

## Derrida, Phenomenology, and Structuralism: Why American Critics Turned Deconstructionists

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In the following, I will explore some of the reasons for Jacques Derrida's considerable impact among American critics in the late 1960s and 1970s. I argue that Derrida's theories met with a 'pre-understanding' (Gadamer) among American critics in the 1960s as a consequence of the homology of American criticism (Poulet vs. Frye) and French philosophy (Husserl's French disciples vs. Lévi-Strauss). A younger generation of critics that had started in the mould of Poulet's 'phenomenology' (de Man, Miller) then turned to Derrida because they felt that subjectivist formalism was no longer appropriate for the analysis of contemporary literature.

Derrida assumed the role of a mediator between Paris and the US and helped redirect the course of critical theory in the United States. Thus he has become a mediator in at least three ways:

1. His project is situated at the center of a dialogue between the two most important strands of post-war philosophical debate in Paris: phenomenology (existentialism) and structuralism.
2. His transatlantic success has marked the beginning of an 'invasion' of Continental philosophy into American criticism.
3. Derrida served as a mediator between the two reigning critical paradigms in the United States of the late 1950s and 1960s: Poulet's 'criticism of consciousness' and Frye's 'myth analysis.'

As a consequence of Derrida's reception in the US, indigenous critical theory in America was thoroughly transformed and came more and more under the sway of Continental philosophy.

After a short introduction, this paper will proceed along three steps. The first part deals with the situation in post-war Paris. Secondly, I'll outline the state of American critical theory in the 1960s, and in a last step I'll compare both traditions to elucidate the hermeneutic conditions for Derrida's translatability.

### INTRODUCTION: DERRIDEAN DECONSTRUCTION, AMERICAN CRITICISM, AND TRANSATLANTIC EXCHANGE

The history of deconstruction in the United States is a textbook example of how a new theory fulfills the needs of an intellectual community at a time when an old paradigm is suddenly perceived as a dead end. In the 1970s, Derrida's reflections on the nature of the sign sounded the final death knell for the New Critical paradigm and triggered a revolution especially in departments of French, English, and Comparative Literature. This intellectual reversal was based on a fairly simple idea: that

meaning exclusively derives from the relations and differences between the signifiers and not from signifieds, positive terms, or transcendental truths. The totality is seen as a system of signifiers with no positive terms. Meaning comes right from *within* the system, the relations and differences of which—not some given 'essence'—produce its meaning. In Jameson's words: "The originality of Structuralism lies in its insistence on the signifier" (1971, 111). With categories like intent, consciousness, 'reality' increasingly losing their extratextual status, the text turns 'flat.' Since the text is no longer dependent on the hidden consciousness of an author, deconstructors are engaged "in something other than traditional humanistic interpretation" (Culler 1982, 20).

But why was Derrida so successful among certain American literary critics of the early 70s? After all, why did 'liberating the signifier' seem so revolutionary to them? Why did Derrida play such an important role in the reorientation of American critical theory? Given that Derrida was trained in Continental philosophy, a field in which American criticism had shown little interest, the enthusiasm among his American colleagues regarding deconstruction was by no means to be expected. Furthermore, when Derrida gave his famous paper on Lévi-Strauss (Derrida 1967c, 409-428) at Johns Hopkins in 1966 (cf. Macksey/Donato 1970), he, although having some substantial interest in French literature, was hardly familiar with English literature or American criticism. In his first English interview, which he gave as much as 20 years after the Johns Hopkins conference, he remarked that "it's difficult for me to understand what's going on (for instance, when I see a reading of Wordsworth or Coleridge). I try, but it's not really easy." And "if I had time I would be totally captured by it [English Romanticism, JA]. But, well, it's too late now [sic]" (Derrida in Salusinszky 1987, 24).

As Gadamer explains, for successful communication to be possible between writer (Derrida) and reader (his American audience) they have to share certain expectations. Without an overlap of their 'horizons' no understanding will be possible. In these horizons, both past and present horizons merge, which is a condition for the future possibilities of true hermeneutics. We understand "überlieferte Texte auf Grund von Sinnerwartungen, die aus unserem eigenen vorgängigen Sachverhältnis geschöpft sind" (Gadamer 1960, 278).

In the United States, however, most American readers of Derrida's early texts like *Of Grammatologie* were trained according to indigenous 'formalist' traditions like the 'New Criticism' or the 'Chicago School' (Leitch 1988, 24ff.), for whom Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Lévi-Strauss were not an issue. As a consequence, most American critics did not have the same literary background and intellectual tradition as Derrida. The shared anticipations of a pre-understanding (*Vorverständnis*) could not originate from a common tradition.

I want to argue that American critics were able to 'pre-understand' Derrida because the American critical tradition up to the 1960s, even though not in any way identical, was *homological* to the French field of literary and philosophical debate after the war. Since Derrida's success in America wasn't planned or systematically prepared, the homology between both discourses must be seen as an historical 'coincidence.' But still it wasn't just the will-o'-the-wisp of some American critic's state of

mind either. By comparing the French and American intellectual context of that time, we can see surprising analogies between both countries in the late 1960s. While the debates between existentialism/phenomenology and structuralism were the main focuses of the intellectual climate in post-war Paris, Georges Poulet's 'criticism of consciousness' and Northrop Frye's myth criticism dominated the American scene. Derrida's first works were structuralist critiques of Husserlian phenomenology, then in vogue in post-war Paris (cf. Merleau-Ponty, Sartre). As a consequence, Derrida addressed questions that went to the heart of all these debates in France and America.

#### THE RISE OF PHENOMENOLOGY IN FRANCE

Immediately after the war Sartre played a crucial role in the reception of phenomenology. Heidegger's considerable influence gave Sartre's philosophy an existentialist turn, but its starting point was Husserl's phenomenology. For Husserl knowledge is a matter of an *act of constituting an object*. In order to collapse the notion of subject and object, of interior and exterior, he points out the role of intentionality. The object is constituted by a "consciousness of...", i.e. there's neither a pure subject, nor a pure object. Husserl is interested in the In-between: "Allgemein gehört es zum Wesen jedes aktuellen cogito, Bewußtsein *von* etwas zu sein" (Husserl 1913, § 36).

For Sartre, Husserl's idea of the "consciousness of..." became the crucial starting point. The acting and world-constituting subject became the central theme of his philosophy. Soon leading the French existentialist movement, Sartre posited that the relation *between* subject and world was ultimately constituted by the perpetual necessity of *acts*: "Tout est en acte" (Sartre 1943, 12). Thus, the focus on the act of the (liberating) subject became one of the hallmarks of French phenomenology.

After the war, the status of the philosopher as the dominant intellectual (cf. *l'intellectuel engagé* as represented by Sartre) in public discourse was increasingly challenged by a younger generation increasingly interested in questions of sociology (Aron), psychology (Lacan), anthropology (Lévi-Strauss), and history (Foucault). In a way, phenomenology was an answer to this crisis of philosophy since, according to Lyotard, "la phénoménologie constitue [...] une introduction aux sciences humaines" (1954, 48).

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's impact has to be seen against the background of this crisis. After he severed his ties to Sartre he was soon seen as the most important spokesman of a phenomenology that shifts one's attention to the body and its relation to the world. This focus opened new strands of investigation for young philosophers interested more in social than in philosophical questions like Foucault ('bio-power') and Bourdieu ('habitus'). To this generation, Merleau-Ponty became more interesting than Sartre because philosophy no longer had a 'totalitarian' status (cf. Sartre's commitment to the PCF and his role as a 'total intellectual'). According to Merleau-Ponty, philosophy no longer constituted the ultimate source of truth and beauty but, rather, the phenomenological method entails that "tout l'effort est de retrouver ce contact naïf avec le monde pour lui donner enfin un statut philosophique" (1945, i). The world precedes philosophy, which, in turn, is nothing

but a sublimated version of the former. As a consequence, phenomenology encouraged a turn away from abstract philosophical problems and toward investigations of sociohistorical questions.

#### STRUCTURALISM IN POST-WAR FRANCE

With the publication of Lévi-Strauss' *Tristes tropiques* (1955) structuralism entered the French scene from the mid 1950s on. Sartre, the *intellectuel engagé* par excellence, was a direct or indirect target of this new movement. According to Lévi-Strauss and Dumézil, the father figures of structuralism, intellectual success should be primarily defined by "la somme de travail, sur les scrupules de rigueur et d'exactitude" (Lévi-Strauss cited in Dosse 1992, 25). Thus, initially at least, this new group of thinkers were more interested in empirical and scientific research than in direct political engagement. After the demise of existentialism "le champ [était] libre aux sciences humaines classificatoires et souvent déterministes" (Dosse 1992, 25).

The unifying idea of all structuralisms is that scientific or philosophical 'method' doesn't have recourse to manifest or latent ideas of the 'Same' or of the 'Identical' but with the differential principle that underlies all reality and meaning. This is not to say that structuralists are not interested in the whole but, rather, they believe that it is always constituted and produced by differences. The totality in itself, they would argue, would remain meaningless since it 'always already' presupposes the difference from something else. Structuralism focuses on the opposition between elements constituting a whole. Its main target are substantive, ontologically closed ideas of the object. The point is not to see the object as things but as structure, difference, signifier in short: as a difference. Accordingly, Lacan applied "la définition strictement linguistique" to the Freudian ego. The subject was no longer seen "comme une chose" but "comme signifiant" (Lacan 1971, 159).

The 'founding father' of structuralism became the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. To him, language is a system of differences with no positive terms. By distinguishing phonemes both synchronically and diachronically, Jakobson applies this idea to phonology. But it was only when the young anthropologist Lévi-Strauss returned from the United States, where he had met Jakobson, that structuralism turned into an intellectual force in France. In his *Tristes tropiques* he recounts his travel experiences in the jungle of Amazonia, which has become an unexpected bestseller. Although explicitly structuralist analyses occur only in a couple of pages, the implications of his new perspective are already well laid out. In the chapter on the *caduveo* in Brazil, Lévi-Strauss outlines the generative mechanisms underlying the production of indigenous art and social structure. He assumes that there is "sur le plan sociologique une structure analogique à celle que j'ai dégagée sur le plan stylistique [...] Il suffit de considérer le plan d'un village bororo [...] pour s'apercevoir qu'il est organisé à la façon d'un dessin caduveo" (Lévi-Strauss 1955, 226). The structuralist anthropologist analyzes the culture under consideration by using quasi-mathematical formulae of oppositions, mechanisms, and reciprocities. Wine drinking in Southern France is brought into relation with body paintings of the Bororos in Brazil—a procedure both scientific in its argument and sweeping in its

range. Since all kinds of elements of human culture are drawn into the maelstrom of structuralist analysis, Lévi-Straussian anthropology resembles a scientifically controlled *mélange* of heteroclit elements whose coherence is presumably anchored in universal cognitive structure of the human brain.

#### DERRIDA'S STRUCTURALIST CRITIQUE OF PHENOMENOLOGY

Unlike other young aspiring students of his generation (e.g. his schoolmate Bourdieu), Derrida remained faithful to philosophy, then under constant attack from the social sciences. Derrida's achievement was to introduce radical structuralism into philosophy, which enabled him to 'strike back' against both traditional versions of philosophy (Sartre) and structuralist social sciences. His allegiance to a philosophy in crisis may explain why in France Derrida, unlike in the United States, never became an intellectual superstar like Foucault. Since Derrida pushes the implications of a differential philosophy to its extreme consequences, Dosse (1992, 29ff) correctly calls deconstruction an "ultra-structuralisme." Philosophically, Derrida initiated a dialogue between structuralism and phenomenology, which was only implicit in Foucault (1969) and in many structuralist studies of the time.

Derrida's dissertation dealt with Husserl (1990 [1954]), as well as some of the early works, the introduction to his translation of Husserl's *The Origin of Geometry* (1962), "'Genèse et structure' et la phénoménologie" (1967b [1959], 229ff), and *La voix et le phénomène* (1967c). Derrida's basic point against phenomenology is that Husserl's phenomenology has a (necessary) blind spot, a latent metaphysics of presence and voice pretending to do without "ce jeu de la présence et de l'absence" (1967c, 9) which is language (writing). Derrida insists on phenomenology's written character the differentiability of which it constantly tries to suppress by having recourse to "l'idéalité de l'idéalité [qui] est le présent vivant, la présence à soi de la vie transcendente" (1967c, 5). Thus, privilege of consciousness is put into question because this ideality wants to be what it can never be: "la possibilité de la vive voix" (1967c, 14)—a voice that thinks to "affirmer un lien d'essence entre le logos et la phonè" (ibid.) denying its reiterability. However, as Derrida repeatedly says, a sign that is not repeatable will have difficulty being a sign, i.e. it won't be a sign. Therefore, Derrida suggests that "[i]l faut d'abord passer par le problème du langage" (1967c, 9).

This convincingly unfolded idea is the kernel of what Derrida calls the deconstruction of the Western tradition's metaphysics of presence. He sets out to prove that phenomenology "est le projet métaphysique lui-même" (1967c, 3). However, Derrida soon makes clear that the metaphysics of presence is not limited to the realm of phenomenological philosophy. In *La structure, le signe et le jeu* (1967b, 409ff) Derrida equally critiques Lévi-Strauss' notion of structure. Structuralist anthropology presupposes the possibility of constituting "un jeu fondé" (1967c, 410), i.e. of centering the play of differences and giving them a fixed origin (e.g. of cognitive structures) which they can, according to Derrida, never contain. So the (in fact ever decentering) center in Lévi-Strauss corresponds to the metaphysical 'living present' in Husserl. Finally, Derrida's structuralist critique has come full circle to

challenge the notion of structure itself. The scientific pretensions of structuralism are unveiled to be metaphysical since they presuppose a center which is always displaced. The result is a new appreciation of language in its own right. The task is to create a writing that is liberated from its metaphysical limitations such as presence and its quasi-synonyms like voice, *telos*, *logos*.

It was in his paper on Lévi-Strauss presented at the Johns Hopkins symposium in 1966, where Derrida's 'invasion' into American criticism began. The success of his ideas was less immediate than is generally assumed today (cf. Martin 1983, xix), but the long-term effect of French theory for American criticism soon turned out to be as significant as the 'invasion' of Germany philosophy into French intellectual life some 30 years before. After only three years, Derrida "had attracted some extraordinarily gifted students" (Lentricchia 1980, 159) in some American literature departments. The next section will shed some light on this true American 'success story.'

#### CRITICISM OF CONSCIOUSNESS AND MYTH CRITICISM IN AMERICA

Neither Husserl nor structuralism were familiar phenomena to most American critics before 1965/66, the years of the Yale colloquium and The Johns Hopkins symposium, where European thought was presented to a wider American audience. In the immediate post-New Critical era, the dominant trends in American criticism were hardly influenced by Continental philosophy. The two most important critical trends that deeply influenced American critics in the 50s were Poulet's 'criticism of consciousness' and Frye's 'myth criticism'. After teaching many years in Edinburgh, Georges Poulet, who was closely tied to the Geneva group of critics, became chair of the Romance department at Johns Hopkins. His theory focuses on the horizon of the author's consciousness and its specific forms. For this task the critic needs to achieve "la coincidence de deux consciences: celle d'un lecteur et celle d'un auteur" (Poulet 1971, 9). The critic aims at a consciousness of another consciousness, i.e. at the pure transparency of the inner world of another writer. The works of an author serve to reconstruct his/her world. The underlying assumption is that "la critique reconnaissance dans les formes et dans les objets la présence d'un sujet qui leur est antécédent" (Poulet 1971, 297).

Poulet's approach to criticism was soon loosely labeled 'phenomenological.' Though declaring that he was "faithful to the Cartesian tradition" (cit. in Miller 1991, 23), Poulet was one of the first critics to introduce Continental philosophy to America, and with it, although in a rather distorted way, Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty. J. Hillis Miller was so much captured by Poulet's method that his first three books were written in the 'phenomenological' mould. Faithful to Poulet's project, in *Charles Dickens and The World of His Novels* Miller represents the "profound harmony" of the "imaginative universe of the writer." At the center of his investigations is the "original unity of a creative mind" (Miller 1958, ix). Thus, the early Miller accepted the same division of subject and object as Poulet, which, as Miller was well aware of, was, in fact, foreign to Husserl's phenomenology (Miller 1991, 23). However, the insistence on the presence of a meaning-giving subject was

not all that distant from the "blind spot" of both Husserl and Poulet, as the Miller of 1970 (1991 [1971], 47) was later to remark under Derrida's influence.

The second major group of critics in America then were interested in universally recurring patterns of symbolic elements, a theoretical enterprise that gained a wide public after the publication of Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957). Unlike Poulet's insistence on the individual *Cogito*, the main area of Frye's interest was the description of 'myths' and 'archetypes,' defined as "associative clusters [...] which are communicable because a large number of people in a given culture happen to be familiar with them" (Frye 1957, 102). In *Anatomy of Criticism*, Frye draws together a vast array of various texts such as the Bible, William Blake, but also Frazer, Aristotle and many more. He attempts to show the recurrent emergence of certain narrative structures ('plots'), symbols, and genres. Since he is interested in transhistorically valid structures of mutual understanding, Frye compares most different sources from all over the world. His hypothesis is that "we should expect to find, at that center, a group of universal symbols common to all men, and therefore have a communicable power which is potentially unlimited" (Frye 1957, 118).

There are strong parallels between Lévi-Strauss' anthropology and Frye's myth criticism. Both Frye and Lévi-Strauss deal with a strong diversity of objects that are analyzed according to their underlying structural unity. Both assume that myths permeate every symbolic activity, their own texts including. And finally, both assume that the structural differences are fixed by a cognitive or transcultural center/origin. Given that there was no mutual influence between these two thinkers, the parallels even regarding minute terminological details are surprising, indeed.

So when Derrida came to the Johns Hopkins symposium to talk about the decentering of the center in Lévi-Strauss, most of his listeners, among them Poulet's students J. Hillis Miller and Paul de Man, while hardly familiar with French anthropology, certainly knew about Frye's myth criticism. Thus Derrida's point against Lévi-Strauss, the impossibility of centering "un langage décrivant une structure a-centrique" (Derrida 1967c, 420), must have been seen as implicitly pertinent to Frye, the "half-structuralist, half-aesthete" (Lentricchia 1980, 10). Although most critics were unaware of the predominant discussions in Europe, the situation after the New Criticism as represented by the *vague* of Frye's and Poulet's projects was to some degree homologous to that in Paris. While Derrida attempted to formulate a critique of Husserl's phenomenology and Lévi-Strauss's structuralism, many young American critics had already been exposed to Poulet's and Frye's American versions of 'phenomenology' and 'structuralism.' What Derrida tried to get across in his paper on Lévi-Strauss must have struck them as immediately relevant to their own problems. Thus, some young critics, such as de Man, Miller, Hartman, Bloom, who later were to form the so-called Yale School, were soon captured by Derrida's project.

In conclusion, it was the homologous structure of the two discourses that was crucial for the possibility of pre-understanding Derrida's argument against Lévi-Strauss and phenomenology. The reasons for Derrida's tremendous impact in America should be sought in the preceding paradigmatic trends. As Martin remarks, Derrida was able to "describe[d] the systematic disposition of concepts in this [American] tradition with such precision at the Johns Hopkins symposium that

Miller might well have felt Derrida's analysis was directed specifically at him" (Martin 1983, xxvi). Thus, for some of these critics, the translation of Derrida's deconstruction into American critical theory was a much needed theoretical input that helped them get out of the impasse that occurred between Poulet and Frye. In the 1970s, deconstruction became the core intellectual activity for the rise of High Theory and was to pave the way towards the transformation of literary criticism into Cultural Studies textualism.

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## A European Journey to the Bush: Susanna Moodie's *Roughing It in the Bush* as Travel Literature

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Susanna Moodie's *Roughing It in the Bush or Life in Canada* maintains an undisputed place at the heart of the Canadian literary imagination. Since first publication in London in 1852, Moodie's narrative of adventure and misadventure in the mid nineteenth-century wilds of Canada has continued to influence the manner in which Canadians perceive themselves and represent their self-reflection in fiction. Although undisputedly central to Canadian literature, *Roughing It* is not an unproblematic text in the Canadian canon with difficulties and ambiguities which stem from Moodie's ambivalence towards her subject matter—life in Canada—and which extend to the very generic designation of this work.

Thematically, *Roughing It* is a profoundly contradictory text, one which displays the hesitations of its author on every page. A professedly proud and willing immigrant to Canada, Moodie's descriptions of separation from England are frequently couched in terms of exile and death. A keen observer of pioneering life and pioneers, Moodie rarely identifies with her fellow immigrants and pioneers and through her choice of narrative stance seeks to distance herself from the culture and individuals described. A writer seeking acceptance as an artist depicting life in Canada, she remained a self-identified British woman and during her lifetime garnered more positive praise in England and the United States for *Roughing It* than in Canada. Added to this is the famed "generic instability" of *Roughing It*, an instability so pronounced that it has become almost customary to begin critical studies of Moodie's work with a delineation of the various generic categories *Roughing It* could possibly belong to.

Composed of 29 "sketches" describing the pioneer life of Susanna Moodie and her family as emigrant farmers from their arrival in Canada in 1832 until their departure from the backwoods to the relative civilization of Belleville in 1840, *Roughing It* clearly combines both fictional and non-fictional narrative formats in a variety of possible generic combinations. While many critics have been perplexed by the generic fluidity of Mrs. Moodie's text, few have gone as far as David Jackel in his statement that: "*Roughing It in the Bush* simply has no structure. The series of sketches that comprise it are 'unified' only by Mrs. Moodie."<sup>1</sup> Neither have many sought with John Thurston to validate the apparent absence of internal structure in Moodie's book as the necessary outcome of writing in Canada, where the "established, traditional, lyric genres would not accommodate the dialogic, amorphous, democratic, 'vulgar' Canadian experience as the Moodies found it."<sup>2</sup> Instead, most critics, in attempting to isolate the primary generic characteristic of Moodie's work, have concentrated their attention—often via comparison with another work—on