

JACQUES DERRIDA

Critical Thought

Edited by
Ian Maclachlan

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Preface

In assembling the present selection of essays from the vast corpus of writings which Derrida's work has elicited, I have adopted two simple principles: that the essays included should not previously have been collected in book form, and that they should be substantial pieces illuminating important and potentially difficult aspects of Derrida's work. Thus, although the selection cannot claim to offer a comprehensive view of that work – that would have not only been impossible within the confines of one volume, but would also imply the possibility of a totalizing perspective which sits uneasily with Derrida's thought – the reader will find that the essays range over most of Derrida's published output, and that they focus on a number of crucial topics (some if not all of which, one might add, overflow the containing spatial figure of the *topos*): these include literature, iterability, the signature, time, alterity, Judaism, metaphor and death.

I have made no systematic attempt to choose essays highlighting the various debates or controversies provoked by Derrida's work, except where an essay seemed to me to recommend itself on the grounds of an especially lucid exposition of a thorny area, as was the case with those by A.J. Cascardi and Ian Maclean. Many of these 'debates' have emerged from hasty readings of Derrida's work and consequently have generated more heat than light. In the case of certain important encounters between Derrida's work and other modes of thought, such as Marxism and feminism, there already exist helpful collections of essays dealing with those points of contact.¹

The essays are reprinted here in chronological order of their first publication. The final paragraph of the original version of Timothy Clark's essay has been omitted at the author's request. Otherwise, the texts are unchanged in substance; the only editorial interventions I have made are to correct obvious typographical errors and to achieve a degree of uniformity in presentation. Thus, a system of abbreviated references to English translations of Derrida's texts has been adopted. Where the essays included references to, or quotations from, the original French texts, English references and quotations have been added. Any otherwise unattributed translations from French texts are mine, and are marked as such.

I should like just to comment briefly on the first and last essays collected here. In kindly consenting to the inclusion of his early essay "'Literature'/Literature' in this collection, Alan Bass was at pains to point out that this piece was written to a tight deadline at the request of Richard Macksey for a special issue of *MLN* in 1972, at a time when the major translations of Derrida (including Bass's own) were yet to appear and when, in his words to me, Bass himself was a graduate student and 'a

novice in this area'. For my part, I have no doubt about the value of Bass's essay as an opening to the present collection, both for its clear exposition of aspects of Derrida's work of the late 1960s and early 1970s, particularly in relation to the status of writing, and for its suggestive insights into the precarious, aporetic ontology of 'literature'. At first sight, the inclusion of Robert Smith's article 'Memento Mori' may seem surprising, given that Derrida's name only appears in one of its epigraphs and in a few references in the latter part of the essay. However, it seems to me that the thinking of death which Smith eloquently explores will be an invaluable aid to anyone seeking to grasp the significance of terms such as death, mourning, the event, the promise or the future in so many of Derrida's texts, and not only in those, such as *Aporias*, which feature death as an explicit theme.

Note

¹ Reactions to Derrida's *Specters of Marx* have been collected in Michael Sprinker (ed.), *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida's 'Specters of Marx'* (London and New York: Verso, 1999). Two edited volumes have traced the relationship between Derrida's work and feminism: Ellen K. Feder, Mary C. Rawlinson and Emily Zakin (eds), *Derrida and Feminism: Recasting the Question of Woman* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), and Nancy J. Holland (ed.), *Feminist Interpretations of Jacques Derrida* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997).

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Abbreviations

Abbreviations used in reference to English translations of Derrida's work are given here in alphabetical order.

- A *Aporias: Dying – Awaiting (One Another at) the 'Limits of Truth'*, trans. Thomas Dutoit, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993.
- ATM 'At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am', trans. Ruben Berezdivin, in *Re-Reading Levinas*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley, London: Athlone Press; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991, pp. 11–48.
- BL 'Before the Law', trans. Avital Ronell and Christine Roulston, in Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge, London and New York: Routledge, 1992, pp. 183–220.
- C 'Circumfession', trans. Geoffrey Bennington, in Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993.
- Com 'Coming into One's Own', trans. James Hulbert, in *Psychoanalysis and the Question of the Text*, ed. Geoffrey Hartman, Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978, pp. 114–48.
- D *Dissemination*, trans. and intro. Barbara Johnson, London: Athlone Press; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981.
- F 'Fors: The English Words of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok', trans. Barbara Johnson, *The Georgia Review*, 31, 1 (1977), 64–116.
- FL 'Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundation of Authority"', trans. Mary Quaintance, in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, ed. Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld and David Gray Carlson, London and New York: Routledge, 1992, pp. 3–67.
- G *Glas*, trans. John P. Leavey, Jr and Richard Rand, Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1986.
- HAS 'How to Avoid Speaking: Denials', trans. Ken Frieden, in *Languages of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory*, ed. Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser, New York: Columbia University Press, 1989, pp. 3–70.
- LG 'The Law of Genre', trans. Avital Ronell, in *Acts of Literature*, pp. 223–52.
- LI *Limited Inc*, ed. Gerald Graff, trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988.

- LJF 'Letter to a Japanese Friend', trans. David Wood and Andrew Benjamin, in *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, ed. Peggy Kamuf, London and New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991, pp. 270–76.
- LO 'Living On: Border Lines', trans. James Hulbert, in Harold Bloom *et al.*, *Deconstruction and Criticism*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul; New York: Seabury Press, 1979, pp. 75–176.
- MB *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993.
- Me 'Me – Psychoanalysis: An Introduction to the Translation of "The Shell and the Kernel" by Nicolas Abraham', trans. Richard Klein, *Diacritics*, 9, 1 (1979), 4–12.
- MP *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass, Brighton: Harvester Press; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.
- MPDM *Mémoires: for Paul de Man*, trans. Cecile Lindsay, Jonathan Culler and Eduardo Cadava, New York: Columbia University Press, 1986.
- OAT 'Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy', trans. John P. Leavey, Jr, *Oxford Literary Review*, 6, 2 (1984), 3–37.
- OG *Of Grammatology*, trans. and intro. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976.
- P *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass, London: Athlone Press; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981.
- PC *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. and intro. Alan Bass, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987.
- PI *Points . . . Interviews 1974–1994*, ed. Elisabeth Weber, trans. Peggy Kamuf *et al.*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995.
- PM 'Perhaps or Maybe', in 'Responsibilities of Deconstruction', ed. Jonathon Dronsfeld and Nick Midgley, *PLI: Warwick Journal of Philosophy*, 6 (1997), 1–18.
- PR 'The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of its Pupils', trans. Catherine Porter and Edward P. Morris, *Diacritics*, 13, 3 (1983), 3–20.
- Psy 'Psyche: Inventions of the Other' [extract], trans. Catherine Porter, in *Acts of Literature*, pp. 311–43.
- RDP 'Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism', trans. Simon Critchley, in Simon Critchley *et al.*, *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, ed. Chantal Mouffe, London and New York: Routledge, 1996, pp. 77–88.
- SM *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, London and New York: Routledge, 1994.
- SNS *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles*, trans. Barbara Harlow, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1979.
- SP *Speech and Phenomena, and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*,

- trans. and intro. David B. Allison, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973.
- SST 'Some Statements and Truisms about Neologisms, Newisms, Postisms, Parasitisms, and Other Small Seismisms', trans. Anne Tomiche, in *The States of 'Theory': History, Art, and Critical Discourse*, ed. David Carroll, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994, pp. 63–94.
- TOJ 'The Time is Out of Joint', trans. Peggy Kamuf, in *Deconstruction is/in America*, ed. Anselm Haverkamp, New York and London: New York University Press, 1995, pp. 14–38.
- TP *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987.
- TSICL '"This Strange Institution Called Literature": An Interview with Jacques Derrida', trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby, in *Acts of Literature*, pp. 33–75.
- TTP 'The Time of a Thesis: Punctuations', trans. Kathleen McLaughlin, in *Philosophy in France Today*, ed. Alan Montefiore, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, pp. 34–50.
- WD *Writing and Difference*, trans. and intro. Alan Bass, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.

Introduction: Deconstruction, Critical Thought, Literature

Ian Maclachlan

More than 40 years after the publication of Derrida's first article, and about 30 years after his work first began to have an impact on literary studies in the anglophone world, deconstruction still seems to sit uneasily in that same field in which it was first hailed as a new theoretical approach. Or, rather, it might be more accurate to say that, at a time when the term 'deconstruction' is more widely used than ever, whether its demise is being heralded by proponents of other critical approaches or whether it is being deployed more or less as a synonym for 'critique' or 'refutation' by academics or journalists, the significance of Derrida's work for our critical thinking about literature still calls for elucidation. In my introduction to this collection of essays on Derrida, which themselves range over a period of some 30 years, I propose to examine why it is that Derrida's work unsettles what we understand by each term in a phrase such as 'critical thinking about literature'.

In the now well-known text entitled 'Letter to a Japanese Friend', where Derrida addresses the problem of translating the term 'deconstruction' which has become inescapably associated with his name, he insists that:

. . . deconstruction is neither an *analysis* nor a *critique* . . . It is not an analysis in particular because the dismantling of a structure is not a regression toward a *simple element*, toward an *indissoluble origin*. These values, like that of analysis, are themselves philosophemes subject to deconstruction. No more is it a critique, in a general sense or in a Kantian sense. The instance of *krinein* or of *krisis* (decision, choice, judgment, discernment) is itself, as is all the apparatus of transcendental critique, one of the essential 'themes' or 'objects' of deconstruction. (LJF 273)

I intend to examine this differentiation of deconstruction from critique in general terms, but since Derrida alludes to Kant and transcendental critique here, let us briefly pursue that path.¹ Deconstruction would disturb the distinctions which are necessary to the Kantian project of establishing the conditions of possibility of knowledge, beginning, for example, with the distinction between the transcendental and the empirical, but not in order to suggest that we can simply do without such distinctions, that we can collapse, bypass or dialectically transcend them, nor that we can simply replace them with better ones. Rather, deconstruction would involve provisionally embracing such distinctions in order to pursue them to the point at

which the necessary co-implication of the distinguished terms manifests itself: the transcendental, for instance, never quite managing to pull itself clear of the empirical, and the empirical never quite free of traces of the transcendental. It is because of this constitutive impurity and incompleteness of any would-be foundational dimension, such as the transcendental, that the conditions of possibility which might be sought on such a dimension turn out, at the same time, to be conditions of impossibility, as we shall see later in relation to the notion of decision.²

Thus, while deconstruction may loosely be said to share with Kantian critique a process of desedimentation, exposing the aprioristic grounds for what various forms of philosophical idealism and materialism have to assume as simply given, this can no longer be in view of establishing an ultimate, secure ground, and thus can no longer properly be termed critique; if we were to insist on retaining the term, it would have to be a neologized, 'improper' critique. As Geoffrey Bennington observes of Irene Harvey's provisional suggestion that deconstruction be considered a critique of critique, 'this can only be a first move, in so far as critique is always a digging for foundations, a search for firm ground on which the edifice of metaphysics might subsequently be (re)built, and the point is that deconstruction is not even a metacritique in this sense.'³ However, if deconstruction renounces the ambition of positing an ultimate epistemological ground, this does not entail simply abandoning the transcendental movement of critique, for such a gesture would ultimately amount to a return to a pre-critical empiricism or to a scepticism which simply leaves the symmetrical poles of would-be rational or empirical certainty in place.⁴ Thus, in his 'Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism', commenting on his use of the term 'quasi-transcendental', Derrida affirms 'the necessity of posing transcendental questions in order not to be held within the fragility of an incompetent empiricist discourse, and thus it is in order to avoid empiricism, positivism and psychologism that it is endlessly necessary to renew transcendental questioning' (RDP 81).⁵

Turning to the relationship between deconstruction and critique in the context of contemporary literary and cultural criticism, one would have to observe that, by and large, the term 'critique', as it is deployed in that field, seems to have rather more to do with Marx than with Kant. Resisting the assimilation of deconstruction to critique, Geoffrey Bennington remarks of the latter term that it is 'notoriously slippery between a Kantian sense and a Marxist inflexion of that sense',⁶ and goes on to cite a passage from Barbara Johnson's introduction to her translation of *Dissemination* which neatly illustrates this slipperiness. Immediately after describing critique as an 'analysis that focuses on the grounds of [a] system's possibility', Johnson allows this roughly Kantian sense to merge into what appears to owe more to a Marxist notion of critique when she continues: 'The critique reads backwards from what seems natural, obvious, self-evident, or universal, in order to show that these things have their history . . . and that the starting-point is not a (natural) given but a (cultural) construct, usually blind to itself' (D xv).⁷ The

widespread use of the term 'critique' in the sense of a demystification of what is taken to be natural or universal doubtless betrays some sort of debt, however indirect, to the ideological critique of Marxism. None the less, the use of 'critique' in the former sense presents far too diffuse a category to enable a useful point of comparison with deconstruction. Ideological critique would present some significant parallels and contrasts with deconstruction, but a thorough account would require a detailed examination of various strands of Marxist thought and cannot therefore be properly undertaken here.

However, sketching the picture with broad brush-strokes, one could say that deconstruction shares with Marxist critique the gesture of uncovering the material, historical moorings of what is given as ideal and universal, and the exploitation, for the purposes of critical intervention, of contradictory fissures in what is given as natural or self-evident. Such parallels would then have to be qualified by the observation that deconstruction would part company with Marxism to the extent that the latter posited an ultimate, self-present ground for its critique, this ground in effect circularly reappearing as a dialectically projected *telos*, and also to the extent that Marxism relied on determinate moments of *krinein* which deconstruction would put in question: the material and the ideal, base and superstructure, use-value and exchange-value, sensuous thing and commodity, and so on. But this picture already risks confronting deconstruction, falsely conceived as a theory, a method or simply even as an activity with a monolithic Marxism. For one thing, one would already have to note that such conceptions of ground and determinate oppositions are already put into question in the texts that constitute the Marxist 'tradition'. In fact, one might say that the texts of this tradition are already 'in deconstruction' (and therefore not simply in a single tradition), but not in order to effect an assimilation or subordination of an entity called 'Marxism' to one called 'deconstruction'. There is perhaps one point of confluence which we may briefly adduce without being unduly reductive, namely that neither deconstruction nor Marxism pretends to effect a transcendental critique of a system from the outside and in such a way as to leave it intact⁸ (although any Marxism which sought to establish itself as a positivist science would be unable to avoid such a transcendentalizing movement): both may be described, in terms which are familiar from more than one Marxist tradition, as transformative and emancipatory critiques. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida proclaims that:

... if there is a spirit of Marxism which I will never be ready to renounce, it is not only the critical idea or the questioning stance (a consistent deconstruction must insist on them even as it also learns that this is not the last or first word). It is even more a certain emancipatory and *messianic* affirmation, a certain experience of the promise that one can try to liberate from any dogmatics and even from any metaphysico-religious determination, from any *messianism*. And a promise must promise to be kept, that is, not to remain 'spiritual' or 'abstract', but to produce events, new effective forms of action, practice, organization, and so forth. (SM 89)⁹

We shall return later to another guise of this affirmation as an unfulfillable and therefore ineradicable promise when we consider the significance of literature for Derrida. But first, having sketched the relationship between deconstruction and critique in Kantian and Marxist senses of the latter, let us consider in more general terms what both makes possible and marks the limit of any *rapprochement* between deconstruction and the *krinein* of the critical moment. In response to an interviewer's question about the relationship between deconstruction and critique, Derrida first asserts the necessity of the critical idea, as we saw him do in relation to 'a spirit of Marxism' a moment ago, before going on to observe that '[i]n the style of the Enlightenment, of Kant, or of Marx, but also in the sense of evaluation (esthetic or literary), *critique* supposes judgment, voluntary judgment between two terms; it attaches to the idea of *krinein* or of *krisis* a certain negativity' (PI 357). To locate the divergence of deconstruction and critique at the moment of decision (*krinein*) is not at all to imply that deconstruction entails, for example, the annulment of that moment. Instead, deconstruction reveals that a decision can only come about through an experience of undecidability, and that this undecidability is at once the condition of possibility and of impossibility of the decision. It is the condition of possibility in as much as the moment of decision exceeds what is decidable in terms of the following of already determined rules, conventions or codes: 'A decision that would be taken otherwise than on the border of this undecidable would not be a decision' (PI 147). Thus, this possibility of the decision already exceeds the possible in terms of what falls simply within the ambit of such established rules, of prior knowledge or competence: 'The only decision possible is the impossible decision. It is when it is not possible to *know* what must be done, when knowledge is not and cannot be determining that a decision is possible as such' (PI 147).

But we should take care not to conclude from this that a decision takes place in the absence of any regulatory or conventional framework, for a decision would equally no longer be a decision if it were ineffective, if it did not effect a moment of *krinein* within a given system. Indeed, the experience of undecidability or *aporia* which we have described as the condition of (im)possibility of the decision is inconceivable without reference to such a framework or system. Thus, the moment of decision which appears to issue from such systemic undecidability cannot be said to break entirely free of that undecidability, lest it become an absolutely disassociated and therefore ineffective event, without purchase on any system, or, in definitively resolving the undecidability, it reveal itself to have been no more than the simple application of a rule after all. A passage in which Derrida delineates this situation in respect of the relation of law to justice is worth citing at length here:

There is apparently no moment in which a decision can be called presently and fully just: either it has not yet been made according to a rule, and nothing allows us to call it just, or it has already followed a rule – whether received, confirmed, conserved or reinvented – which in its turn is not absolutely guaranteed by anything; and, moreover, if it were guaranteed, the decision