Chapter 4
Deconstructing Derrida

Je n'ai jamais dit qu'*il n'y avait pas* de 'sujet de l'écriture'. Je n'ai jamais dit non plus qu'il n'y avait pas de sujet.

Jacques Derrida, *Positions*[1]

I   The Pervasiveness of Logocentrism

New Criticism, we are told, believed in the text as 'verbal icon': a closed structure of meanings which it was the business of the critic to display in all its subtle articulations, thereby revealing not, perhaps, the author's *intentions* (these might safely be left out of account) but the living consciousness of the author as manifested in his work.

Newer criticism, in its rush to dissociate itself from the 'liberal humanism' of such views, has embraced some desperate doctrines. The following, for instance, might serve as a basic statement of the critical theory of 'deconstruction', as that term has come to be understood among English-speaking literary critics:
1. No text has a determinate meaning.
2. A text, though it may refer to other texts, refers to nothing extra-textual.
3. Equally legitimate interpretations of a text may be incompatible with one another, or just have nothing in common.
4. Since a text gives no access to the conscious states of its author, it gives no access to authorial consciousness *tout court*, and therefore cannot be taken as in any sense a *communication* from author to reader.
5. The job of the critic is not to explain what a text means, but to elaborate it into a new text.

Not all critics conventionally labelled 'deconstructionist', of course, would wish to accept theses (1)–(5) just as they stand here. Some

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would wish to dissent from one or another, or to diminish – or sharpen – by qualification the paradoxical appearance of others. Each, however, can claim one or more serious practical critics among its defenders, while in the secondary literature of deconstruction something like the whole position outlined by theses (1)–(5) is frequently offered as constituting a new critical orthodoxy.

At the same time, although the resulting orthodoxy can claim some basis in practical criticism (Barthes, Bloom, de Man, Fish, Miller *et al.*), it is not primarily recommended by its defenders as the *ad hoc* theoretical precipitate of some interesting criticism. It is recommended primarily on philosophical grounds, and the philosophical support in question is taken to come most importantly from the work of Jacques Derrida.

Derrida's work has so far received little attention from English-speaking philosophers. The exception is John Searle, whose pugnacious dismissal of Derrida's claims to serious philosophical attention has only served to increase the disinclination of analytic philosophers to undertake the task of penetrating a style and a background of philosophical reference which they find, to say the least, unappealing.

I have not myself found Searle's dismissiveness compatible with any extensive reading of Derrida's work. I have not the slightest doubt that Derrida is an important philosopher. What I do doubt is whether his work provides much philosophical support for theses (1)–(5). In fact I would put it more strongly than that. Theses (1)–(5) can be shown to be strictly incompatible with Derrida's philosophical position, if his work is read as a connected body of thought, rather than just used as a convenient quarry from which to extract exhilaratingly sceptical *obiter dicta*.

My object, however, is not to take possession of Derrida's thought on behalf of a more conservative ideology of criticism, or of 'philosophy' departmentally considered (as what Richard Rorty likes to call *a Fach*); or even to accuse some distinguished critics of having got philosophically out of their depth. Something more interesting than any of that is at stake: something having to do with the transmission of Derrida's thought into an English-speaking academic culture; something, also, which Derrida's thought itself equips us to understand.

To invert the terms of an ingrained conceptual dichotomy is, as Derrida frequently reminds us, not at all the same thing as escaping from the influence of that dichotomy. Theses (1)–(5), however, represent a position arrived at by simple denial of what Derrida calls 'logocentrism'; thus a position which, because it accepts the polarities of logocentrism as the condition of its self-definition,

remains profoundly, if obscurely, logocentric. No doubt this has something to do with the ingrained empiricism of English-speaking philosophical and literary culture. We can come to grips with a view which says that there is a solid extra-linguistic reality which language passively represents, or with an opposed view which denies language any commerce with reality at all; but we lack ready access to, and find difficulty envisaging, views, like those of Heidegger or Merleau-Ponty, say, which aim (however imperfectly, if we are to accept Derrida's estimate of Heidegger) at transcending that sort of opposition.

Be that as it may, any reading of Derrida which systematically and straightforwardly reinterprets him in terms of (1)–(5) imports into his position a covert logocentrism which opens it to the sort of accusation (of denying logocentrism in terms which require logocentrism to support them) which Derrida himself levels at Lévi-Strauss:[2] makes it, in other words, itself open to deconstruction. It is this phenomenon which I propose now to examine in detail.

II Meaning and *Différance*

To begin with, let us take the thesis (1), that a text has no determinate meaning, and the correlative theses (3) and (5) that equally legitimate interpretations may have nothing in common and that the task of criticism is to elaborate, not elucidate, texts. Equivalent claims are not hard to find in the literature of deconstruction. Here, for example is Christopher Norris:

> Writing, for Derrida, is the 'free play' or element of undecidability within every system of communication ... [it] is the endless displacement of meaning which both governs language and places it for ever beyond the reach of a stable, self-authenticating knowledge. ... If meaning could only attain to a state of self-sufficient intelligibility, language would no longer present any problem but serve as an obedient vehicle of thought. To pose the question of writing in its radical, Derridean form is thus to transgress – or 'violently' oppose – the conventional relation of language and thought.[3]

And here is Rorty on 'strong textualism', a view which Rorty (who, unlike at least some literary critics, is well aware of some of the complexities in Derrida's thought which I propose to unravel here) thinks Derrida upholds in his better – i.e. least constructive – moments:

> The second sort of textualist – the strong textualist – has his own vocabulary and doesn't worry about whether anybody shares it. ... He

recognizes what Nietzsche and James recognized, that the idea of *method* presupposes that of a *privileged vocabulary*, the vocabulary which gets to the essence of the object, the one which expresses the properties which it has in itself *as opposed to those which we read into it* [my italics]. Nietzsche and James said that the notion of such a vocabulary was a myth – that even in science, not to mention philosophy, we simply cast around for a vocabulary which lets us get what we want.[4]

Finally, Norris again, drawing the consequences for interpretation of the alleged indeterminacy of meaning:

> Having done away with the Author as transcendent source of authenticated meaning, one is left with a limitless free play of textual potential, open to a reading which asserts its creative independence of all traditional sanctions. Derrida and Barthes have been the most outspoken in their choice of this second, more joyous and vertiginous mode of deconstructive thinking.[5]

How far can this kind of thing be defended by appeal to Derridean arguments? A good place to start is *La Voix et le phénomène* (*Speech and Phenomena*); for Derrida, 'peut-être l'essai auquel je tiens le plus.'[6]

Speech and Phenomena is a reflection on a few pages of the first of Edmund Husserl's *Logical Investigations*: pages in which Husserl elaborates a few 'essential distinctions' which embody an account of the nature of the linguistic sign. The resulting theory of language turns upon the claims (which it shares with a very long metaphysical tradition extending from the *Cratylus* to early Russell) that the physical apparatus of language, though it is essential to the *expression* of meaning, contributes nothing to the *constitution* of meaning. Meaning has nothing essential to do with the manipulation of signs, in fact, but is apprehended directly in the immediate presence of consciousness to itself.

Derrida does not attempt a direct demonstration of the falsity of this thesis. What he does is to show, elegantly and persuasively, that the thesis cannot be coherently propounded in the first place; that the more Husserl struggles to get it formulated, the more he involves himself in absurdities and contradictions: that, in short, the thesis 'deconstructs' itself.

The thrust of Derrida's deconstruction of the notion of meaning as manifest in the self-presence of consciousness is profoundly anti-Cartesian and anti-Platonic, in that Derrida is opposing to the idea of the mind as a system of non-material, timeless, closed meanings a conception which views mentality as essentially involved with the

physical and the temporal. This is the background to Derrida's talk of 'effacing the difference between signifier and signified' (*signifiant et signifié*). What he has in mind is not the exclusion from discourse of all concern with or reference to the extra-textual, but the erosion of the Platonic/Cartesian distinction between the intelligible and the sensible.

> Car il y a deux manières hétèrogènes d'effacer la différence entre le signifiant et le signifié: l'une, la classique, consiste à réduire ou à dériver le signifiant, c'est-à-dire finalement à *soumettre* le signe à la pensée; l'autre, celle que nous dirigeons ici contre la précédente, consiste à mettre en question le système dans lequel fonctionnait la précédente réduction: et d'abord l'opposition du sensible et de l'intelligible.*[7]

A related thought lies behind the Derridean reversal of the traditional (e.g. Rousseauian) view of writing as secondary to speech: a matter of representation rather than of primary utterance. The primacy of speech in the traditional view, according to Derrida, is related to its presumed status as the direct expression of thought. In listening we are confronted with another living subject. In reading all we have is the text, in its naked and humble conventionality. But, Derrida wants to say, the moment one reflects on the alleged poverty of the material – the text – confronting the reader, one sees that that poverty is illusory: that the text is *readable (lisible, itérable)* despite the absence – the non-*présence* – of its author. That seen, the point transfers back to listening, and we see that access to *présence*, to the full and living immediacy of another consciousness, is quite inessential even to the understanding of speech. So writing, which had been thought to belong on the side of the sensible, the accidental, the material, the temporal, the conventional, turns out to be the primary mode of language (of discourse), while speech, which had been classed as closest to thought, as the direct expression of the living and eternal *logos*, turns out to be, not secondary to, but no less conventional, accidental, sensible, material, etc., than writing.

Having arrived at the view that meaning is constituted within language, or within *writing (écriture)*, Derrida needs a way of representing the results of this constitution. He chooses to adopt for this purpose Saussure's characterization of linguistic objects as

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* ('For there are two quite different ways of effacing the difference between signifier and signified. One, the classical, consists in reducing or deriving the signifier; that is to say, finally, in subordinating the sign to thought. The other, which we are deploying here against the former, puts into question the system within which the former reduction operated; *and questions first of all the opposition between the sensible and the intelligible* [my italics].')

structural or *diacritical*: constituted, like phonemes, purely in terms of the relationships of contrast holding between them.

From this Saussurian perspective, meaning within language appears as a system of 'differences' (contrasts) between one sign and another. Derrida now argues, plausibly enough, that once we cut language free from the control of a 'transcendental signified' (*signifié transcendentale*) we are left with no means of limiting the array of potential contrasts which can contribute to the meaning of a sign. In consequence we never arrive at a complete, final and totalized meaning for a sign. The goal of a complete and final meaning flees endlessly before us as a given sign passes into new contexts and new relations of contrast: is always *deferred*, as a consequence of the fact that meaning is *difference*. Derrida coins the famous compound *différance* to express the intimate relation between difference and deferral.

The Cartesian metaphysics of *présence*, as manifested, for example, in the Husserlian ἐποχή, can now be seen as offering the delusive hope that human life might escape from temporality and perpetual becoming into a 'pure consciousness' which would be a realm of *meanings*, but of closed, and so eternal meanings. The central message of Derrida's thought is that there can be no such closure of meaning, and thus no escape from the perpetual reformulation of ourselves and our concepts whose image is the process of endless projection and augmentation of meaning through text after related text which Derrida calls 'dissemination' (*dissémination*).

These arguments provide the basis for the interpretation of Derrida which enlists him on the side of those who want to claim that a text has no determinate meaning, that 'creative' interpretation is the only kind there can be, and so on. Two thoughts should make us pause before accepting this interpretation.

The first is the thought that such an interpretation depends covertly on the very 'logocentrism' which Derrida attacks (which in turn should prompt the cautious reader to recall Derrida's frequent complaints, in *Positions*, in *Limited, Inc.*, and elsewhere, that his critics accuse him of defending the very positions he attacks, using arguments drawn from his work: 'Là encore, on me prête ce que je dénonce, comme si l'on était moins pressé de me critiquer ou de me discuter que de se mettre d'abord à ma place pour le faire' ('Here, too, what I denounce is attributed to me, as if one were in less of a hurry to criticise or discuss me, than first to put oneself in my place in order to do so').[8] The logocentrist thinks that strings of linguistic signs can be perceived as determinately meaningful only because their order or structure can be seen as representing or mirroring the structure of external reality. If

it is shown to everyone's satisfaction that this is not so, and that the ascription of specific meaning to a text cannot be controlled by any appeal to extra-linguistic meanings residing in the very structure of Reality, it is thus precisely the *logocentrist* whose tendency will be to conclude that, in that case, the ascription of meaning to a text cannot be controlled by anything at all, but must be to all intents and purposes arbitrary: that, as Rorty tells us, there is no difference between reading and reading-in.

This transition of thought is of course a *non sequitur*. It simply does not follow from the assertion that the ascription of meaning to a text is not controlled by a 'transcendental signified' (by meanings directly apprehended in the Husserlian 'living present of conscious-ness', or something of the sort) that it is not controlled by anything at all. Which brings us to the second of the two thoughts which the cautious reader of Derrida should bear in mind. It is this. Suppose we take seriously the idea that all reading is reading-in; that the Derridean 'opening' of meaning really does betray us into 'the abyss of an endless regress of ever-promised, never-delivered meaning'.[9] Don't the notions of *text* and *écriture* themselves begin to dis-integrate under us?

We cannot, after all, cut the text loose from the 'transcendental signified' unless we can somehow retain the possibility of distin-guishing between a text and a random string of marks or sounds. Once the 'transcendental signified' has gone, what basis for such a distinction remains available to us? The only possible one, it seems to me, is that different readers can, in the case of a text but not in the case of a random string of marks, give independently of one another accounts of the semantic features of the text, and the semantic mechanisms operating in it, which agree with one another. But to avail ourselves of this criterion of textuality we need to maintain a rather rigid distinction between reading and reading-in. If we *both* do away with the 'transcendental signified' *and* refuse to maintain the distinction between reading and reading-in, then we are left with a position which is simply incoherent – or, to put it modishly, which 'deconstructs itself' – because, as I have just tried to show, it is itself deeply, if covertly, 'logocentric'.

It is no doubt for this reason that Derrida insists everywhere, in a way rather reminiscent of Wittgenstein, on the *publicity* of the mech-anisms of *dissemination*. In the celebrated passage in *Éperons*, on the fragment 'I have forgotten my umbrella' found among Nietzsche's *Nachlass*, for instance, Derrida is concerned to argue only that the words give us no clue to Nietzsche's intentional states, not that they lack determinate meaning: 'Sa transparence s'étale sans pli,

sans réserve.... Chacun comprend ce que veut dire "j'ai oublié mon parapluie"' ('Its transparence displays itself without fold or reserve.... Everyone knows what "I have forgotten my umbrella" means').[10]

Perhaps all Derrida has in mind is that 'Everyone knows' what words *literally* mean. But no; in 'Signature Event Context' the claim of publicity is extended by implication to all the rhetorical mechanisms of *dissémination*, to every 'organon of iterability', for reasons which have to do with the central move of Derrida's position: the severing of textuality from psychic *presence*:

> Une écriture qui ne serait pas structurellement lisible – itérable – par-delà la mort du destinataire ne serait pas une écriture.... Imaginons une écriture dont le code soit assez idiomatique pour n'avoir été instauré et connu, comme chiffre secret, que par deux 'sujets'. Dira-t-on encore que, à la mort du destinataire, voire des deux partenaires, la marque laissée par l'un d'eux est toujours une écriture? Oui, dans la mesure où, réglée par un code, fût-il inconnu et non linguistique, elle est constituée, dans son identité de marque, par son itérabilité, en l'absence de tel ou tel, donc à la limite de tout 'sujet' empiriquement déterminé. Cela implique qu'il n'y a pas de code – organon d'itérabilité – qui soit structurellement secret.*[11]

It is not difficult to show, either, that the publicity of the mechanisms of *dissémination* is not a mere afterthought, but is essential to Derrida's position. I have the impression that English-speaking readers tend to see parallels between Derrida and Sartre; perhaps not surprisingly, since Sartre is the one philosopher in the phenomenological tradition whose ideas have penetrated fairly deeply into English-speaking literary culture. They tend to equate Derridean *présence* with Sartrean *Being* (or, as one perhaps should say, with Sartre's bizarre glossing of Heidegger's notion of Being), and thus to see the operations of Derridean *dissémination* as roughly equivalent to those of Sartrean *anéantissement*: as a process, that is, in which an absolutely arbitrary act of denial or exclusion results in an equally absolute and arbitrary creation of meaning. This is to stand Derrida

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* ('A writing that is not structurally readable – iterable – beyond the death of the addressee would not be writing.... Imagine a writing whose code would be so idiomatic as to be established and known, as secret cipher, by only two "subjects". Could we maintain that, following the death of the receiver, or even of both partners, the mark left by one of them is still writing? Yes, to the extent that, organized by a code, even an unknown and non-linguistic one, it is constituted in its identity as mark by its iterability [*itérabilité*], in the absence of such and such a person, and hence of every empirically determined "subject". This implies that *there is no such thing as a code – organon of iterability – which could be structurally secret* [my italics].')

on his head. Derrida's insistence on the *materiality* of language – his reduction, in effect, of the intelligible to the sensible – aligns him not with Sartre's intensely Cartesian, not to say Manichaean, theory of consciousness, but with the sort of objections brought against it by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, which in another way question the feasibility of a radical distinction between the sensible and the intelligible.

Thus, in *Positions*, Derrida insists on the 'regulated' character of *différance*. The 'play' (*jeu*) of *différance*, it appears, involves not just change, but *transformation*:

> L'activité ou la productivité connotées par le *a* de la *différance* renvoient au mouvement génératif dans le jeu des différences. Celles-ci ne sont pas tombées du ciel et elles ne sont pas inscrites une fois pour toutes dans un système clos, dans une structure statique qu'une opération synchronique et taxinomique pourrait épuiser. Les différences sont les effets de transformations et de ce point de vue le thème de la différance est incompatible avec le motif statique, synchronique, taxinomique, anhistorique, etc., du concept de *structure*. Mais il va de soi que ce motif n'est pas le seul à définir la structure et que la production des différences, la différance, n'est pas astructurale: elle produit des transformations systématiques et réglées pouvant, jusqu'à un certain point, donner lieu à une science structurale. Le concept de différance développe même les exigences principielles les plus légitimes du 'structuralisme'.*[12]

Some readers may merely see in this evidence of vacillation or the simple desire to have it both ways.[13] Surely a system governed by *rule* must be one in which the rules determine everything beforehand, in which nothing is left to chance. And conversely, once we begin to talk of 'openness' or 'play' surely we must be speaking of an activity not, or no longer, governed by rules.

In fact there is no inconsistency. The key to Derrida's thought at this point lies in the word 'productivity'. Derrida is claiming, in effect, that a sign system is *productive* in the sense that the rules of use which we lay down initially, and which *in one way* entirely

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* ('The activity or productivity connoted by the *a* of *différance* refers to the generative movement in the play of differences. The latter are neither fallen from the sky nor inscribed once and for all in a closed system, a static structure that a synchronic and taxonomic operation could exhaust. Differences are the effects of transformations, and from this vantage the theme of *différance* is incompatible with the static, synchronic, taxonomic, ahistoric motifs in the concept of structure. But it goes without saying that this motif is not the only one that defines structure, and that the production of differences, *différance*, is not astructural: it produces systematic and regulated transformations which are able, at a certain point, to leave room for a structural science. The concept of *différance* even develops the most legitimate principled exigencies of "structuralism".')

determine the meanings of the component signs of the system, may turn out to yield surprising and unexpected possibilities of combination and extension of meaning when projected into unfamiliar contexts.

This view of the 'activity or productivity' of *différance*, of course, specifically excludes arbitrariness or subjectivity in interpretation. *That* is not at all the kind of 'activity' at stake. (In general, in Derrida, it is *the text*, the actual signs themselves, which is conceived as 'active', not the subjectivity of the interpreter.) It is not hard to see why this is so. If reading and reading-in were one and the same thing, the 'activity' of the text would not be a matter of 'productivity' or 'transformation' at all, but simply one of *change*: not *différance*, but merely difference.

This is why Derrida speaks in *Of Grammatology* of the *trace* (what is produced by the movement of *différance*): 'comme l'unité d'un double mouvement de protention et de rétention' ('as the unity of the double movement of protention and retention').[14]

The commonplace meaning of a sign, which it carries with it into a new context (*rétention*) is what enables the reader to grasp the nature of the transformation, semantic or rhetorical, which the sign is producing in a new context (*protention*). If there were no retention, then, since it would not be possible for the reader to recognize the text produced by his reading as standing to an 'original' text in a relationship of transformation (i.e. systematic reordering of structure), there would be no protention either.

All this seems closely related, as I suggested a few paragraphs ago, to the account Merleau-Ponty gives of reading in *La Prose du monde* and elsewhere:

> Je sais, avant de lire Stendhal, ce que c'est qu'un coquin et je peux donc comprendre ce qu'il veut dire quand il écrit que le fiscal Rossi est un coquin. Mais quand le fiscal Rossi commence à vivre, ce n'est plus lui qui est un coquin, c'est le coquin qui est un fiscal Rossi. J'entre dans la morale de Stendhal par les mots de tout le monde dont il se sert, mais ces mots ont subi entre ses mains une torsion secrète. A mesure que les recoupements se multiplient et que plus de flèches se dessinent vers ce lieu de pensée où je ne suis jamais allé auparavant, où peut-être, sans Stendhal, je ne serais jamais allé, tandis que les occasions dans lesquelles Stendhal les emploie indiquent toujours plus impérieusement le sens neuf qu'il leur donne, je me rapproche davantage de lui jusqu'à ce que je lise enfin ses mots dans l'intention même où il les écrivit.... Des mots communs, des épisodes après tout déjà connus – un duel, une jalousie – qui d'abord me renvoyaient au monde de tous fonctionnent soudain

comme les émissaires du monde de Stendhal et finissent par m'installer sinon dans son être empirique, du moins dans ce moi imaginaire dont il s'est entretenu avec lui-même pendant cinquante années en même temps qu'il le monnayait en ses œuvres. C'est alors seulement que le lecteur ou l'auteur peut dire avec Paulhan: 'Dans cet éclair du moins, j'ai été avec toi'.*15

All this is no doubt very remote from 'deconstruction' as practised, say, by J. Hillis Miller, or Stanley Fish, or even Harold Bloom. But it is very close indeed to Derrida. The following words, from *L'Écriture et la différence*, which virtually repeat the substance of the above passage, should suffice to demonstrate Derrida's affinity with Merleau-Ponty:

Le sens doit attendre d'être dit ou écrit pour s'habiter lui-même et devenir ce qu'à différer de soi il est: le sens. C'est ce que Husserl nous apprend à penser dans *l'Origine de la géométrie*. L'acte littéraire retrouve ainsi à sa source son vrai pouvoir. Dans un fragment du livre qu'il projetait de consacrer à *l'Origine de la vérité*, Merleau-Ponty écrivait: 'La communication en littérature n'est pas simple appel de l'écrivain à des significations qui feraient partie d'un *a priori* de l'esprit humain: bien plutôt elle les y suscite par entraînement ou par une sorte d'action oblique. Chez l'écrivain la pensée ne dirige pas le langage du dehors: l'écrivain est lui-même comme un nouvel idiome qui se construit...'. 'Mes paroles me surprennent moi-même et m'enseignent ma pensée', disait-il ailleurs.

C'est parce qu'elle est *inaugurale*, au sens jeune de ce mot, que l'écriture est dangereuse et angoissante.†16

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* ('Before I read Stendhal, I know what a rogue is. Thus I can understand what he means when he says that Rossi the revenue man is a rogue. But when Rossi the Rogue begins to live, it is no longer he who is a rogue: it is a rogue who is the revenue man Rossi. I have access to Stendhal's outlook through the commonplace words he uses. But in his hands these words are given a new twist. The cross-references multiply. More and more arrows point in the direction of a thought I have never encountered before, and perhaps never would have met without Stendhal. At the same time, the contexts in which Stendhal uses common words reveal even more majestically the new meanings with which he endows them. I get closer and closer to him, until in the end I read his words with the very same intention that he gave to them.... Common words and familiar events, like jealousy or a duel, which at first immerse us in everyone's world, suddenly function as emissaries from Stendhal's world. Although the final effect is not for me to dwell within Stendhal's lived experience, I am at last brought within the imaginary self and the internal dialogue Stendhal held with it for the fifty years he was coining it in his works. It is only then that the reader or the author can say with Paulhan, "In this light at least, I have been with you." ')

† ('Meaning must await being said or written in order to inhabit itself, and in order to become, by differing from itself, what it is: meaning. This is what Husserl teaches us to think in *The Origin of Geometry*. The literary act thus recovers its true power at its source. In a fragment of a book he intended to devote to the *Origin of Truth*, Merleau-Ponty wrote: "Communication in literature is not the simple appeal on the part of the writer to meanings

One can agree, I think, with A. D. Nuttall: 'Certainly, if one reads Derrida with Merleau-Ponty in mind, certain passages suggest not so much free-floating formalism as a peculiarly tense engagement with reality.'[17] An engagement also, one might add, with language, considered not as the garden of relaxedly burgeoning parasitical kudzu vines recently evoked in Derrida's name by Richard Rorty,[18] but something rather more like a gymnasium, or possibly a minefield.

III   The author as 'effect of *différance*'

Let us turn now to the second and fourth of the five 'deconstruc-tionist' theses with which we began. Here again, we find plenty of commentators ready to cite Derrida in their favour.

'Our traditional commitment to the voice as the primary com-municative instrument also commits us, in Derrida's view', according to Terence Hawkes, 'to a falsifying "metaphysics of presence", based on an illusion that we are able, ultimately, to "come face to face once and for all with objects". That is, that some final, objective, unmediated "real world" exists, about which we can have concrete knowledge.' According to A. D. Nuttall, 'in his [Derrida's] writing as in the earlier work of Sartre there is a bias towards idealism'. 'It is in Derrida that the dissolution of the subject is most complete.' Richard Rorty, assessing 'textualism' as 'the contemporary counterpart of idealism', assures us that 'textualists', among whom he includes Derrida, 'write as if there were nothing but texts'.[19]

Against the weight of this Anglo-Saxon chorus, in which disciples and opponents stand for once united, Derrida's 'Je n'ai jamais dit qu'il n'y avait pas de "sujet d'écriture". Je n'ai jamais dit non plus qu'il n'y avait pas de sujet' ('I never said there was no "subject of writing". I never said either that there was no subject') takes on a certain pathos. And yet he never has said either of those things. What has gone wrong?

One fruitful source of misunderstanding lies in the terms (of Saussurian origin, but now universal in French philosophy of language) *signifiant* and *signifié*. They are invariably translated 'signifier' and 'signified'. For English-speaking readers, because of

which would be part of an *a priori* of the mind; rather, communication arouses these meanings in the mind through enticement and a kind of oblique action. The writer's thought does not control his language from without; the writer is a kind of new idiom, constructing itself. . . ." "My own words take me by surprise and teach me what to think", he said elsewhere.
   It is because writing is *inaugural*, in the fresh sense [*sens jeune*] of the word, that it is dangerous and anguishing.')

the way in which English thought has, since the eighteenth century, turned centrally upon the issue of idealism versus realism, the term 'signified' can only mean the 'external' real-world object which is (in Russellian terms, for instance) the *designatum* of the sign: the *real tree*, for example, to which I refer when I point and say, 'there is a tree'. This is not at all what *signifié* means in Saussure, or in subsequent French linguistic or philosophical discussion. For Saussure the term *signifiant* refers to the 'acoustic image', the sign-*vehicle*, that is, while *signifié* refers to the *concept* evoked by the *signifiant*. *Signe* (sign) designates the union of sign-vehicle and concept.[20]

Thus, when Derrida says that we have no access to a *signifié transcendentale* ('transcendental signified'), what he means is not, absurdly, that we have no access to trees but only to texts on trees. He means that *meanings*, or concepts, are elaborated solely within the text, through the transforming activity of *différance*. As reference to the preceding context of the passage will confirm, it is only this that is at stake in the famous slogan 'Il n'y a pas d'hors-texte' ('there is nothing outside the text'). Plainly, nothing in the claim that 'meaning must await to be spoken or written' ('Le sens doit attendre d'être dit ou écrit') in order to exist *as meaning* entails any form of philosophical idealism. In using language to refer to and talk about what exists, extra-textually, in reality, we are not, after all, using it to refer to and talk about *meanings* (about, that is, the Saussurian *signifié*). On the contrary, the meanings (concepts) which we elaborate *within* language are just what serve to give us common referential access to the extra-linguistic, or real, *world*.

So much for Derrida's alleged idealism. Related, but more interesting issues arise over the status of the author in Derrida's theory of reading. He holds that the reader of a text is acquainted with its author as an 'effect of *différance*':

> Rien – aucun étant présent et in-différant – ne précède donc la différance et l'espacement. Il n'y a pas de sujet qui soit agent, auteur et maître de la différance et auquel celle-ci surviendrait éventuellement et empiriquement. La subjectivité – comme l'objectivité – est un effet de différance, un effet inscrit dans un système de différance.*[21]

M. H. Abrams concludes from this that, 'since they lack a ground in presence',[22] such effects must be illusory. But this does not

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* ('Nothing – no present and in-*different* being – thus precedes *différance* and spacing. There is no subject who is agent, author and master of *différance*, who eventually and empirically would be overtaken by *différance*. Subjectivity – like objectivity – is an effect of *différance*, an effect inscribed in a system of *différance*'.)

necessarily follow. When I am confronted with another person, what confronts me is not the 'living present' of his consciousness, but the 'text' of his words, deeds, gestures and expressions. His or her responses to the contingencies of life are apprehended by me as those of a single, unique person, not because I have access to the metaphysical unity of a Cartesian substance underlying them (even the knowledge, which the nature of his or her responses forces upon me, that the Other is *conscious*, does not entail the kind of meta-physical self-identity which Cartesian metaphysics – the metaphysics of *présence* – demands as a condition for ascribing personhood), but because those responses confront me as a *system*: a unique order of transformations effected in the structure of physical and perceptual capacities, notions of morality, social and linguistic conventions, which is common to all of us. And this system develops over time: transforms itself in ways which are not always foreseeable, but which can be seen in retrospect to constitute transformation and not just change; to have come about by just that 'double movement of pro-tention and retention' in terms of which Derrida characterizes the *trace*. The person who confronts me in life confronts me, just like the author of the book I am reading, 'comme un nouvel idiome qui se construit'.

Sterne, who saw deeply into these issues at a time when they were less familiar, turns the tables on the Lockeian sceptic in just this way in the chapter of *Tristram Shandy* which begins with Momus's glass and ends with my Uncle Toby's hobby-horse. If 'the fixture of *Momus's* glass in the human breast, according to the proposed emendation of that arch-critick, had taken place', we could 'have taken a chair and gone softly, as you would to a dioptical bee-hive, and look'd in, – view'd the soul stark naked; – observed all her motions, – her machinations; – traced all her maggots from their first engendering to their crawling forth; . . . '.[23]

Alas, this is not possible. Cartesian *présence* is inaccessible in the case of the Other. Are we to conclude, sceptically, that others, including my Uncle Toby, unfortunately inhabit that 'final, objective, unmediated "real world"' of which, according to Terence Hawkes, 'we can have no concrete knowledge'? Certainly not. Sterne, after considering various increasingly elaborate and alarming ways of penetrating my Uncle Toby's dark backward and abysm, concludes that no such metaphysical surgery is necessary:

> To avoid all and every one of these errors, in giving you my Uncle *Toby's* character, I am determined to draw it by no mechanical help whatever; – nor shall my pencil be guided by any one wind-instrument which ever was

blown upon, either on this, or on the other side of the *Alps*; – nor will I consider either his repletions or his discharges, – or touch upon his Non-Naturals; – but, in a word, I will draw my Uncle *Toby's* character from his HOBBY-HORSE.[24]

It is, of course, much to the point that my Uncle Toby's hobby-horse is a *game* (a *jeu*), just as *Tristram Shandy* itself is a game, of words. Don't we reveal ourselves, precisely, in the games we play?

'Not if the way we play them is incoherent, subject to radically exclusive interpretations', the deconstructionist may want to reply, playing once more the third of his supposedly Derridean cards. So let us look at this move again.

The notion of 'incoherence' at stake here is clearly going to have to be a pretty strong one, if it is to do the work the deconstructionist requires of it. Mere logical inconsistency will hardly do. When a fellow philosopher says something logically inconsistent with something he said a moment ago, that in itself has no tendency to make me doubt – indeed it may confirm me in my belief – that one and the same person, familiar over many years, is continuing to address me. Christopher Norris, arguing against Hirsch, commits a pair of *non sequiturs* when he says:

> The author is not simply *there* in the text, a self-authenticating 'voice' of intent, as Hirsch (in his more sanguine moments) would have us believe. One might expect some such assurance from the homely narrative address of a novelist like Fielding, or the intimate soul-baring style of Wordsworth's poetry. Yet Fielding is as cunning a narrative tactician as any, his 'voice' a shifting multitude of ironies and ploys; while Wordsworth manages a complex and selective rhetoric of memory which (as recent critics have shown) by no means communicates the 'unmediated vision' of purely personal address.[25]

To show that the 'voice' operative in Fielding's novels cannot be ascribed to Fielding, Norris would need to show that his 'multitude of ironies and ploys' is not merely 'shifting', but as incoherent as those of a madman to whom we can attribute no single stable personality; while to suppose that 'rhetoric' excludes self-revelation (rather than serving, as it often does, as its instrument) is just to take at face value the Romantic opposition between the naïvely direct and the rhetorically opaque which Norris supposes himself to be questioning in the case of Wordsworth.

Again, when we have read and understood Derrida's deconstruction of Rousseau's *Essay on the Origin of Language* we do not feel

ourselves, when subsequently reading that text, any the less in the presence of Rousseau, considered as an 'idiome qui se construit'. Derrida has shown, indeed, how Rousseau's text 'differs' within itself. To show that is indeed to show that the text is not a closed, final, plenitude of meaning, that there are tensions within it capable of starting it moving, along paths of further development, parody, citation to one end or another and so on. But these tensions, or rather the way in which they are held in an unstable and dynamic balance with one another, in a discourse caught in the act of fabricating meanings which are not a mere reflection of the timeless finality of the *logos*, but exist only in this never-ending coming-to-birth in the act of writing, which is always further projectible: they and their shifting and always provisional resolutions *are* – constitute – the idiom of Rousseau's mind. Talk of the author as an 'idiom which constructs itself' is perfectly compatible with talk of the text as something which deconstructs itself, just as continuity of the person is compatible wtith the strains, inconsistencies and uneven accommodations and self-transcendences of everyday life.

But isn't *parody* one of the Derridean modes of *différance*? And isn't every reading in one sense a parody, if only in that it emphasizes and associates some aspects of the text while neglecting or dissociating others? And does not that make every reading false not just to authorial intention but to any stable reconstruction of the author's mind or outlook?

One can make two answers to this. The first is that different readings generally more resemble different artists' sketches of the same cathedral than sketches of different cathedrals. Fish, de Man, Kermode and others have attempted to provide instances of more radically alternative readings than this. They deserve separate discussion. My concern here is merely (mostly) to show that the thesis of the 'death of the author' receives no general, philosophical, support from the work of Derrida.

The second answer takes the objection by the horns. Doesn't *actual* parody depend for its effect not on a rupture with the author as 'idiome qui se construit', but precisely on a continuity between his idiom and that of the parody? And doesn't *that* mean that there is a sense in which a parody, far from demonstrating the possibility of a 'free play' of signs which annihilates the author by the mere fact that it can proceed in his absence, actually *belongs* to the author parodied, at least in the capacity of an albatross hung around his neck, or a chicken come home to roost?

Take, for example, Max Beerbohm's killing parody of a Barrack Room Ballad:

Then it's collar 'im tight,
  In the name o' the Lawd!
'Ustle'im, shake 'im till 'e's sick!
  Wot, 'e *would*, would'e? Well,
  Then yer've got ter give 'im 'Ell,
An' it's trunch, trunch, truncheon does the trick.[26]

This *is* Kipling, though of course a Kipling gone very much over the top. But doesn't the fact that Kipling's characteristic mannerisms, and not just of style but of tone and moral impulse, can be transformed by *différance* in this way, show something about Kipling? Doesn't all first-rate parody show something about its target? And doesn't that mean that the evanescence of the author under the impact of *différance* is not quite the self-evident consequence it has been taken to be, *even* when the activity of *différance* is being carried on by another mind, be it that of a parodist or that of the reader?

In general there are (at least) three senses in which we can put the question 'What did A mean by "p"?' We may want to know what 'p' *says*: what the ordinary meaning of the words is. This is the sense in which, as Derrida says, 'Everyone knows' ('Chacun comprend') what 'I have forgotten my umbrella' means. Secondly, we may want to know what were A's *intentions* in saying 'p'. Pretty evidently, this is a psychological rather than a hermeneutic question, and, as Derrida rightly points out, one which, once a text has left its author's hand and embarked upon a public career, rapidly becomes matter for mere speculation.

Thirdly, we may wish to know *what A has said in saying 'p'*. This *is* a hermeneutic question. We can answer it only by taking the measure of the text; and not just by drawing out its logical implications (though certainly in part by doing that), but by examining the transformations which overtake its characteristic structures and polarities when we project these into new contexts. The author may never have envisaged those contexts: may never, therefore, have *intended* (psychologically speaking) that his words should be taken in quite that way. But does nothing of *him*, of his mind and characteristic way of looking at things, project into the new context along with his words? If meaning is constituted within the text, don't we *have* to say, in fact, that the structures of meaning which constitute an author's textual personality *just are* what we project into a new context?

But surely his *textual* personality is to be distinguished from his *actual* personality, present to him if to him alone, through the 'privileged access' of consciousness?

Is that so clear? Don't we recognize the unclarity of such claims when we recognize in everyday life the power of our own words to depart from us and yet to retain a hold upon us, to drag us with them into a new context, within which we would vastly prefer not to have to reconstrue either them or ourselves? One need only think of the telling force with which words once lightly said and since forgotten can be recalled when circumstances have changed. 'That is not what I intended', we say, logocentrically: but does that absolve us?

It is only if 'taking the measure of the text' in new contexts is a process of arbitrary invention, rather than one of 'transformation' in the structural sense of that term, that words once spoken can depart absolutely from their speaker. But such a view is false to everything we know about speaking, writing and reading. Certainly, as I have tried to show here, it receives no philosophical support from anything in Derrida. It seems to, for English readers, only because the Cartesianism ingrained in an empiricist outlook makes it quite easy for us to miss or blur the distinction between the second and the third of the senses distinguished above in which one can ask 'What did A mean by "p"?'

IV Reconstructing Derrida

So far I have been doing my best to separate Derrida from everything which is thought on this side of the English Channel to stamp him as a radical literary theorist. And yet plainly Derrida *is* a radical thinker, whose work does have implications for the practice of criticism. So I shall end by offering a brief reassessment of what these might amount to.

Derrida has, by and large, been billed in England and America as a 'free floating formalist' (Nuttall) and an enemy of American 'New Criticism'.

In fact, I take it, Derrida's primary literary-critical target is not New Criticism but the type of French structuralism known as 'semiology'. Derrida objects to the semiological notion of literary work as a closed system of structural relationships, and also to the way in which the 'static, synchronic, taxonomic, ahistoric' aspects of semiology participate in the Cartesian 'metaphysics of presence'.

Of course there are New Critical echoes in this: in the notion of the work as a closed structure of meanings, explicable with finality, for instance. But the arguments in Derrida which oppose them are equally opposed to formalism. Derrida is opposed to any kind of criticism which seeks to put the reader in an epistemologically dominating position, from which the text can be exhaustively and

finally explained, irrespective of whether the explanation proposed is a formalist one, in terms of semiological structures, or a 'thematic' one, in terms of, say, Marxist or Freudian theory. Indeed, Derrida sees both formalism and thematic criticism (rightly, I think) as equally conditioned by the 'metaphysics of presence'; as the alternatives within which such a metaphysics constrains us to restrict our critical options:

> une critique du simple contenu (critique thématique, qu'elle soit de style philosophique, sociologique, psychanalytique, qui prendrait le théme, manifeste ou caché, plein ou vide, pour la substance du texte, pour son objet ou pour *sa vérité illustrée*) ne peut pas plus se mesurer à *certains* textes (ou plutôt à la structure de certaines *scénes* textuelles) qu'une critique purement formaliste qui ne s'intéresserait qu'au code, au pur jeu du signifiant, à l'agencement technique d'un texte-objet et négligerait les effets génétiques ou l'inscription ('historique', si vous voulez) du texte lu *et* du nouveau texte qu'elle écrit elle-même. Ces deux insuffisances sont rigoureusement complémentaires. On ne peut les définir sans une déconstruction de la rhétorique classique et de sa philosophie implicite....*[27]

What has been thought to stamp Derrida himself as a 'free floating formalist' is his supposed commitment to the indeterminacy of textual meaning and to the 'death of the author'. If, as I have been trying to show, these alleged commitments are misunderstandings engendered by a reading directed by the very logocentrism which Derrida attacks, what follows?

First of all, I think, we have to see Derrida as recommending that we drop, or cease to worry about, the distinction between 'Realist' and 'Formalist' *writing*; between writing, that is, which because of its Lockeian plainness seems to put us directly in contact with Reality, and writing which because of its artificial, rhetorical character, seems to refuse the challenge of what Dr Leavis liked to call 'Life', in favour of remaining on a level of 'pure play', or talk for its own sake; between *Clarissa, Sons and Lovers* or *Germinal* on the one hand, say,

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* ('a criticism concerned only with content (that is, a thematic criticism, be it in philosophical, sociological or psychoanalytic style, that takes the theme – manifest or hidden, full or empty – as the substance of the text, as its object or as its *illustrated truth*) can no more measure itself against *certain* texts ... than can a purely formalist criticism which would be interested only in the code, the pure play of signifiers, the technical manipulation of a text-object, thereby overlooking the genetic effects or the ('historical', if you will) inscription of the text read *and* of the new text this criticism itself writes. These two insufficiencies are rigorously complementary. They cannot be defined without a deconstruction of classical rhetoric and its implicit philosophy....')

and *Tristram Shandy, Tom Jones* or *To the Lighthouse* on the other. 'Textuality' rules: no text is any less 'textual' than any other.

This in itself, of course, is a thought which has already penetrated quite deeply into the consciousness and practice of English-speaking critics. But the assimilation is generally taken to run one way (is so taken by Christopher Norris, for instance, in the passage on Fielding and Wordsworth quoted earlier), towards the idea that all writing is equally remote from Reality, equally *play*, in the somewhat pejorative sense (*not* equivalent to Derridean *jeu*) which a traditional logocentrism makes available to us.

What I want to suggest is that the assimilation can just as easily (and more faithfully to Derrida) be made to run the other way. If meaning is brought to birth within the text, then the text itself is the bearer of all the Reality that inheres in meaning; and that, when one thinks about it, is, while by no means all the Reality there is, quite a good portion of that part of Reality which matters to us. On such a view, to read *Tristram Shandy*, say, as a field of reverberating and self-mirroring rhetorical devices is not to forget Sterne and his world, but precisely to encounter Sterne, and the world as strangely transmuted, but also strangely recognizable, in his vision. The vision, and the world, are not *behind* but *in* the rhetoric.

Secondly, we have to see Derrida as recommending an 'active', disseminative style of reading. Again this thought is already deeply entrenched in the minds of critics, especially American ones, who see it as a valuable counterbalance to the New Critical insistence on the scholarly pursuit of a single, privileged, final elucidation of the text. But here again, 'activity' is very often construed in terms of 'free floating' subjectivity; in part, I suspect, because that is the way in which 'activity' in interpretation, as opposed to 'passive' delineation of the Real, is marked within the scheme of conceptual distinctions which characterizes an only formally renounced logocentrism.

'Active' reading does not for Derrida, as I have been trying to show, mean subjective reading. It means the projection of the structures and polarities of the text by a public 'organon of iteration' into new contexts. What that will yield, doubtless, is a fan of alternative readings, with no means of stopping the fan from opening still further. My suggestion, however, is that if we attend carefully to what Derrida has to say about the nature of *itération, dissémination, différance* and the rest, we shall be led to see the alternative texts generated by disseminative reading not just as *other texts*, having no connection (or at best a causal one) with the text from which they sprang, but as refractions or transformations of that original text, each of which catches an aspect of its potential for significance. Of

course, we have equally to consider each of these aspects as coming to birth as fully *explicit* structures of meaning in the new texts which elaborate them as such – but I have already done my best to rid that thought of its supposed idealist implications.

Such an account of reading displaces us as readers (this, it seems to me, is Derrida's most fundamental thought) from epistemological dominance over the text. It is worth noticing in this connection that such dominance is just as much assured by a stance of pure subjectivism towards the text as by the pursuit of a canonical elucidation. We have to see ourselves neither as inventively fooling around with texts nor as 'decoding' complex ciphers, but as generating a reading of the text by a process which, because it involves an intercourse between our concerns and those of the text of a kind whose outcome we cannot altogether control (we may indeed find ourselves 'read' by the text), has more in common with a relationship between persons than with the scientific scrutiny of a natural object. For such a reading, what is required is just that combination of trust,[28] honesty, self-scrutiny and readiness to catch hints which is required in personal relationship.