Chapter Two

DECONSTRUCTION

Deconstruction has been variously presented as a philosophical position, a political or intellectual strategy, and a mode of reading. Students of literature and literary theory are doubtless most interested in its power as a method of reading and interpretation, but if our goal is to describe and evaluate the practice of deconstruction in literary studies, this is a good reason for beginning elsewhere, with deconstruction as a philosophical strategy. Perhaps we should say, more precisely, with deconstruction as a strategy within philosophy and a strategy for dealing with philosophy, for the practice of deconstruction aspires to be both rigorous argument within philosophy and displacement of philosophical categories or philosophical attempts at mastery. Here is Derrida describing “une stratégie générale de la déconstruction”: “In a traditional philosophical opposition we have not a peaceful coexistence of facing terms but a violent hierarchy. One of the terms dominates the other (axiologically, logically, etc.), occupies the commanding position. To deconstruct the opposition is above all, at a particular moment, to reverse the hierarchy” (Positions, pp. 56–57/41).

This is an essential step, but only a step. Deconstruction must, Derrida continues, “through a double gesture, a double science, a double writing, put into practice a reversal of the clas-

1 I will not attempt to discuss the relationship of Derridian deconstruction to the work of Hegel, Nietzsche, Husserl, and Heidegger. Gayatri Spivak’s introduction to Of Grammatology provides much useful information. See also Rodolphe Gasché, “Deconstruction as Criticism.”
Deconstruction

sical opposition and a general displacement of the system. It is on that condition alone that deconstruction will provide the means of intervening in the field of oppositions it criticizes and which is also a field of non-discursive forces" (Marges, p. 392/SEC, p. 195). The practitioner of deconstruction works within the terms of the system but in order to breach it.

Here is another formulation: “To ‘deconstruct’ philosophy is thus to work through the structured genealogy of its concepts in the most scrupulous and immanent fashion, but at the same time to determine, from a certain external perspective that it cannot name or describe, what this history may have concealed or excluded, constituting itself as history through this repression in which it has a stake” (Positions, p. 15/6).

To these formulations let us add one more: to deconstruct a discourse is to show how it undermines the philosophy it asserts, or the hierarchical oppositions on which it relies, by identifying in the text the rhetorical operations that produce the supposed ground of argument, the key concept or premise. These descriptions of deconstruction differ in their emphases.

To see how the operations they invoke might converge in practice, consider a case that lends itself to brief exposition, the Nietzschean deconstruction of causality.

Causality is a basic principle of our universe. We could not live or think as we do without taking for granted that one event causes another, that causes produce effects. The principle of causality asserts the logical and temporal priority of cause to effect. But, Nietzsche argues in the fragments of The Will to Power, this concept of causal structure is not something given as such but rather the product of a precise tropological or rhetorical operation, a chronologische Umdehnung or chronological reversal. Suppose one feels a pain. This causes one to look for a cause and spying, perhaps, a pin, one posits a link and reverses the perceptual or phenomenal order, pain ... pin, to produce a causal sequence, pin ... pain. “The fragment of the outside world of which we become conscious comes after the effect that has been produced on us and is projected a posteriori as its ‘cause.” In the phenomenalism of the ‘inner world’ we invert the chronology of cause and effect. The basic fact of ‘inner experience’ is that the cause gets imagined after the effect has occurred” (Werke, vol. 3, p. 804). The causal scheme is produced by a metonymy or metalepsis (substitution of cause for effect); it is not an indubitable foundation but the product of a tropological operation.

Let us be as explicit as possible about what this simple example implies. First, it does not lead to the conclusion that the principle of causality is illegitimate and should be scrapped. On the contrary, the deconstruction itself relies on the notion of cause: the experience of pain, it is claimed, causes us to discover the pin and thus causes the production of a cause. To deconstruct causality one must operate with the notion of cause and apply it to causation itself. The deconstruction appeals to no higher logical principle or superior reason but uses the very principle it deconstructs. The concept of causation is not an error that philosophy could or should have avoided but is indispensable—to the argument of deconstruction as to other arguments.

Second, the deconstruction of causality is not the same as Hume's skeptical argument, though they have something in common. When we investigate causal sequences, Hume claims in his Treatise of Human Nature, we can discover nothing other than relations of contiguity and temporal succession. Insofar as “causation” means more than contiguity and succession it is something that can never be demonstrated. When we say that one thing causes another, what we have in fact experienced is “that like objects have always been placed in like relations of contiguity and succession” (i. III, vi). Deconstruction too puts causality in question in this way, but simultaneously, in a different movement, it employs the notion of cause in argument. If “cause” is an interpretation of contiguity and succession, then pain can be the cause in that it may come first in the sequence of experience. This double procedure of systematically employ-

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86

87
Deconstruction

ing the concepts or premises one is undermining puts the critic in a position not of skeptical detachment but of unwarrantable involvement, asserting the indispensability of causation while denying it any rigorous justification. This is an aspect of deconstruction which many find difficult to understand and accept.

Third, the deconstruction reverses the hierarchical opposition of the causal scheme. The distinction between cause and effect makes the cause an origin, logically and temporally prior. The effect is derived, secondary, dependent upon the cause. Without exploring the reasons for or the implications of this hierarchization, let us note that, working within the opposition, the deconstruction upsets the hierarchy by producing an exchange of properties. If the effect is what causes the cause to become a cause, then the effect, not the cause, should be treated as the origin. By showing that the argument which elevates cause can be used to favor effect, one uncovers and undoes the rhetorical operation responsible for the hierarchization and one produces a significant displacement. If either cause or effect can occupy the position of origin, then origin is no longer originary; it loses its metaphysical privilege. A nonoriginary origin is a "concept" that cannot be comprehended by the former system and thus disrupts it.

This Nietzschean example poses numerous problems, but for the moment it can serve as a compact instance of the general procedures we encounter in the work of Jacques Derrida. Derrida's writings consist of engagements with a series of texts, mostly by the great philosophers but also by others: Plato (La Dissémination), Rousseau (De la grammaïologie), Kant ("Economie," La Vérité et peinture), Hegel (Marges, Glis), Husserl (L'Origine de la géométrie, La Voix et le phénomène, Marges), Heidegger (Marges), Freud (L'écriture et la différence, La Carte postale), Mallarmé (La Dissémination), Saussure (De la grammaïologie), Genet (Glis), Lévi-Strauss (L'écriture et la différence, De la grammaïologie), Austin (Marges). Most of these encounters display a concern with a problem that he identifies succinctly in "La Pharmacie de Platon" ("Plato's Pharmacy"). In writing philosophy Plato condemns writing. Why?

Quelle loi commande cette "contradiction," cette opposition à soi dûe contre l'écriture, dit qui se dit contre soi-même dès lors.

Writing and Logocentrism

What law governs this "contradiction," this opposition to itself of what is said against writing, of a dictum that pronounces itself against itself as soon as it finds its way into writing, as soon as it writes down its self-identity and carries away what is proper to it against this ground of writing? This "contradiction," which is nothing other than the relation-to-self of diction as it opposes itself to scription, ... this contradiction is not contingent. [Dissemination, p. 158]

Philosophical discourse defines itself in opposition to writing and thus in opposition to itself, but this self-division or self-opposition is not, Derrida claims, a mistake or accident that sometimes occurs in philosophical texts. It is a structural property of the discourse itself.

Why should this be? As a point of departure for the discussion of Derrida, this claim poses several questions. Why should philosophy resist the idea that it is a kind of writing? Why should this question of the status of writing be important? To answer these questions we must cover considerable ground.

1. Writing and Logocentrism

In De la grammaïologie and elsewhere, Derrida has documented the devaluation of writing in philosophical writings. The American philosopher Richard Rorty has suggested that we think of Derrida as answering the question, "Given that philosophy is a kind of writing, why does this suggestion meet with such resistance?" This becomes, in his work, the slightly more particular question, "What must philosophers who object to this characterization think writing is, that they should find the notion that this is what they are doing so offensive?" ("Philosophy as a Kind of Writing," p. 144).

Philosophers write, but they do not think that philosophy ought to be writing. The philosophy they write treats writing as
a means of expression which is at best irrelevant to the thought it expresses and at worst a barrier to that thought. For philosophy, Rorty continues, "Writing is an unfortunate necessity; what is really wanted is to show, to demonstrate, to point out, to exhibit, to make one’s interlocutor stand at gaze before the world. . . . In a mature science, the words in which the investigator 'writes up' his results should be as few and as transparent as possible. . . . Philosophical writing, for Heidegger as for the Kantians, is really aimed at putting an end to writing. For Derrida, writing always leads to more writing, and more, and still more" (p. 145).

Philosophy characteristically hopes to solve problems, to show how things are, or to untangle a difficulty, and thus to put an end to writing on a topic by getting it right. Of course, philosophy is by no means alone in this hope. Any discipline must suppose the possibility of solving a problem, finding the truth, and thus writing the last words on a topic. The idea of a discipline is the idea of an investigation in which writing might be brought to an end. Literary critics, dismayed by the proliferation of interpretations and the prospect of a future in which writing will breed ever more writing so long as academic journals and university presses survive, frequently attempt to imagine ways of bringing writing to an end by reformulating the goals of literary criticism to make it a true discipline. Claims about the true purpose of criticism usually define tasks that could in principle be completed. They invoke the hope of saying the last word, arresting the process of commentary. In fact, this hope of getting it right is what inspires critics to write, even though they simultaneously know that writing never puts an end to writing. Paradoxically, the more powerful and authoritative an interpretation, the more writing it generates.

Whatever its discomforts for critics, this is a particularly awkward situation for philosophers. If they are seeking to solve problems about the conditions of truth, the possibility of knowledge, and the relationship between language and the world, then the relation of their own language to truth and to the world is part of the problem. To treat philosophy as a species of writing would create difficulties. If philosophy is to define the relation of writing to reason, it must not itself be writing, for it wants to define the relation not from the perspective of writing but from the perspective of reason. If it is to determine the truth about the relation of writing to truth, it must be on the side of truth, not of writing. To return to Derrida's remark quoted earlier concerning the dictum that pronounces against itself as soon as it writes itself or is written, it is precisely because it is written that philosophy must condemn writing, must define itself against writing. To claim that its statements are structured by logic, reason, truth, and not by the rhetoric of the language in which they are "expressed," philosophical discourse defines itself against writing.

Writing, from this perspective, is the external, the physical, the nontranscendental, and the threat posed by writing is that the operations of what should be merely a means of expression might affect or infect the meaning it is supposed to represent. We can glimpse here the outlines of a familiar model. There is thought—the realm of philosophy, for example—and then mediating systems through which thought is communicated. In speech there is already mediation but the signifiers disappear as soon as they are uttered; they do not obtrude, and the speaker can explain any ambiguities to ensure that the thought has been conveyed. It is in writing that the unfortunate aspects of mediation become apparent. Writing presents language as a series of physical marks that operate in the absence of the speaker. They may be highly ambiguous or organized in artful rhetorical patterns.

The ideal would be to contemplate thought directly. Since this cannot be, language should be as transparent as possible. The threat of nontransparency is the danger that, instead of permitting direct contemplation of thought, linguistic signs might arrest the gaze and, by interposing their material form, affect or infect the thought. Worse still, philosophical thinking, which should lie beyond the contingencies of language and expression, might be affected by the forms of the signifiers of a language, which suggest, for example, a connection between the desire to write and to get it right. Can we be certain that our philosophical thinking about the relation between subject and object has not been influenced by the visual or morphological symmetry of these terms and the fact that they sound very similar? The extreme case, a sin against reason itself, is the pun, in which an "accidental" or external relationship between
Deconstruction

signifiers is treated as a conceptual relationship, identifying "history" as "his story" or connecting meaning (sens) and absence (sans). We treat the pun as a joke, lest signifiers infect thought.

The rejection of the signifier takes the form of the rejection of writing. This is the move by which philosophy constitutes itself as a discipline unaffected by the machinations of words and their contingent relationships—a discipline of thought and reason. Philosophy defines itself as what transcends writing, and by identifying certain aspects of the functioning of language with writing, tries to rid itself of these problems by setting writing aside as simply an artificial substitute for speech.

This condemnation of writing, in Plato and elsewhere, is of considerable importance because the "phonocentrism" that treats writing as a representation of speech and puts speech in a direct and natural relationship with meaning is inextricably associated with the "logocentrism" of metaphysics, the orientation of philosophy toward an order of meaning—thought, reason, logic, the Word—conceived as existing in itself, as foundation. The problem Derrida identifies involves not only the relation of speech and writing in philosophical discourse but also the claim that competing philosophies are versions of logocentrism. Indeed, Derrida might say, it is only because they are united in this search for a foundation, for something beyond which we need not go, that they can become competing philosophies.

Philosophy has been a "metaphysics of presence," the only metaphysics we know. "It could be shown," Derrida writes, "that all names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the center have always designated the constant of a presence." (L'Écriture et la différence, p. 411/279). Phonocentrism, the privileging of voice,

merges with the determination through history of the meaning of being in general as presence, with all the sub-determinations that depend on this general form and organize within it their system and their historical linkage (presence of the object to sight as idée), presence as substance/essence/existence (étre), temporal presence as the point (sujet) of the now or the instant (nun), self-presence of the cogito, consciousness, subjectivity, co-presence of the self

Writing and Logocentrism

...and the other, intersubjectivity as an intentional phenomenon of the ego, etc.). Logocentrism would thus be bound up in the determination of the being of the existent as presence. [De la grammaïologie, p. 29/12]

Each of these concepts, all of which involve a notion of presence, has figured in philosophical attempts to describe what is fundamental and has been treated as a centering, grounding force or principle. In oppositions such as meaning/form, soul/body, intuition/expression, literal/metaphorical, nature/culture, intelligible/sensible, positive/negative, transcendental/empirical, serious/nonserious, the superior term belongs to the logos and is a higher presence; the inferior term marks a fall. Logocentrism thus assumes the priority of the first term and conceives the second in relation to it, as a complication, a negation, a manifestation, or a disruption of the first. Description or analysis thus becomes

the enterprise of returning "strategically," in idealization, to an origin or to a "priority" seen as simple, intact, normal, pure, standard, self-identical, in order then to conceive of (pour penser ensemble) derivation, complication, deterioration, accident, etc. All metaphysicists have proceeded thus, from Plato to Rousseau, from Descartes to Husserl: good before evil, the positive before the negative, the pure before the impure, the simple before the complex, the essential before the accidental, the imitated before the imitation, etc. This is not just one metaphysical gesture among others; it is the metaphysical exigency, the most constant, profound, and potent procedure. [Limited Inc., p. 68/236]

Indeed, we generally assume that this is the procedure to follow in any "serious" analysis: to describe, for example, the simple, normal, standard case of deconstruction, illustrating its "essential" nature, and proceeding from there to discuss other cases that can then be defined as complications, derivations, and deteriorations. The difficulty of imaging and practicing different procedures is an indication of the ubiquity of logocentrism.

Among the familiar concepts that depend on the value of presence are: the immediacy of sensation, the presence of ultimate truths to a divine consciousness, the effective presence of
an origin in a historical development, a spontaneous or unmediated intuition, the transmutation of thesis and antithesis in a dialectical synthesis, the presence in speech of logical and grammatical structures, truth as what subsists behind appearances, and the effective presence of a goal in the steps that lead to it. The authority of presence, its power of valorization, structures all our thinking. The notions of “making clear,” “grasping,” “demonstrating,” “revealing,” and “showing what is the case” all invoke presence. To claim, as in the Cartesian cogito that the “I” resists radical doubt because it is present to itself in the act of thinking or doubting is one sort of appeal to presence. Another is the notion that the meaning of an utterance is what is present to the consciousness of the speaker, what he or she “has in mind” at the moment of utterance.

As these examples indicate, the metaphysics of presence is pervasive, familiar, and powerful. There is, however, a problem that it characteristically encounters: when arguments cite particular instances of presence as grounds for further development, these instances invariably prove to be already complex constructions. What is proposed as a given, an elementary constitutive, proves to be a product, dependent or derived in ways that deprive it of the authority of simple or pure presence.

Consider, for example, the flight of an arrow. If reality is what is present at any given instant, the arrow produces a paradox. At any given moment it is in a particular spot; it is always in a particular spot and never in motion. We want to insist, quite justifiably, that the arrow is in motion at every instant from the beginning to the end of its flight, yet its motion is never present at any moment of presence. The presence of motion is conceivable; it turns out, only insofar as every instant is already marked with the traces of the past and future. Motion can be present, that is to say, only if the present instant is not something given but a product of the relations between past and future. Something can be happening at a given instant only if the instant is already divided within itself, inhabited by the nonpresent.

This is one of Zeno’s paradoxes, purported to demonstrate the impossibility of motion, but what it illustrates more convincingly are the difficulties of a system based on presence. We think of the real as what is present at any given instant because the present instant seems a simple, indecomposable absolute. The past is a former present, the future an anticipated present, but the present instant simply is: an autonomous given. But it turns out that the present instant can serve as ground only insofar as it is not a pure and autonomous given. If motion is to be present, presence must already be marked by difference and deferral. We must, Derrida says, “penser le présent à partir du temps comme différence” [think the present starting from in relation to time as difference, differencing, and deferral] (De la grammaïologie, p. 237/166). The notion of presence and of the present is derived: an effect of differences. “We thus come,” Derrida writes, “to posit presence... no longer as the absolute matrix form of being but rather as a ‘particularization’ and ‘effect.’ A determination and effect within a system that is no longer that of presence but of difference” (Margins, p. 17/“Differance,” p. 147).

Here the issue has been the hierarchical opposition presence/absence. A deconstruction would involve the demonstration that for presence to function as it is said to, it must have the qualities that supposedly belong to its opposite, absence. Thus, instead of defining absence in terms of presence, as its negation, we can treat “presence” as the effect of a generalized absence or, as we shall see shortly, of différence. This operation may become clearer if we consider another example of the difficulties that arise within the metaphysics of presence. This one bears on signification and might be called the paradox of structure and event.

The meaning of a word, it is plausible to claim, is what speakers mean by it. A word’s meaning within the system of a language, what we find when we look a word up in a dictionary, is a result of the meaning speakers have given it in past acts of communication. And what is true of a word is true of language in general: the structure of a language, its system of norms and regularities, is a product of events, the result of prior speech acts. However, when we take this argument seriously and begin to look at the events which are said to determine structures, we find that every event is itself already determined and made possible by prior structures. The possibility of meaning something by an utterance is already inscribed in the structure of the language. The structures themselves are always products,
Deconstruction

out however far oack we try to push, even when we try to imagine the “birth” of language and describe an originary event that might have produced the first structure, we discover that we must assume prior organization, prior differentiation.

As in the case of causality, we find only nonoriginary origins. If a cave man is successfully to inaugurate language by making a special grunt signify “food,” we must suppose that the grunt is already distinguished from other grunts and that the world has already been divided into the categories “food” and “nonfood.” Acts of signification depend on differences, such as the contrast between “food” and “nonfood” that allows food to be signified, or the contrast between signifying elements that allows a sequence to function as a signifier. The sound sequence Barth is a signifier because it contrasts with pat, mat, bad, bet, etc. The noise that is “present” when one says bat is inhabited by the traces of forms one is not uttering, and it can function as a signifier only insofar as it consists of such traces. As in the case of motion, what is supposedly present is already complex and differential, marked by difference, a product of differences.

An account of language, seeking solid foundation, will doubtless wish to treat meaning as something somewhere present—say, present to consciousness at the moment of a signifying event; but any presence it invokes turns out to be already inhabited by difference. However, if one tries instead to ground an account of meaning on difference, one fares no better, for differences are never given as such and are always products. A scrupulous theory must shift back and forth between these perspectives, of event and structure or parole and langue, which never lead to a synthesis. Each perspective shows the error of the other in an irresolvable alternation or aporia. As Derrida writes,

We can extend to the system of signs in general what Saussure says about language: “The linguistic system (langue) is necessary for speech events (parole) to be intelligible and produce their effects, but the latter are necessary for the system to establish itself. . . .” There is a circle here, for if one distinguishes rigorously langue and parole, code and message, schema and usage, etc. and if one is to do justice to the two principles here enunciated, one does not know where to begin and how something can in general begin, be it langue or parole. One must therefore recognize, prior
to any dissociation of langue and parole, code and message, and what goes with it, a systematic production of differences, the production of a system of differences—a difference among whose effects one might later, by abstraction and for specific reasons, distinguish a linguistics of langue from a linguistics of parole. [Positions, pp. 39–40/28]

The term différence, which Derrida introduces here, alludes to this undecidable, nonsynthetic alternation between the perspectives of structure and event. The verb différer means to differ and to defer. Différence sounds exactly the same as différence, but the ending ance, which is used to produce verbal nouns, makes it a new form meaning “difference-differing-deferring.” Différence thus designates both a “passive” difference already in place as the condition of signification and an act of differing which produces differences. An analogous English term is spacing, which designates both an arrangement and an act of distribution or arranging. Derrida occasionally uses the corresponding French term espacement, but différenciation is more powerful and apposite because difference has been a crucial term in the writings of Nietzsche, Saussure, Freud, Husserl, and Heidegger. Investigating systems of signification, they have been led to emphasize difference and differentiation, and Derrida’s silent deformation of the term, as well as showing that writing cannot be seen as simply the representation of speech, makes apparent the problem that both determines and subverts every theory of meaning.

Différence, he writes,
is a structure and a movement that cannot be conceived on the basis of the opposition presence/absence. Differé is the systematic play of differences, of traces of differences, of the spacing [espacement] by which elements relate to one another. This spacing is the production, simultaneously active and passive (the a of différence indicates this indecision as regards activity and passivity, that which cannot yet be governed and organized by that opposition), of intervals without which the “full” terms could not signify, could not function [Positions, pp. 38–39/27]

These problems are explored further in Derrida’s reading of Saussure in De la grammatologie. Saussure’s Cours de linguistique
Deconstruction

générale, which has inspired both structuralism and semiotics, can be shown to contain, on the one hand, a powerful critique of the metaphysics of presence and, on the other hand, an explicit affirmation of logocentrism and unavoidable involvement with it. Derrida thus shows how Saussure's discourse deconstructs itself, but he also argues, and this is a point that must not be missed, that, far from invalidating the Cours, this self-deconstructive movement is essential to its power and pertinence. The value and force of a text may depend to a considerable extent on the way it deconstructs the philosophy that subsumes it.

Saussure begins by defining language as a system of signs. Noises count as language only when they serve to express or communicate ideas, and thus the central question for him becomes the nature of the sign: what gives it its identity and enables it to function as sign. He argues that signs are arbitrary and conventional and that each is defined not by essential properties but by the differences that distinguish it from other signs. A language is thus conceived as a system of differences, and this leads to the development of the distinctions on which structuralism and semiotics have relied: between a language as a system of differences (langue) and the speech events which the system makes possible (parole), between the study of the language as a system at any given time (synchronic) and study of the correlations between elements from different historical periods (diachronic), between two types of differences within the system, syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations, and between the two constituents of the sign, signifier and signified. These basic distinctions together constitute the linguistic and semiotic project of accounting for linguistic events by making explicit the system of relations that makes them possible.

Now the more rigorously Saussure pursues his investigations, the more he is led to insist on the purely relational nature of the linguistic system. Sound itself, he argues convincingly, cannot belong to the system; it permits the manifestation of units of the system in acts of speech. Indeed, he concludes that “in the linguistic system there are only differences, without positive terms” (Cours, p. 166/120). This is a radical formulation. The common view is doubtless that a language consists of words, positive entities, which are put together to form a system and thus acquire relations with one another, but Saussure's analysis of the nature of linguistic units leads to the conclusion that, on the contrary, signs are the product of a system of differences; indeed, they are not positive entities at all but effects of difference. This is a powerful critique of logocentrism, as Derrida explains, to conclude that the system consists only of differences undermines the attempt to found a theory of language on positive entities which might be present either in the speech event or in the system. If in the linguistic system there are only differences, Derrida notes, the play of differences involves syntheses and referrals that prevent there from being at any moment or in any way a simple element that is present in and of itself and refers only to itself. Whether in written or in spoken discourse, no element can function as a sign without relating to another element which itself is not simply present. This linkage means that each “element”—phoneme or grapheme—is constituted with reference to the trace in it of the other elements of the sequence or system. This linkage, this weaving, is the text, which is produced only through the transformation of another text. Nothing, either in the elements or in the system, is anywhere simply present or absent. There are only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces. [Positions, pp. 37–38/26]

The arbitrary nature of the sign and the system with no positive terms give us the paradoxical notion of an “instituted trace,” a structure of infinite referral in which there are only traces—traces prior to any entity of which they might be the trace.

At the same time, however, there is in Saussure's argument an affirmation of logocentrism. The concept of the sign itself, from which Saussure starts, is based on a distinction between the sensible and the intelligible; the signifier exists to give access to the signified and thus seems to be subordinated to the concept or meaning that it communicates. Moreover, in order to distinguish one sign from another, in order to tell when material variations are significant, the linguist must assume the possibility of grasping signifieds, making them his point of departure. The concept of the sign is so involved with the basic concepts of logocentrism that it would be difficult for Saussure to shift it even if he wished to. Though much of his analysis does work to
this end, he explicitly affirms a logocentric conception of the sign and thus inscribes his analysis within logocentrism. This emerges, most interestingly for Derrida, in Saussure’s treatment of writing, which he relegated to a secondary and derivative status. Although he had specifically excluded sound as such from the linguistic system and insisted on the formal character of linguistic units, he maintains that “the object of linguistic analysis is not defined by the combination of the written word and the spoken word: the spoken word alone constitutes the object” (Cours, pp. 45/23–24). Writing is simply a means of representing speech, a technical device or external accessory that need not be taken into consideration when studying language.

This may seem a relatively innocuous move, but in fact, as Derrida shows, it is crucial to the Western tradition of thinking about language, in which speech is seen as natural, direct communication and writing as an artificial and oblique representation of a representation. In defense of this ranking, one may cite the fact that children learn to speak before they learn to write or that millions of people, even entire cultures, have speech without writing; but when such facts are adduced they are taken to demonstrate not just a factual or local priority of speech to writing but a more portentous general and comprehensive priority. Speech is seen as in direct contact with meaning: words issue from the speaker as the spontaneous and nearly transparent signs of his present thought, which the attendant listener hopes to grasp. Writing, on the other hand, consists of physical marks that are divorced from the thought that may have produced them. It characteristically functions in the absence of a speaker, gives uncertain access to a thought, and can even appear as wholly anonymous, cut off from any speaker or author. Writing thus seems to be not merely a technical device for representing speech but a distortion of speech. This judgment of writing is as old as philosophy itself. In the Phaedrus Plato condemns writing as a bastardized form of communication; separated from the father or moment of origin, writing can give rise to all sorts of misunderstandings since the speaker is not there to explain to the listener what he has in mind.

Privileging speech by treating writing as a parasitic and imperfect representation of it is a way of setting aside certain features of language or aspects of its functioning. If distance, absence, misunderstanding, insincerity, and ambiguity are features of writing, then by distinguishing writing from speech one can construct a model of communication that takes as its norm an ideal associated with speech—where the words bear a meaning and the listener can in principle grasp precisely what the speaker has in mind. The moral fervor that marks Saussure’s discussion of writing indicates that something important is at stake. He speaks of the “dangers” of writing, which “disguises” language and even on occasion “usurps” the role of speech. The “tyranny of writing” is powerful and insidious, leading, for example, to errors of pronunciation that are “pathological,” a corruption or infection of the natural spoken forms. Linguists who attend to written forms are “falling into the trap.” Writing, supposedly a representation of speech, threatens the purity of the system it serves (De la grammaétique, pp. 51–69/34–43).

But if writing can affect speech, the relationship is more complicated than it at first appeared. The hierarchical scheme that gave speech priority and made writing dependent upon it is further skewed by Saussure’s recourse to the example of writing to explain the nature of linguistic units. How can one illustrate the notion of a purely differential unit? “Since an identical state of affairs is observable in writing, another system of signs, we shall use writing to draw some comparisons that will clarify the whole issue” (Cours, p. 165/119). The letter t, for example, can be written in various ways so long as it remains distinct from d, f, i, d, etc. There are no essential features that must be preserved; its identity is purely relational.

Thus writing, which Saussure claimed ought not to be the object of linguistic enquiry, turns out to be the best illustration of the nature of linguistic units. Speech is to be understood as a form of writing, an instance of the basic linguistic mechanism manifested in writing. Saussure’s argument brings about this reversal: the announced hierarchy that makes writing a derivative form of speech, a parasitic mode of representation added to speech, is inverted, and speech is presented, explained, as a form of writing. This gives us a new concept of writing: a generalized writing that would have as subspecies a vocal writing and a graphic writing.
Pursuing the interplay of speech and writing in the texts of Plato, Rousseau, Husserl, Lévi-Strauss, and Condillac, as well as Saussure, Derrida produces a general demonstration that if writing is defined by the qualities traditionally attributed to it, then speech is already a form of writing. For example, writing is often set aside as merely a technique for recording speech in inscriptions that can be repeated and circulated in the absence of the signifying intention that animates speech; but this iterability can be shown to be the condition of any sign. A sequence of sounds can function as a signifier only if it is repeatable, if it can be recognized as the "same" in different circumstances. It must be possible for me to repeat to a third party what someone said. A speech sequence is not a sign sequence unless it can be quoted and put into circulation among those who have no knowledge of the "original" speaker and his signifying intentions. The utterance "Ris-Orangis is a southern suburb of Paris" continues to signify as it is repeated, quoted, or, as here, cited as example; and it can continue to signify whether or not those who reproduce or quote it have anything "in mind." This possibility of being repeated and functioning without respect to a particular signifying intention is a condition of linguistic signs in general, not just of writing. Writing may be thought of as a material record, but as Derrida notes, "If 'writing' means inscription and especially the durable instituting of signs (and this is the only irreducible kernel of the concept of writing), then writing in general covers the entire domain of linguistic signs.... The very idea of institution, hence of the arbitrariness of the sign, is unthinkable prior to or outside the horizon of writing" (De la gramma, p. 65/44). Writing-in-general is an archi-écriture, an archi-writing or protowriting which is the condition of both speech and writing in the narrow sense.

The relationship between speech and writing gives us a structure which Derrida identifies in a number of texts and which he calls, using a term that Rousseau applies to writing, a logic of the "supplement." A supplement, Webster's tells us, is "something that completes or makes an addition." A supplement to a dictionary is an extra section that is added on, but the possibility of adding a supplement indicates that the dictionary itself is incomplete. "Languages are made to be spoken," writes Rousseau; "writing serves only as a supplement to speech." And this concept of the supplement, which appears everywhere in Rousseau, "harbors within it two significations whose cohabitation is as strange as it is necessary" (De la gramma, p. 208/144). The supplement is an inessential extra, added to something complete in itself, but the supplement is added in order to complete, to compensate for a lack in what was supposed to be complete in itself. These two different meanings of supplement are linked in a powerful logic, and in both meanings the supplement is presented as exterior, foreign to the "essential" nature of that to which it is added or in which it is substituted.

Rousseau describes writing as a technique added to speech, foreign to the nature of language, but the other sense of supplement also turns out to be at work here. Writing can be added to speech only if speech is not a self-sufficient, natural plenitude, only if there is already in speech a lack or absence that enables writing to supplement it. This emerges strikingly in Rousseau's discussion of writing, for while he condemns writing "as a destruction of presence and disease of speech," his own activity as a writer is presented, quite traditionally, as an attempt to restore through the absence of writing a presence that has been missing from speech. Here is a succinct formulation from the Confessions: "I would love society as others do if I were not certain of showing myself not just at a disadvantage but as completely different from what I am. The decision I have taken to write and to hide myself is precisely the one that suits me. If I were present people would never have known what I was worth" (De la gramma, p. 205/142).

Writing can be compensatory, a supplement to speech, only because speech is already marked by the qualities generally predicated of writing: absence and misunderstanding. As Derrida notes, though speaking of linguistic theory generally rather than of Rousseau's argument, writing can be secondary and derivative "only on one condition: that the 'original,' 'natural' etc. language never existed, was never intact or untouched by writing, that it has itself always been a writing," an archi-writing (De la gramma, p. 82/56). Derrida's discussion of "this dangerous supplement" in Rousseau describes this structure in a variety of domains: Rousseau's various external supplements are called in to supplement precisely because there is always a lack in what is supplemented, an originary lack.
For example, Rousseau discusses education as a supplement to nature. Nature is in principle complete, a natural plenitude to which education is an external addition. But the description of this supplementation reveals an inherent lack in nature; nature must be completed—supplemented—by education if it is to be truly itself: the right education is needed if human nature is to emerge as it truly is. The logic of supplementarity thus makes nature the prior term, a plenitude that is there at the start, but reveals an inherent lack or absence within it, so that education, the additional extra, also becomes an essential condition of that which it supplements.

Rousseau also speaks of masturbation as a "dangerous supplement." Like writing, it is a perverse addition, a practice or technique added to normal sexuality as writing is added to speech. But masturbation also replaces or substitutes for "normal" sexual activity. To function as substitute it must resemble in some essential way what it replaces, and indeed the fundamental structure of masturbation—desire as auto-affection focusing on an imagined object that one can never "possess"—is repeated in other sexual relationships, which can thus be seen as moments of a generalized masturbation.

However, it would be more exact to speak of a generalized substitution, for what Rousseau's supplements reveal is an endless chain of supplements. Writing is a supplement to speech, but speech is already a supplement: children, says Emile, quickly learn to use speech "to supplement their own weakness... for it does not need much experience to realize how pleasant it is to act through the hands of others and to move the world simply by moving the tongue" (De la gramma
tologie, p. 211/147).

In the absence of Madame de Waren, his beloved "Maman," Rousseau has recourse to supplements, as the Confessions describes: "I would never finish if I were to describe in detail all the follies that the recollection of my dear Maman made me commit when I was no longer in her presence. How often I kissed my bed, recalling that she had slept in it, my curtains and all the furniture in the room, since they belonged to her and her beautiful hand had touched them, even the floor, on which I prostrated myself, thinking that she had walked upon it" (De la gramma
tologie, p. 217/152). These supplements function in her absence as substitutes for her presence, but, the text immediately continues, "Sometimes even in her presence I committed extravagances that only the most violent love seemed capable of inspiring. One day at table, just as she had put a piece of food in her mouth, I exclaimed that I saw a hair on it. She put the morsel back on her plate; I eagerly seized and swallowed it." Rousseau's passage astutely marks through the signifier the structure that is at work here. What he exclaims that he sees on the morsel of food is both something foreign and indifferent (un cheveu) and his own desire (un je veux), which functions through contingent supplements.

This chain of substitutions could be continued: Maman's "presence," as we have seen, does not arrest it. If he were to "possess her," as we say, this would still be marked by absence: "la possession physique," says Proust, "où d'ailleurs l'on ne possède rien." And Maman is herself a substitute for an unknown mother, who would herself be a supplement. "Through this sequence of supplements there emerges a law: that of an endless linked series, ineluctably multiplying the supplementary mediations that produce the sense of the very thing that they defer: the impression of the thing itself, of immediate presence, or originary perception. Immediacy is derived. Everything begins with the intermediary..." (De la gramma
tologie, p. 226/157).

Rousseau's texts, like many others, teach that presence is always deferred, that supplementation is possible only because of an originary lack, and they thus propose that we conceive what we call "life" on the model of the text, on the model of supplementation figured by signifying processes. What these writings maintain is not that there is nothing outside the empirical texts—the writings—of a culture, but that what lies outside are more supplements, chains of supplements, thus putting in question the distinction between inside and outside. The matrix of what we call Rousseau's real life, with its socioeconomic conditions and public events, its private sexual experiences and its acts of writing, would prove on examination to be constituted by the logic of supplementarity, as do the physical objects he invokes in the passage about Maman in the Confessions. Derrida writes,

What we have tried to show in following the connecting thread of the "dangerous supplement," is that in what we call the real life
of these "flesh and blood" creatures, beyond and behind what we believe we can circumscribe as Rousseau's oeuvre, there has never been anything but writing, there have never been anything but supplements and substitutional significations which could only arise in a chain of differential references. The "real" supervenes or is added only in taking meaning from a trace or an invocation of supplements [un appel de supplet]. And so on indefinitely, for we have read in the text that the absolute present, Nature, what is named by words like "real mother" etc., have always already escaped, have never existed; that what inaugurates meaning and language is writing as the disappearance of natural presence [De la gramma
tologie, pp. 228/158–59]

This ubiquity of the supplement does not mean that there is no difference between the "presence" of Maman or Thérèse and their "absence," or between a real event and a fictional one. These differences are crucial and play a powerful role in what we call our experience. But effects of presence and of historical reality arise within and are made possible by supplementa
tion, by difference, as particular determinations of this structure. Maman's "presence" is a certain type of absence, and a real historical event, as numerous theorists have sought to show, is a particular type of fiction. Presence is not originary
but reconstituted (L'écriture et la différence, p. 314/212).

The metaphysical strategy at work in Rousseau's texts, which at the same time prove its undoing, has consisted "of excluding non-presence by determining the supplement as simple ex
teriority, pure addition or pure absence... What is added is nothing because it is added to a full presence to which it is exterior. Speech comes to be added to intuitive presence (of the entity, of essence, of the eidos, of oswia, and so forth); writing comes to be added to a living self-present speech; masturbation comes to be added to so-called normal sexual experience; culture to nature, evil to innocence, history to origin, and so forth" (De la gramma
tologie, pp. 237–38/167). The importance of these structures and valuations in our thinking indicates that the privile
leging of speech over writing is not a mistake that authors
might have avoided. The setting aside of writing as supplement
is, Derrida insists, an operation underwritten by the entire his
tory of metaphysics and is even the crucial operation in the
"economy" of metaphysical concepts.

The privilege of the phonè does not depend upon a choice that might have been avoided. It corresponds to a moment of the system (let us say, of the "life" of "history" or of "being-as-self-rela
relationship"). The system of "hearing/understanding-one-self
speak" [s'entendre parler] through the phonic substance—which pres
ts itself as a non-exterior, non-worldly and therefore non-emp
irical or non-contingent signifier—has necessarily dominated the
history of the world during an entire epoch, and has even pro
duced the idea of the world, the idea of world-origin, arising from
the difference between the worldly and the non-worldly, the out
side and the inside, ideality and non-ideality, universal and non-universal, transcendental and empirical, etc. [De la gramma
tologie, pp. 17/7–8]

These are large claims. They become more comprehensible if one notes that the idea of the "world," as that which is out
side consciousness, depends on distinctions such as inside/out
side, and each of these oppositions depends upon a point of dif
ferentiation, a point where outside becomes differentiated from inside. The distinction is controlled by a point of dif
ferentiation. Derrida's claim is twofold. First, the moment of
speech, or rather the moment of one's own speech, where sig
nifier and signified seem simultaneously given, where inside
and outside, material and spiritual seem fused, serves as a point
of reference in relation to which all these essential distinctions
can be posited. Second, this reference to the moment of one's
own speech enables one to treat the resulting distinctions as
hierarchical oppositions, in which one term belongs to presence
and the logos and the other denotes a fall from presence. To
tamper with the privilege of speech would be to threaten the
entire edifice.

Speech can play this role because at the moment when one
speaks material signifier and spiritual signified seem to present
themselves as an undissociated unity, where the intelligible con
trols the sensible. Written words may appear as physical marks
which the reader must interpret and animate; one can see them
without understanding them, and this possibility of a gap is
part of their structure. But when I speak, my voice does not
seem to be something external that I first hear and then under
stand. Hearing and understanding my speech as I speak are
the same thing. This is what Derrida calls the system of s'enten-
Deconstruction

dre parler, the French verb efficiently fusing the acts of hearing oneself and understanding oneself. In speech I seem to have direct access to my thoughts. The signifiers do not separate me from my thought, but efface themselves before it. Nor do the signifiers seem to be external devices taken from the world and put to use. They arise spontaneously from within and are transparent to the thought. The moment of hearing/understanding oneself speak offers "the unique experience of the signified producing itself spontaneously, from within the self, and yet nevertheless, as signified concept, in the element of ideality or universality. The unworldly character of this substance of expression is constitutive of this ideality. This experience of the effacement of the signifier in voice is not one illusion among others—since it is the condition of the very idea of truth..." (De la grammatologie, p. 33/20).

The effacement of the signifier in speech is a condition of the idea of truth because it combines the possibility of objectivity—repeatable manifestation, a constant meaning present in numerous appearances—with dominance of meaning over appearance. Insofar as truth requires the possibility of a constant signification which can manifest itself and remains unchanged or unaffected by the vehicles that manifest it, voice provides us with the necessary model. By this model in which the distinction between meaning and form is a hierarchical opposition, truth dominates the opposition between truth and appearances.

But of course this model does involve an illusion. The evanescence of the signifier in speech creates the impression of the direct presence of a thought, but however swiftly it vanishes, the spoken word is still a material form which, like the written form, works through its differences from other forms. If the vocal signifier is preserved for examination, as in a tape recording, so that we can "hear ourselves speak," we find that speech is a sequence of signifiers just as writing is, similarly open to the process of interpretation. Though speech and writing may produce different sorts of effects of signification, there are no grounds for claiming that voice delivers thoughts directly, as may seem to be the case when one hears oneself speak at the moment of speaking. A recording of one's own speech makes clear that speech too works by the differential play of signifiers, though it is precisely this work of difference that the privileging of speech seeks to suppress. "Speech and the consciousness of speech—that is to say, simply consciousness as self-presence—are the phenomena of an auto-affectation experienced as the suppression of difference. This phenomenon, this presumed suppression of difference, this lived reduction of the opacity of the signifier, are the origin of what we call presence" (De la grammatologie, p. 36/166).

In seeing how the system of s'entendre parler serves as a model of presence and reveals the solidarity of phonocentrism, logocentrism, and metaphysics of presence, we have explored the reasons why speech has been set above writing. This opposition, in all its strategic importance, is deconstructed in the texts that affirm it, as speech turns out to depend upon those very qualities that have been predicated of writing. Theories grounded on presence—whether of meaning as a signifying intention present to consciousness at the moment of utterance or of an ideal norm that subsists behind all appearances—undo themselves, as the supposed foundation or ground proves to be the product of a differential system, or rather, of difference, differentiation, and deferral. But the operation of deconstruction or the self-deconstruction of logocentric theories does not lead to a new theory that sets everything straight. Even theories like Saussure's, with its powerful critique of logocentrism in its concept of a purely differential system, do not escape the logocentric premises they undermine; and there is no reason to believe that a theoretical enterprise could ever free itself from those premises. Theory may well be condemned to a structural inconsistency.

The question that now arises, especially for literary critics who are more concerned with the implications of philosophical theories than with their consistency or affiliations, is what this has to do with the theory of meaning and the interpretation of texts. The examples we have examined so far permit at least a preliminary reply: deconstruction does not elucidate texts in the traditional sense of attempting to grasp a unifying content or theme; it investigates the work of metaphysical oppositions in their arguments and the ways in which textual figures and relations, such as the play of the supplement in Rousseau, produce a double, aporetic logic. The examples we have consid-
Deconstruction

ered give no reason to believe, as is sometimes suggested, that
deconstruction makes interpretation a process of free associ-
ation in which anything goes, though it does concentrate on
conceptual and figural implications rather than on authorial
intentions. However, the deconstruction of the opposition be-
tween speech and writing, by making central to language predi-
cates often associated with the written character alone, may
have implications that we have not yet explored. If, for ex-
ample, meaning is thought of as the product of language rather
than its source, how might that affect interpretation? A good
way to approach the implications of deconstruction for models
of signification is through Derrida’s reading of J. L. Austin in
“Signature événement context” (Margins) and the subsequent
dispute with the American theorist of speech acts, John Searle.

2. Meanings and Iterability

In the Saussurian perspective meaning is the product of a
linguistic system, the effect of a system of differences. To ac-
count for meaning is to set forth the relations of contrast and
the possibilities of combination that constitute a language. This
procedure is essential to the analysis of signifying processes,
but two observations must be made about the theory that pro-
poses it. First, as we have seen in following Saussure’s self-
deconstruction, a theory based on difference does not escape
logocentrism but finds itself appealing to presence, not only
because concepts of analysis, demonstration, and objectivity
involve such reference but also because in order to identify
differences responsible for meanings one needs to treat some
meanings as if they were given, as if they were somewhere
“present” as a point of departure.

Second, a theory that derives meaning from linguistic struc-
ture, though it contributes much to the analysis of meanings,
does not account for it completely. If one conceives of mean-
ing as the effect of linguistic relations manifested in an ut-
terance, then one must contend with the fact that, as we say,
a speaker can mean different things by the same linguistic se-
quence on different occasions. “Could you move that box?” may
be a request, or a question about one’s interlocutor’s strength,
or even, as rhetorical question, the resigned indication of an
impossibility.

Such examples seem to reinstate a model in which the sub-
ject—the consciousness of the speaker—is made the source
of meaning; despite the contribution of linguistic structure, the
meaning of the utterance varies from case to case; its meaning
is what the speaker means by it. Confronted with such a model,
the partisan of structural explanation will ask what makes it
possible for the speaker to mean these several things by the one
utterance. Just as we account for the meaning of sentences by
analyzing the linguistic system, so we should account for the
meaning of utterances (or as Austin calls it, its illocutionary
force) by analyzing another system, the system of speech acts.
As the founder of speech act theory, Austin is in fact repeating
at another level (though less explicitly) the crucial move made
by Saussure: to account for signifying events (parole) one at-
ttempts to describe the system that makes them possible.

Thus Austin argues, for example, that to mean something by
an utterance is not to perform an inner act of meaning that
accompanies the utterance. The notion that I may mean differ-
ent things by “Could you move that box?” seems to urge that
we explain meaning by inquiring what the speaker has in mind,
as though this were the determining factor, but this is what
Austin denies. What makes an utterance a command or a prom-
ise or a request is not the speaker’s state of mind at the
moment of utterance but conventional rules involving features
of the context. If in appropriate circumstances I say “I promise
to return this to you,” I have made a promise, whatever was
running through my mind at the time, and conversely, when
earlier in this sentence I wrote the words “I promise to return
this to you” I did not succeed in making a promise, even if the
thoughts in my mind were similar to those that occurred on an
occasion when I did make a promise. Promising is an act gov-
erned by certain conventions that the theorist of speech acts
attempts to make explicit.

Austin’s project is thus an attempt at structural explanation
which offers a pertinent critique of logocentric premises, but in
his discussion he reintroduces precisely those assumptions that
his project puts in question. Derrida outlines this self-decon-
structive movement in a section of “Signature événement con-