Deconstruction and Philosophy

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Christopher Norris, *The Contest of Faculties: Philosophy and Theory after Deconstruction*, Methuen: London and New York, 1985. pp. 247.

Philosophy grounds and defends its claim to rationality and truth only by repressing its own rhetorical charactor. It is inevitably bound up with fiction, and no attempt, by Plato, Descartes, Kant or Husserl, can remove fiction from philosophy's operative center to its periphery. This is a central tenet of deconstruction, and it has become a central tenet of contemporary deconstructive literary theory which has sought to dissolve the traditionally held distinctions among various disciplines such as literature, philosophy, criticism, psychology' history, and so on. In contemporary analytic philosophy, a central concern has been to decide what should count as competent, rational argument and conditions or criteria for justifying it as such. Christopher Norris attempts, in his ambitious book *The Contest of Faculties*, to bring together Continental and analytic philosophy, and does so by bringing to bear on philosophy the insights of contemporary literary theory as developed by the deconstructive critics and theorists jacques Derrida and Paul de man. It deserves attention not only because Norris writes eminently lucid, analytic prose, but also because he exhibits considerable grasp of local complexities in both philosophy and leterary theory. In bringing elements of analytic and post-analytic philosophy together with deconstruction, and in bringing all of these together with Habermas's critical theory, Norris aims at nothing less than an ambitious alternative to the account given by Richard Rorty in *Philosophy and the Mirror of nature*. Norris therefore considers it necessary to challenge the mainlines of Rorty's neo-pragmatist thought. Rorty is for Norris a neo-pragmatist who treats deconstruction

J.C.L.A. Vol. IX : 1-2 :1986 52-8169/86/10801-0171/1,50/00

as no more than a stage "on the path to a 'post-philosophical' consensus view of knowledge and human interests" (p. 228).

Norris claims that Derrida, like analytic philosophers, does not "abandon the protocols of reasoned argument" (p. 27) but rather employs them with a logical rigor and tenacity attributable only to the very best analytic and post-analytic philosophers. Thus, for example, when he examines the interpretations of Aristotle by Hegel, Heidegger and Benveniste, Derrida shows how they fail to grasp the full logical and rhetorical complexity of Aristotle's text and are consequently content with various forms of metaphysical or dialectical resolution and closure. Derrida explores, in Norris's view, the leading problems of philosophy through the rigor of their formulation in Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, and others and shows their texts resisting the drift toward abstract concepts by their repressed, grammatological symptoms, There is rigor here, Norris, in Derrida that analytic philosophers disdain to notice and recognize, This disdain has to do with their conception of what constitutes serious and rigorous reasoning; analytic philosophy tends to move from word to regulating concept without pausing to reflect on those textual processes that impede and complicate such a move. Derrida's affinity with moments of analytic and post-analytic philosophy stems from his confrontation of those very questions of meaning, reference, and truth which preoccupy analytic philosyphers from Frega to Quine, Putnam, and Davidson.

Norris want to do the sort of things that certain philosopher trained in intellectual history are well equipped to do: he wants to use Davidson to highlight certain tension in relativism and deconstruction, MacIntryre and Putnam to reveal certain ditficulties in Rorty. This project loses focus and perspective, however, because Norris does not see that such highlighting of tension cannot be allowed to obscure real conflicts or divergences between, say, Derrida and post-analytic philosophy (Davidson, Putnam, Goodman). At the very least, he would have to show why Rorty's putting together of post-analytic philosophy and contemporary Continental thought (Heidegger, Sartre, Derrida, Gadamer, and Habermas) is less than convincing. Such a critique of Rorty cannot be done by generalized observations about postmodern bourgeois liberalism, Rorty's pragmatist defence of it, and its alleged conservatism. It would have to engage

Rorty at many specific junctures, in terms of both theoretical and metatheoretical arguments. Many recent critics and theorists are quick to label a thinker as conservative and therefore regressive for culture or as radical and therefore energizing, and Norris, for all his refreshing commitment to argument and analysis, is no exception. He seems to be unaware that some insights of Gadamer are crucial to Habermas in his current preoccupation with devloping communicative pragmatics. Similarly' Norris overlooks the fact that Habermas's critique of Gadamer has prompted the latter to incorporate certain radical components in his thought, and that these elements can in principle make possible a radical recasting of Gadamer's otherwise conservative aesthetics modelled on Renaissance classical humanism.

As I suggested above, Rorty's critique of what happens when "Habermas goes trranscendental" cannot be answered by simply citing Rorty's co-called post-modern bourgeois liberalism and his alleged inability or unwillingness to offer an ideological critique of that liberalism. The difficulties plaguing Habermas's model of universal pragmatics are real, since being grounded in a concept of the ideal speech situation it cannot allow for the posibility of falsification or refutation and lays claim to reason. Consequently, for all its ostensible attempt at grounding reason in practice Habermas's conception of reason remains very much that of *theoria* in the transcendental sense of the term. There is no question about the moral-political animus underlying Habermas's quest for a universal pragmatics, but this does not imply that a stance such as Rorty's, one that questions the univeralist appeal, or ahistorical, absolute resoning' necessarily deprives itself of a moral-political vision capable of questioning the wrongs in either postmodern bourgeois liberal or radical communist institutions. Rorty's stance isn't bereft of a noble moral-political vision just because the past and present of many liberal institutions justly deserve serious criticism, any more than the marxist stance is bereft of such a vision just because its concrete manifestations in the form of modern communist societies pervert that vision.

In rejecting all apriori limitations or hidden constraints on the invention of new vocabularies and new forms of what he calls abnormal discorse, Rorty also rejects all reification of what are only contingent social practices subject to radical change. His radical

pragmatism simply amounts to saying that there are no universally necessary rules of argument and analysis that will inevitably apply to new forms of discourse. If Rorty's observations appear to be cast in universalist vocabulary, that is indeed part of the paradox of the contemporary intellectual: rejection of universalist criteria in the form that seems to entail such a universalism. Rorty might plead here for the usefulness of recourse to metatheoretical arguments, since his criticism of Habermas, like his criticism of analytic philosophy, requires the use of reasoning central to both Habermas and analytic philosophy. For Norris to support Habermas he would have to give some substantively worked out reason to show how he can "ground" critical theory and reach some atemporal, absolute basis which can be shown to lie beneath all possible conversations. This is not the place to criticize or defend the spirit of unrestrained dialectical negativity in Rorty or Derrida. Rorty's pragmatist deconstruction may indeed be as little relevant to social-political praxis as Habermas's universal pragmatics is to real speech situations. My point here is to mark the juncture at which Norris's defence of Derrida, de Man, and deconstruction, one that fundamentally criticizes Rorty while trying to synthesize Habermas with Derrida and the general movement of thought from Quine to Putnam and Davidson with elements of Derrida interpretative practice, goes fundamentally wrong. And this happens from the outset of his project. Rorty has written scornfully of those recent literary critics and theorists who, following de Man, are talking about epistemology in literature to dignify their enterprise, just when post-empiricist analytic philosophy has largely discarded epistemology. Any defence of deconstructive criticism as practised by de Man and his followers will have to confront Rorty's claim head-on, and it will have to come to terms with the implications Rorty draws from developments in post-analytic philosophy.

Unlike Rorty who frequently juxtaposes complexes of very different ideas against one another and generates startling insights, Norris follows a rather well-worn traditional method of analysis and comparison for explicating and judging a particular thinker's work. After giving a substantial analysis and positive assessment of a theorist he goes on to offer qualifications that call into question his own explication and valuation of it. The process of qualifying works in a strict see-sawing fashion, rather than in terms of articulation fo many

subtle nuances underlying the position that separates, for example, Habermas from Derrida, or one that separates and connects, at different levels, Rorty, Habermas, and the American pragmatist tradition.

More fundamental problems of analysis and critique reveal themselves when one focuses on particular instances of his analysis. I want to illustrate some of them through a brief analysis of his discussion of de Man. Summarizing de Man's deconstructive practice, Norris says "criticism is most deluded when it thinks to have mastered the play of textual figuration and arrived at a stable, self-authenticating sense Interpretation becomes an allegory of errors, an endless reflection on its own inability to set firm limits to the textual aberrations of sense .. Deconstrution .. pursues this undoing of sense to the point where it appears a constitutive or *necessary* moment in the reading of texts. There is no escaping a process whose efforts, according to de Man are coextensive with the use of language. But this doesn't mean that deconstruction can so to speak, pull itself up by the bootstraps and theorize from a standpoint of masterly detachment. Its reading will always leave a 'margin of error, a residue of logical tension that prevents the closure of the deconstructive discourse and accounts for its narrative or allegorical mode" (pp. 41-42).

Norris then suggests that Marxism, such as that of Fredric Jameson who believes in the virtues of a totalizing metacritique, can benefit from "the extreme demystifying rigour of de Man's hermeneutics" (Norris, p. 42). Why? Beacause deconstruction resists and undermines all forms of pre emptive consensus-thinking which Norris identifies with the postmodern bourgeois liberalism of Rorty and with the conservative ethos of Gadamar's hermeneutics De Man reads/interprets texts, including political texts in the light of their rhetorical organization, one that discloses a perpetual oscillation between modes of language problematizing all hope of extracting a coherent political meaing. So, then, what would be history and politics for de Man? For de Man, as Norris approvingly quotes him, "textual allegories on this level of rhetorical complexity generate history" (p. 44). De Man's rhetoical analysis pushes to the limits of rational accountability what happens when reading a text and this rigor puts him on the

side of enlightened critique. In other words, the radicalization and textualization of the notion of history poses no problem because de Man arrives at it by following rigorously the protocols of reason and logic. As for politics, de Man's analysis dislocates received categories like 'literature' and 'politics'. His reading is 'political' in this radical sense in that the field of rhetorical tensions brought to view constitutes the space where the politics of reading enacts itself. What values political criticism might acquire would consist primarily of deconstructive analytical effort, expressing even its own liability to error and delusion.

Now, Norris mentions certain Marxist objections to deconstructive practice, and offers his explanation of de Man as the answer. The most trenchant objection is that de Man and deconstructive practice reduce politics to a mere epiphenomenon of textual signification. The summary he give of de Man's reading of Rousseau leaves, in my opinion, the objection completely unanswered. For Norris to give a properly deconstructive response, he would have to deconstruct Marxist objections through an interpretation of the texts in which they figure, for, as de Man has shown, only through the operations of figurative language can one disclose the tensions which undermine any totalizing, absolute implications underlying catagories such as "literature" and"politics". If Norris were to adhere to the deconstructive strategy of de Man or Derrida, he would have to avoid thematic reduction that constantly characterizes his accounts of Derrida and de Man. Moreover, the objections that he cites and wishes to question cannot properly be dealt with in terms of argument, since the very implications underlying the notign of argument and its claim to theoretical detachment and consecutive, logical analysis are what are brought into question by deconstruction. I would surely settle for reasoned arguments to prove that political discourse can and does indeed benefit from de Man's reading of Rousseau, though Norris provides none, and I suspect he cannot find any to drive his point home. His *a priori* commitment is at the basis of his discussion where he misperceives his assertions for reasons.

This method of summarizing deconstructive analysis and then praising it for its rigor recurrently serves the purpose of answering the objections he occasionally raises against deconstruction.

Take, for instance, another trenchant objection that Norris mentions: deconstruction simply invents "ever more ingenious textual complications to keep itself in business *and* avoids reflecting on its own political situation" (pp. 42-43). "But this is to ignore," Norris goes on to answer, "the very real and pointed implications of de Man's writing for a politics of theory inextricably tied to the problems of textual and narrative representations" (Norris, p.43). It is only resonable that we expect Norris to give an account of these "real" and "pointed" implications. Norris provides, instead, a succinct account of de Man's reading of Rousseau's *Social Contract*, which discloses the field of rheorical tensions that make it impossible for Rousseau's theory of politics to achieve the status of a science. Since, for de Man, a politics of theory is inextricably tied to problems of textual and narrtive representation, he must focus on the field of rhetorical tensions where "the politics of reading is inevitbly brought into play" (p. 44). Norris can thus conviently give an argumentative summary of the textual and rhetorical complications articulated by de Man and in effect do everything that the objection questioned, though without any of the negaiive force brought to bear on de Man's mode of analysis. The objection he had mentioned is left intact. This method of proceeding reveals the real difficulties underlying Norris's project: he is a *priori* convinced of the truth of deconstructive theory and practice, and he is also sensibly aware of the strength of the objections raised by Marxists and others. His *a priori* convicaion leads him into offering a thematic summary of de Man or Derrida as uncontestable refutations of the objections, absolving him of any need to unpack what he considers, as a real insider, the "real and pointed implications" of de Man's analysis. The upshot of my remarks here is that Norris, in spite of his deconstructive commitment, wishes to present himself as someone who is on the side of enlightened critique and reasoned argument, and is therefore forced to proceeed in a manner that departs from and contradicts deconstructive practice. Consequently, when he asserts that it is Habermas rather than Gadamar who Is on the side of deconstruction' he misconcives the whole force of Habermas's project of communicative pragmatics and its relation to social practice enlightened critique, and theoria, one that would accuse deconstruction of a reactionary politics. Gadmar's project of hermeneutics, while it draws on both the notion of critique derived from the Enlighterment

and the notions of authority and tradition derived from romanticisms is centrally founded on the notion of impossibility of ever arriving at absolute, determinaate, and final interpretations of texts. This project brings Gadamer relatively closer to the hermeneutics of suspicion and hence to deconstruction, without of course reducing it to a strategy of disclosing the field of rhetorical tensions in texts.

In de Man paradoes take the force of mystery and everything becomes questionable. De Man seems to be working out a project of reformulating literary theory and its problems, by increasing and intensifying its paradoxical content. In American deconstructive practice de Man's type of interpretation and theorizing has won acceptance as theoritical—interpretative explanations and justifications for a post-traditional, post-structuralist, differentiated academic criticism. Insofar as his mode of criticism challenges philosophy and political theory, de Man stakis for post-struturalist, specifically deconstructive, criticism the status as the gurdian of culture. The price of saving criticism as the gurdian of culture has been, however, the isolation imposed on deconstruction by its privatized, arcane discourse. Derrida has sought to avoid this outcome through his enormous historical and cultural erudition and by deploying its resources for interpretative possibilities. This is why, for all the talk about undecidability and indeterminacy of meaning, Derrida's readings rarely reduce themselves to what appears to amount to the thematics of impossibility of reading so recurrently and persistently marking de Man's interpretative efforts. Derrida's own questioning of Western metaphysics is put under some pressure, however, by a major historical development in contemporary philosophy: the disintegration of philosophical systems presupposed by Derrida's deconstructive strategies as still having philosophical authority.

Now, Rorty may well be wrong about Derrida in trying to place him within a post-philosophical culture, since Derrida's textualist analyses do indeed keep him firmly tied to the metaphysical tradition he deconstructs. For Derrida deconstruction dose not imply going beyond or replacing the tradition, as it does an uncovering of those repressed, grammatological traces which undo the concepts and norms affirmed and presumably proven by tradition. If this is so, Rorty would argue, so much the worse for Derrida who must endlessly play the role of articulating the affirmations and their

rhetorical or logical denials implicit in tradition's texts, Rorty would surely agree with Derrida and Gadamer, for all their differences, that one can't stand outside the tradition in order, as it were, to criticize it as a whole, for we do not know, except by sheer philosophical insensitivity, what it is to do that. Wholesale epistemological and methodological critiques are thus put in jeopardy, and this is consistent with the thought of the later Wittgenstein and the pragmatists such as James and Dewey. Rorty, however, would question the usefulness and importance of textualist interpretations of Derrida which forever chip away at the tradition while acknowledging the impossibility of altogether escaping it. Moreover, he would argue that it is only from the perspective of philosophers that Western philosophy from Plato through Descartes, Kant, Hegel to Heidegger has been immensely valuable for society. It is a story constructed by philosophers, and is largely irrelevant to fundamental charges and improvements that have occurred in the West during the last several centuries. Rorty connects this argument to a related one that philosophy should give up not only its role as the Queen of the sciences it claimed until recently, it must also give up its self-asphyxiating isolation if it is to rejoin the cultural dialogue currently underway in adjacent disciplines.

By arguing as he does, Norris, like many deconstructive critics and theorists, seems to be employing the old rationalist criterion that a position, method, or theory is intellectually and practically significant precisely to the extent that it is uncontestable. But he also seeks to explicate and defend deconstrucion to show that it is fully capable of employing the protocols of reason and logic and hence crucial to the task of enlightened critique. He knows, of course, that in de Man and Derrida these protocols are undermined by what Norris charactarizes as their relentlessly rigorous pursuit of the implications of these protocols. And he repeatedly, indeed repetitively, insists on the exemplary nature of the rigor with which they interpret texts and question the concepts those texts claim to articulate and establish. He never pauses to consider whether this form of relentless and seemingly logical inquiry would be taken to be rigorous analysis by those post-analytic philosphers whom he considers to some extent compatible with Derrida. Nor does he explain why such "rigor" should inevitably have nearly identical interpretative and philosophical conse-

quences everytime deconstructive critics read a text. It is here that Norris seems too committed to deconstruction to step back from it and see its unfolding in the shape of a clear and systematic analytic method, one that produces results specifiable in advance in nearly every case. Derrida's own extraodinary and sometimes extravagantly inventive strategies aren't so much a refutation of this charge as rather a confirmation of that inbuilt tendency which he seeks to obviate and overcome and which most of his followers cannot.

Neither the real or apparent similarities between deconstruction and analytic or post-analytic philosophy, nor a presumed convergence between them can overcome the long-standig mutual incomprehension between Anglo American and Continental philosophy which began with Hegel. If certain developments in analytic philosophy suggest change by either abandonment or dissolution of certain problems, deconstructive theory and practice do not advocate that recourse, but rather insist on the invitability of their continuation and their problematical status. "There is no sense." Derrida insists, "in doing without the concepts of metaphysics in order to shake metaphysics. We have no language—no syntax and no lexicon—which is foreign to this history; we can pronounce not a single destructive propsition which has not already had to slip into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest." For Derrida, then, as for Nietzsche, we cannot possibly do without language or logic; nor can we undermine the tradition by means of vocabulary that presumes to escape its asumptions and categories.

The later Wittgenstein, post-analytic philosophy, and pragmatism all assume that talk about language, logic, and context involves talk about everyday use of language and its relation to practical actions and decisions we are called upon to carry out in highly specific contexts. These things do not require dependence on classical metaphysical assumptions, nor do they require textual interpretative activity of the sort that makes the metaphysical tradition, for all its complexity and internal contradictions, inevitable for deconstructive analysis. For Wittgenstein, problems of language cannot be analyzed and risolved by a systematic analytic sceme; they require piecemeal analysis, in terms of specific contexts that bear on the meaning and use of particular words and concepts. And this is

the juncture at which deconstruction will appear profoundly alien to the later Wittgenstein and developments in post-analytic philosophy as well as pragmatism.

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