

Opening Up the Text:

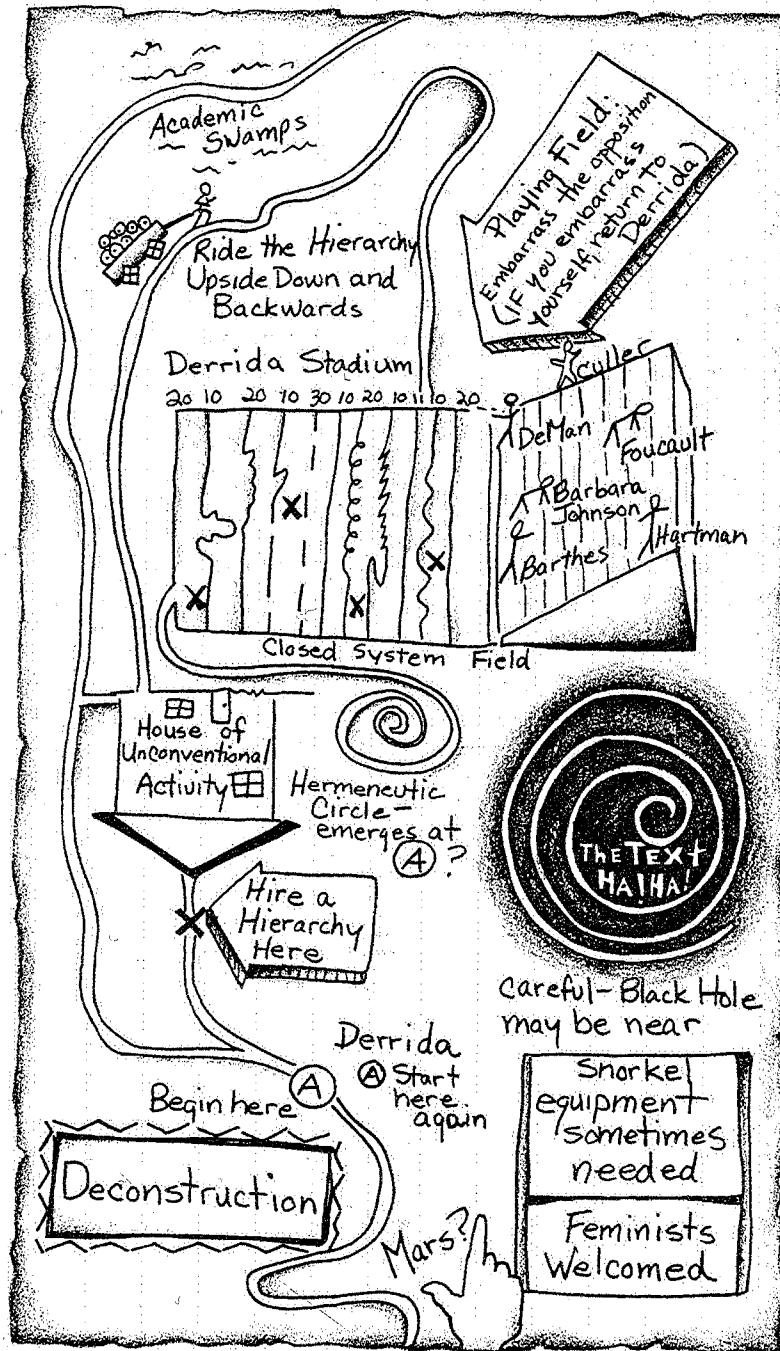
Structuralism and Deconstruction

Imagine being the first to say, with confidence: uncertainty.

—Michael Blumenthal

THE PURPOSES OF STRUCTURALISM AND DECONSTRUCTION

If New Criticism focuses on the work, and reader response criticism focuses on the reader, then structuralism might be seen as the combination of these two approaches: A structure is something—a pattern, a design—that is somehow “in” a text, but a structure is also something that readers must actively perceive. Without someone reading, there is no structure; without a structure, there is no one making sense. You have an understanding of the structure of the English language, and that allows you to identify the subjects, the verbs, the modifiers, and so forth of the sentences you are reading—and thereby make sense. This drive to find organization and meaningfulness is so powerful that human beings can find shapes in clouds or the scorch marks of a tortilla. If we can find structure where (most reasonable people would say) there really isn't any, we can also fail to detect structures, as in hidden codes or unknown languages. But when communication takes place, it occurs because these two elements, text and reader, come together: a perceiver sees how the surface experience fits into some underlying set of conventions. And if structuralism aims to understand how this conveyance of meaning occurs, deconstruction aims to show how it doesn't—how the structures that we bring to language and experience inevitably fail, how meaning slips and slides and comes apart. Deconstruction is, in a literal and theoretical sense, what comes after structuralism: to see how



something comes apart, one must first see how it went together, so a deconstructive analysis is possible only after some degree of structuralist analysis. Thus, this chapter deals with structuralism and deconstruction, but it focuses on deconstruction. Deconstruction has not rendered structuralism obsolete, but it has, for many people at least, changed our thinking about what structuralism actually does, undermining the scientific exuberance of the early structuralists and becoming a pervasive part of our intellectual assumptions.

Structuralism and Semiotics

Structuralism grows from Ferdinand de Saussure's series of lectures on language, delivered between 1913 and 1915, but not translated into English or widely known until the late 1950s. Rather than thinking of a particular language in terms of its history, moving through time, Saussure took a "synchronic" view, looking at the relationships of all the parts of a language at a given moment in time. The surface elements of language, which Saussure called *parole* (French for "speech"), may vary widely; it is our understanding of the underlying structure, which Saussure called *langue* (French for "language"), that allows us to make sense of the surface.

Saussure's structural approach to Linguistics not only provided a powerful analytical tool, but it also altered the way we think about language and meaning. In particular, the distinction between a "signifier" (a word, an image) and a "signified" (the concept that the signifier is pointing to) is crucial, exposing the arbitrary relationship between the words we use and the ideas in our heads. Anyone who can speak two languages fluently knows that some things that are easy to say in one language may be difficult or even impossible to say in another. Different languages structure the world differently: If one language has eleven different words for fog, and another language has only one, then it's reasonable to assume that speakers of these two languages look at fog differently (and probably spend different amounts of time in fog). It's not that one system of meaning is better than another—that fog either comes in eleven different kinds or one. Fog comes in however many kinds we are able to perceive (and desire to distinguish)—and this organizing of the world is based on underlying structures. Crucially, structure is based on difference: The word "bat" is not "cat" because of the difference in the two initial sounds. At the same time, different languages have some structural features in common. Structuralism seeks to find those underlying commonalities and distinguishing differences, bringing a scientific approach to language.

As a method, however, structuralism can be applied to anything, not just language, and "semiotics" is the term usually employed for this larger

enterprise. In the late 1950s, for instance, Claude Levi-Strauss began to demonstrate how structural analysis could be applied to cultures—with fascinating results. Looking for the underlying structures of food preparation, for instance, Levi-Strauss in *The Raw and the Cooked* (1964) observed that in every culture people divide their food into three classes: raw, rotten, and cooked. This fundamental structure has resulted in some wildly different cuisines that are nonetheless organized in the same way. In one society, moldy clumps of solidified cow's milk are consumed; in another, whale blubber with maggots in it is valued. Specific rules that create systems of meaning allow both these cultures to make sense of their food.

Post-structuralism and Deconstruction

The term "deconstruction" has become so popular and pervasive and has been used in so many different ways and contexts that it is hard to say what it means. As Gregory Jay puts it, "deconstruction has now become an indeterminate nominative" (xi): a name without a reference. If the assumptions of deconstruction are correct, however, "deconstruction" always was an uncertain term, for deconstruction's supposition that all terms are unstable must apply to itself. Few efforts would appear to be more ironic, perhaps even comical, than attempting to define and explain a philosophical position that assumes the inevitability of error and misreading, the impossibility of explaining and defining in any stable way.

There are, however, at least three reasons to attempt to explain deconstruction anyway:

1. The alternative to explaining what in the final analysis cannot be explained is silence. We explain deconstruction, and we practice it, even though something is always left undone, unstated, unclear, unthought of. Another explanation can supplement this one, and then another one can supplement it. Such is the case with any term, or perhaps with any thing human.
2. Deconstruction makes no effort to suppress its own irony or absurdity; instead, deconstructive critics have generally indulged a playfulness that from the perspective of traditional criticism seems at times unprofessional; in the merciless punning of some of the most prominent deconstructive critics, it has seemed occasionally almost juvenile.
3. Deconstruction can be learned by students, and it often stimulates a wonderfully imaginative playfulness and scrutiny. In fact, rather than being an esoteric, foreign, abstract, discouraging approach, deconstruction for most students, in my experience, makes tremendous sense: it articulates precisely what they have

in fact already assumed in a vague way. Students who understand deconstruction are much more adventurous, questioning, insightful readers.

So, here we go. The next little stretch is a bit theoretical and even strange, but you'll see several illustrations later on. Just hang in there, and it will get clearer.

Structuralism and semiotics produced many richly revealing and interesting analyses of texts and social phenomena—wrestling matches, detergent boxes, advertisements, anything. But some thinkers started to question just how far structuralist readings could be taken, and they exposed gaps and inconsistencies in the structures they examined. This



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push beyond structuralism, revealing the failures of systems of meaning, came to be known as post-structuralism. Post-structuralism did not put structuralism entirely out of business: one can still do structuralist analysis, but post-structuralism has altered our sense of what is produced by such readings. And post-structuralism is the set of assumptions and ideas that make deconstruction possible. What is deconstruction? To answer that question, let's turn to Jacques Derrida.

Derrida, a Frenchman, is without question the most important figure for deconstruction. He relentlessly and astonishingly exposed the uncertainties of using language. Derrida starts, we might say, from the recognition that words do not refer directly to things. If they did, all languages would represent the world in the same way, and the meanings of words would be stable. Instead of words referring to things, Saussure argued that the signifier (the word) and the signified (its reference, a concept) are not a unified entity, but rather an arbitrary and constantly shifting relationship. A dictionary only seems to stabilize a language, for what we actually find in a dictionary is the postponement or deferment of meaning: Words have multiple definitions, and these definitions require us to seek the meaning of other words, which are themselves defined in the same way.

Even if it were possible to construct instantaneously a dictionary that would be perfectly up-to-date, we would still find ambiguity, multiplicity, and slippage pervading the language. The reason is nicely captured in Derrida's most famous statement, which is translated as "There is nothing outside the text," and as "There is no outside to the text." (In itself, this uncertainty regarding translation tells us something important about language.) Meaning cannot get outside of language, to reality. Therefore, words always refer to other words.

Deconstruction reveals the arbitrariness of language most strikingly by exposing the contradictions in a discourse, thereby showing how a text undermines itself. As Barbara Johnson puts it, deconstruction proceeds by "the careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text itself" (5). Or, as Jonathan Culler says, "To deconstruct a discourse is to show how it undermines the philosophy it asserts, or the hierarchical oppositions on which it relies" (*Deconstruction* 86). This exposure of a text's self-contradictions is possible, deconstruction assumes, because words cannot stabilize meaning: If we choose to say one thing, we are leaving out another thing. And there is always a gap, a space in the text, that the reader cannot ultimately fill in.

Deconstruction is therefore particularly valuable because of its power to open up a text that we may have seen as limited or closed. Popularly, "to deconstruct" seems to be used to mean "to dismantle" or "to destroy," as if "deconstruction" were a fancier form of "destruction." But for most informed critics, deconstruction is not so much a

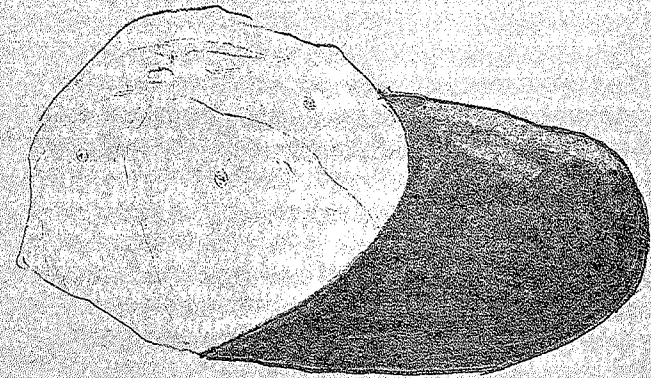
way to obliterate the meaning of a text, as it is a way to multiply meaning. Deconstruction thus encourages us to resist a complacent acceptance of anything and to question our positions and statements in a particularly rigorous way, even reading texts against themselves.

For instance, let's take a very simple text, one appearing beside an elevator: "Seeing Eye Dogs Only." A deconstructive reading of this text might point out that although it appears to extend assistance to the visually impaired, it literally should force them to walk up the stairs, for the sign literally appears to say, "This elevator is reserved for seeing eye dogs. No other animals or persons can ride it." Or we might argue that the text shifts attention and power to a certain kind of dog, while ignoring the owners of the dogs. Here's a text ostensibly put up to help blind persons, and it actually ignores them. A blind person with a seeing-eye monkey, presumably, must not ride. Plus, blind persons obviously cannot read the sign, which suggests that some other intention does motivate it. Perhaps the sign is intended to make sure that someone who is fully sighted and has a retired seeing-eye dog as a pet, can take such a dog on the elevator? Isn't that what it says? What is the point of this sign?

Although such undoing of a text may seem at first glance a bit silly, it actually has the potential for enormous practical value. Imagining all the things a text *might* be saying, including even the opposite of what it may appear to say, will help us to become more creative and careful readers and writers. Some colleagues of mine recently wrote a policy statement that told students "You will fail your Freshman English course if you miss more than three scheduled tutoring sessions." One student read this statement as a prediction rather than a rule, and he elected to skip all his tutoring sessions in order to prove the prediction wrong. As he told me later, appealing his failing grade, "I knew I was smart enough to pass the course without any help, and I resented them telling me I couldn't do it, and I worked twice as hard as I would have otherwise." A deconstructive stance might have anticipated this reading, and precluded it by revising the sentence.

But a deconstructive stance not only may help us anticipate some of the ways that even simple texts can be misread; it may also help us see what is being excluded or suppressed in a text. For instance, the J. Peterman Company advertises a reproduction of "Hemingway's Cap." The point of the advertisement is, of course, that Ernest Hemingway picked out a tough, distinctive, very masculine hat to wear, and now you can have the same. The ad conveys this message by telling us that Hemingway probably bought the cap "on the road to Ketchum," which is where Hemingway's Idaho ranch was located, the scene of hunting, fishing, and other outdoor activities; that he found it "among the beef

Hemingway's Cap.



He probably bought his in a gas station on the road to Ketchum, next to the cash register, among the beef jerky wrapped in cellophane. Or maybe in a tackle shop in Key West.

I had to go to some trouble to have this one made for you and me but it had to be done. The long bill, longer than I, at least, ever saw before, makes sense.

The visor: deerskin; soft and glareless and unaffected by repeated rain squalls. The color: same as strong scalding espresso, lemon peel on the side, somewhere in the mountains in the north of Italy.

Ten-ounce cotton-duck crown. 6 brass grommets for ventilation. Elastic at back to keep this treasure from blowing off your head and into the trees.

Sizes: M, L, XL.

Price: \$33. (He probably got change from a five when he bought the original.)



jerky wrapped in cellophane," which also helps create a rustic, macho atmosphere (isn't beef jerky primarily eaten by guys in a duck blind or deer stand—or wishing they were?); that the bill is longer than average, longer in fact than the advertiser has ever seen, and "impervious" to rainstorms; that the cap is the color of "scalding espresso"—a drink for tough men who need a tough cap; that there's an elastic band "to keep this treasure from blowing off your head and into the trees"; and much else. Thus, the advertisement celebrates masculine toughness, durability, endurance, and sensibility, using these values to sell the product.

But a deconstructive stance encourages an acute alertness to rhetorical strategies and even the assumptions these strategies depend upon. Although the cap appears to promote and depend upon a masculine toughness, deconstruction tells us that it also unavoidably promotes and depends upon masculine insecurity. Why would anyone want the longest bill anyone ever saw? For the same reason one might want the fastest car anyone ever saw. Or the biggest ranch. Made of "deerskin," this longest bill becomes a symbol of its owner's power and potency. It may be too much to claim that the bill is a phallic substitute, although it is pretty clear what part of their skin many men would consider most "dear." Certainly, Hemingway was fascinated by potency and its lack: In *The Sun Also Rises*, for instance, Jake Barnes has been emasculated by a wartime injury and loses Brett, Lady Ashley, to a young bullfighter and then to another aristocrat.

Likewise, the idea that Hemingway may have bought his cap "on the road to Ketchum" conjures up scenes of hunting and fishing. But Ketchum is also where Hemingway committed suicide. Seriously ill for some time, he put a shotgun in his mouth and pulled the trigger. Denied the sort of active, impervious masculinity embodied in the cap, Hemingway apparently could not face a compromised life.

How the cap relates to this weakness or insecurity is most startlingly seen in an especially revealing (or especially unfortunate) phrase, referring to the "elastic at back to keep this treasure from blowing off your head." In asserting that the cap is a "treasure," the ad unavoidably raises the danger—the inevitability really—of losing it. This sentence is meant to reassure potential owners, but it also points out how only the elastic (which must age and wear out) stands between the owner and loss of his manly treasure. The advertisement thus helps to foster an insecurity that the cap covers over; but in such a value system, depending on potency and toughness, the danger of something "blowing off your head" is very real, as Hemingway's case reveals.

Is such a mischievous, even outrageous, allusion intended in "blowing off your head"? Although I've had students who insist that the phrase is a wickedly clever joke, that the ad's author must have been aware of the implications of "blowing off your head" in the

context of Hemingway, the issue is really undecidable, and from a deconstructive point of view irrelevant because other conflicting and contradictory meanings are always available to the attentive, creative reader. There will always be a trace of "don't buy this hat" left in any urging to "buy this hat." And this counter-reading can also be reversed. (I do own one of the caps.)

Let's turn now to some other examples and to the practical matter of how structuralism and deconstruction work on more complex texts, which often even more readily lend themselves to opening up.

HOW TO DO STRUCTURALISM AND DECONSTRUCTION

In an essay designed to question and criticize, Lawrence Lipking shows how deconstruction would deal with W. B. Yeats's famous poem "Sailing to Byzantium." Since deconstruction turns a text against itself, multiplying its meanings, it seems only appropriate that Lipking's attack on deconstruction should provide a convenient illustration of deconstruction's value.

Here is Yeats's poem.

Sailing to Byzantium¹

William Butler Yeats

1
That is no country for old men.² The young
In one another's arms, birds in the trees
—Those dying generations—at their song,
The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas
Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long 5
Whatever is begotten, born and dies.
Caught in that sensual music all neglect
Monuments of unaging intellect.

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¹*Byzantium*: Old name for the modern city of Istanbul, capital of the Eastern Roman Empire, ancient artistic and intellectual center. Yeats uses Byzantium as a symbol for "artificial" (and therefore deathless) art and beauty, as opposed to the beauty of the natural world, which is bound to time and death.

²*That . . . men*: Arguably Ireland, part of the time-bound world.