myself” is the nonsense of deconstruction. If the metaphysical enemy is everywhere and nowhere, so too is deconstruction, which is to say that it can never die and has always died already, can never die because it has always died already and has always died already because it can never die. And the moment in which all of this occurs is of course the moment of *jouissance* or *petite mort*.

But it is not, historically speaking, the moment when it occurs. Historically speaking, many of the vauntedly novel themes of deconstructionism do little more than reproduce some of the most commonplace topics of bourgeois liberalism. The modest disownment of theory, method, and system; the revulsion from the dominative, totalizing, and unequivocally denotative; the privileging of plurality and heterogeneity, the recurrent gestures of hesitation and indeterminacy; the devotion to gliding and process, slippage and movement; the distaste for the definitive—it is not difficult to see why such an idiom should become so quickly absorbed within the Anglo-

Saxon academies. From De Quincey to deconstruction is not, after all, a very long way, and it is doubtless pleasant to find one's spontaneous bourgeois-liberal responses shorn of their embarrassing eclecticism and tricked out as the most explosive stuff around. It is not that these focuses of attention—to the contingent and marginalized, to the duplicitous and undecidable—are in the least to be despised; one has only to think of the productive ways in which, in the hands of feminism, they can be used to deconstruct a paranoid, patriarchal Marxism which reaches for its totality when it hears the word "residue."

It is just that one can no longer doubt, watching the remorseless centralizing of the contingent, the dogmatic privileging of what escapes over what doesn't, the constant dissolution of dialectics, that one is in the presence of a full-blooded ideology. In some ways it is not far from traditional bourgeois liberalism: there is much in common, for example, between deconstruction's well-bred shuddering at "totality" and the shy distaste of a traditional liberal critic like John Bayley for the highroads of history. In other ways, however, deconstructionism signifies a radical mutation of the bourgeois-liberal problematic, one forced upon it by historical developments. If traditional bourgeois liberalism is humanistic, deconstructionism is vehemently antihumanist; it is, if you like, a liberalism without the subject, or at least without any subject which would be recognized by John Bayley. For that privileging of the unitary bourgeois subject characteristic of the traditional liberalism of a Bayley or Trilling will clearly no longer do: that inviolable private space, those strenuous ethical responsibilities and individualist autonomies begin to ring more and more hollow, to appear more and more politically rearguard and implausible in the claustrophobic, all-penetrative arena of late monopoly capitalism. Nicos Poulantzas has reminded us that the "private" is always a juridically demarcated space, produced by the very public structures it is thought to delimit;³ and this fact is now more and more palpable in quotidian experience. Deconstructionism, then, can salvage some of the dominant themes of traditional bourgeois liberalism by a desperate, last-ditch strategy: by sacrificing the subject itself, at least in any of its customary modes. Political quietism and compromise are preserved, not by a Forsterian affirmation of the "personal," but by a

³See *State, Power, Socialism*, trans. Patrick Camiller (London: New Left Books, 1978), p. 70.

dispersal of the subject so radical as to render it impotent as any kind of agent at all, least of all a revolutionary one. If the proletariat can be reduced to text, trace, symptom, or effect, many tedious wrangles can be overcome at a stroke.

Traditional liberalism, of course, contained this contradiction from the outset, between the impulse to shore up an eroded individual substance and a joyful yet disorientating self-abandonment; the fictions of Eliot, James, and Forster are among other things strategic “solutions” to this ambivalently crippling and energizing conflict. And one can observe the same tension today within the “Yale school” itself, between those boldly prepared to erase the last traces of traditional humanism, and those wishing to preserve its residues in suitably Freudianized or deconstructed form. But it is, on the whole, Forster’s Mrs. Moore, not his Fielding, who has won the day. The liberal pleasure-principle is vanquishing the liberal reality-principle, the logic of multiplicity ousting the homogeneous self who was traditionally there to enjoy it. Deconstruction is as disorienting in North America as it was for Mrs. Moore in India; it thus provides you with all the risks of a radical politics while cancelling the subject who might be summoned to become an agent of them. It is in one sense the suicide of liberalism, but then suicide and liberalism were never total strangers. The dispersed subject will not be recuperated—it always might not return—but this hardly matters, since the dispersal was purely textual in the first place; there was never any question of displacing the material conditions which permitted the textual dispersal in the first place, and thus nothing really to be recuperated, since the subject must have been always-already securely in place for the dispersal to have occurred. “Irony,” Geoffrey Hartman tells us, “prevents the dissolution of art into positive and exploitable truth.”⁴ Yes indeed: for if art were to tell anything as metaphysical as the truth then it might speak exploitably of exploitation, and then where would be the infrastructure that for deconstruction is not de(con)structible?

“Something always escapes, but it has to pay a heavy toll,” Jacques Derrida once remarked in a seminar. Of nothing is this more true than deconstructionism itself. Bourgeois liberalism, in its deconstructionist inflection, is now prepared—forced?—to sacrifice truth itself to freedom, a move which John Stuart Mill would have found unintelligible. The deconstruction of the traditional auto-

⁴*Deconstruction and Criticism* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1979), p. viii.

nomous subject now seems more and more the condition of the preservation of that bourgeois-liberal freedom of which such a subject was once thought to be the source. The freedom which was traditionally that of responsible action has become the spasmodic freedom of the deconstruction of such action. Objectivity is suspect, for we know, do we not, that it must rest upon metaphysical notions of absolute truth? (At least we know if we have not read Lenin.) **The classical form of "moral" questioning—what are we to do, given the facts?—is no longer articulable, for what could be less deconstructed than "the facts?"** And what, in monopoly capitalist society, could be more revolutionary?

That we cannot lift ourselves up by our bootstraps outside the metaphysical closure of Western philosophy is surely true. **That there are nonetheless ways of interrogating texts, floating the signifier, reading against the grain, which may prove to shake academic-ideological discourse to its roots is an insight of profound value.** That deconstruction, as a particular set of textual procedures, can operate as a radical force is surely undeniable. What is at question is the appropriation of such insights and procedures in ways which objectively legitimate bourgeois hegemony. There is little doubt that Derrida's dismantling of the speech/writing opposition is richly resourceful; there is little doubt either that the retrieval of writing also provides a much-needed ideological boost for an increasingly marooned and discredited academy. (One could say the same of "semantic materialism," that important emphasis which brought to birth a whole new generation of armchair materialists and lexical Maoists.) Derrida's own relative silence about historical materialism could perhaps be taken as strategic—the silence, say, of a socialist feminist, who bears witness to the "imaginary" position which Marxism too often is by refusing premature, appropriative alliance. I am not sure that Marxists should be too tolerant of this stance: **in a world groaning in agony, where the very future of humankind hangs by a hair, there is something objectionably luxurious about it.** But it is certainly to be respected a good deal more than that modish jargon which hopes, pathetically, to shift the very ground beneath our feet by tropology.

In the deep night of metaphysics, all cats look black. Marx is a metaphysician, and so is Schopenhauer, and so is Ronald Reagan. Has anything been gained by this maneuver? If it is true, is it informative? What is ideologically at stake in such homogenizing? What differences does it exist to suppress? Would it make Reagan

feel comfortable or depressed? If what is in question for deconstructionism is metaphysical discourse, and if this is all-pervasive, then there is a sense in which in reading against the grain we are subverting everything and nothing. If metaphysics is the outer limit or inner structure of all ideology, then our inability to deconstruct it has some very interesting ideological consequences indeed. It is notable that, one year before Derrida's *annus mirabilis* of 1967, a fully-fledged piece of deconstructionist theory made its appearance on the Parisian scene. Violently dismembering literary texts, the author spoke of the need to discern within them certain symptomatic absences and *aporias*, those points at which texts began to unravel themselves in ambiguous encounter with their deceptively homogeneous power-systems. This book was Pierre Macherey's *Pour une théorie de la production littéraire*, and the splash it made, compared to Derrida, was that of a pebble compared to a rock. It could be, of course, that this was because Macherey's book was less ambitious or boring or just bad. But it might also be that Macherey is a Communist, a known ally of Louis Althusser, and that the discourses he saw texts as unravelling were "ideological" rather than "metaphysical." In writing of property as well as presence, Macherey brought the whole affair a little nearer home. Its effects on the Anglo-Saxon academy are still, as they say, somewhat dispersed, not to say sparse. It has probably attracted a good deal less attention than, say, Jeffrey Mehlman's valuable and stimulating *Revolution and Repetition*, a text which can be (and is) taken by those ignorant of the Marxist theory of Bonapartism to have triumphantly deconstructed the belief that the state directly represents class interests—a belief which is, the liberals tell us, Marxist.

Both Macherey and Althusser would seem to believe that ideology is monolithic: a seamless web enmeshing all lived practice, a homogeneous structure to subject the subject. If ideology is not grasped as a heterogeneous, contradictory formation, a question of constant struggle at the level of signifying practices, then this misrecognition may have something to do with a certain view of the class struggle: most simply, that it has disappeared. What you are then left with, as the "outside" of that monolith, is Theory, or Literature, or perhaps the Third World. Deconstructionism raises this view of reality to the second power: ideologies may come and go, but the essential structure of all such significations—metaphysics—is massively immovable, operative all the way from Plato to NATO. What you then have to pit against it is the labor of the negative. It is

remarkable how parallel deconstructionism is in this way to the later Frankfurt school. The rage against positivity, the suspicion of determinate meaning *as such*, the fear that to propose is to be complicit: historically distanced as we are, we can see fairly clearly how all this in the case of the Frankfurt school represented one extreme quietistic response to that series of defeats and partial incorporations of the proletariat which is the narrative of twentieth-century class struggle. If deconstruction never had much belief in the class struggle in the first place, it nevertheless strikingly reproduces just those gestures: gestures which spring from a massive loss of political nerve.

The power of the negative is by no means to be denied. It constitutes an essential moment of Marxism itself. But only an historically powerless petty-bourgeois intelligentsia would raise it to the solemn dignity of a philosophy. There is a real sense in which Marx's operations on the texts of bourgeois political economy may be said to be deconstructionist; but there is also an internal relation between those operations and the theoretical/political necessities which bring Marx to construct into "presence" that absence which scars his opponents' texts, the concept of labor power. That textual activity, moreover, brings into the clearest focus the relations, for Marxism, between "theory" and "interests." To oppose "objectivity" and "interests," to reduce the cognitive status of propositions to the play of power and desire, is perfectly possible for the Parisian petty bourgeoisie, and is indeed the merest commonplace of late nineteenth-century bourgeois philosophy. But it was not possible for the nineteenth-century proletariat. For that proletariat had an interest—amounting to its very physical survival—in getting to know the situation "as it was." Unless it knew whether there was a real theoretical distinction between "labor" and "labor power" it was likely to go on seeing its sons and daughters abused by the bestialities of capitalism. There are some of us, even in Paris and Yale and Oxford, who still believe that today.

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