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*Bourdieu versus Deconstruction: The Social (Con)
Text of Irony and Reality*

'Power', 'class' and 'history' have become key words for the interpretation of literature. After two decades of deconstructive criticism the social has invaded the text. However, those who are the principal experts on how to deal with texts, i.e. literary critics, are not necessarily the principal experts on sociopolitical contexts. Pierre Bourdieu recently gave new impulses by focusing on the social conditions of literary production. In the following I shall discuss the question of why deconstructionist criticism has turned towards the social and what Bourdieu may contribute to the problem of text and reality.

Why deconstruction was such a liberating experience...

The history of Derrida's reception in the United States is a textbook example of how a theory fulfils the needs of an intellectual community at a time when an old paradigm is suddenly perceived as a dead end. In the 1970s, his reflections on the nature of the sign sounded the death knell for the New Critical paradigm and triggered a revolution, especially in departments of English, French and Comparative Literature. This intellectual reversal was based on a fairly simple idea: that meaning derives exclusively from the relations and differences between the signifiers, and not from signifieds, positive terms, or transcendental truths. Meaning comes from *within* the system, produced by internal relations and differences, not by some given 'essence'. In Jameson's words: 'The originality of Structuralism lies in its insistence on the signifier.'¹ The text turns 'flat'.

Derrida pits the referential aspect of the sign against the differential production of its meaning, with the idea of difference winning uncontestedly. Both ideas—the privileged nature of the signified over the signifier and the arbitrary character of the signifier's meaning—clearly

1. Fredric Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 111.

existed in Saussure's structuralist linguistics. Derrida clarifies this apparent contradiction in Saussure by showing that the logocentrist layer of Saussure's theory (the privilege of the signified) is 'in contradiction to Saussure's scientific project'² and should be done away with. Since the meaning of a signifier is but the product of the difference from what it is not, the signified cannot claim any transcendental self-contained truth. The privilege of the signified over the signifier turns out to be artificial; truth, reality, authorship, in short: all philosophy is *first and foremost* written.

Many American critics of the 1970s found this an appealing idea since they no longer had to indulge in 'the adulation of the author'.³ Barthes's earlier programmatic statement of the 'death of the author' expressed their increasing doubts about the privileged role of the Cartesian subject. The critique of concepts such as 'author', 'intent' and 'consciousness' was accompanied by a rigorous reconceptualization of the referential-transcendental reality the text had (supposedly) referred to. Thus the end of the humanist project dovetailed with the crisis of realism.⁴

The text becomes a battlefield where the referents ('reality') and the rhetorical means of their 'expression' ('tropes', 'style', 'writing') are in a constant struggle. Derrida's rigorous treatment of classical philosophical texts highlights this 'tension between rhetoric and logic, between what it [the text] manifestly *means to say* and what it is nonetheless *constrained to mean*'.⁵

For some American critics, Derrida's formula became the rationale to stop short of what happens beyond the pages of the books. 'Free play' deconstruction was hardly occupied with thorough analyses of the history and the social context of the literary text. Geoffrey Hartman, for instance, pleaded for entering 'wholeheartedly...into the dance of meaning'.⁶ Yet to others 'il n'y a pas de hors-texte' came to mean something else. Marxist critics, in particular, have taken up deconstruction as 'an ultimately *political practice*' because it sets out 'to dismantle the logic by which a particular system of political structures and social institutions

2. Jacques Derrida, *Positions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981 [1974]), p. 52.

3. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Translator's Preface', in Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976 [1967]), p. lxxiv.

4. Cf. Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (Paris: Seuil, 1970).

5. Christopher Norris, *Derrida* (London: Fontana, 1987), p. 19.

6. Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1982), p. 92.

maintains its force'.⁷ For this reason, a certain number of Marxists, feminists and other politically minded theorists have eagerly taken up deconstruction as a fundamental ideology critique. In all these cases, the structuralist language model is taken to break down the strict distinction between the inside ('books') and the outside ('reality'). In this sense, 'il n'y a pas de hors-texte' does not deny the existence of a reality beyond a book but, rather, postulates that reality, too, is (structured like) a sign: 'The system of the sign has no outside.'⁸ The 'outside' becomes an 'inside', thus explicitly going beyond the small world of an academic library at Yale or Columbia and, later, beyond disciplinary boundaries.

What unified 'free play' and post-Marxist deconstruction was a model according to which the signifier is no longer dependent on the signified. For post-Marxists as well as for 'free play' deconstructionists, the 'outside' is no longer a substantive self-contained exteriority. They are engaged 'in something other than traditional humanistic interpretation'.⁹ In both cases, the totality is seen as a system of signifiers with no positive terms: '[T]he priority of the language model is maintained'.¹⁰

Deconstruction helped liberate one type of author—literary critics—from another type of author—the 'speaking subject' literary critics were writing about (poets and writers). In fact, deconstruction has turned out to be a smart move to justify the claim that the writing of literary critics is no less real or relevant than the texts to be 'interpreted'. The 'real' meaning is no less a matter of the critics' books than it is of the authors' books or even of 'reality' itself.¹¹

Positing the almighty critic has had the significant side effect that she or he managed to escape a society increasingly dominated by neo-conservative, fundamentalist or even reactionary tendencies. In the 1980s, American critics in the deconstructionist mould were no longer bound by the constraints imposed by other 'speaking subjects', by any universal truths, or, in short, by the world beyond their intellectual community. Deconstructionists began to defend 'the critic's freedom to adopt a charged and "answerable" style of his own in order to counter the weight of received opinion'.¹²

7. Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: Basil Blackwell, 1983), p. 128.

8. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 234.

9. Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), p. 20.

10. Jameson, *Prison-House*, p. 112.

11. Cf. especially Jacques Derrida, *Glas. Que reste-t-il du savoir absolu?* (2 vols.; Paris: Denoël/Gonthier, 1974).

12. Norris, *Deconstruction*, p. 16.

This increasing distance from the values of 'common sense' correlated with deconstruction's institutionalization and gaining of autonomy within the academic field. Since deconstruction, especially in the de Manian version, claimed to be a highly rigorous, technical and reproducible operation, it needed teaching and discipleship. So not only does deconstruction guarantee the intellectual autonomy of the critic from right-wing 'family values', gradually it has become an expression of a field with its own logic and syllabus: 'any determination of the political function of the [deconstructionist] literary critic, either from the left or from the right, is incompatible with the *institutional autonomy of criticism*'.¹³

Controlling the texts to be deconstructed rather than being controlled by these texts, the new Derridean critic suddenly realized that the canon was dominated by a 'metaphysics of presence' and that even the canon itself might be an ideology crying out for deconstruction. Thus, towards the late 1980s, the astonished critic finds himself or herself in a whole society waiting to be deconstructed. It was no longer a problem of a couple of great books. As Guillory remarks, 'the thematization of the political always falls short of satisfying political demand just by being confined to the literary syllabus'.¹⁴ Western tradition and society needed to be addressed in their own right.

...and why it finally went downhill

Asserting the self-contained character of the text had a funny consequence: by rejecting the privilege of the transcendental signified, the autonomy claimed by the Derridean vanguard critics—both on the post-Marxist and 'on the wild side' deconstructionists—led them to recognize that the very world, and yes, society, was metaphysical to its roots. From 'there is nothing outside the text' to 'where's the political?'¹⁵

As early as the mid-1980s Derrida recognized the implications of a 'something' beyond the classical philosophers he had been busy deconstructing. As in the case of de Man, Derrida is aware of deconstruction's institutional ramifications:

the necessity of deconstruction...did not primarily concern philosophical contents, themes or theses, philosophemes, poems, theologemes, ideologemes, but, above all and inseparably, signifying frames, institutional

13. John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 247.

14. Guillory, *Cultural Capital*, p. 237.

15. Richard Beardsworth, *Derrida and the Political* (London: Routledge, 1996).

structures, pedagogical norms or rhetorics, the possibility of law, of authority, of evaluation of representation in its own market.¹⁶

The autonomous position of the intellectual must be maintained in order to preserve his or her freedom from the encroachments of state, markets and other external forces.

Derrida's reflections on the relation of intellectual and institution are accompanied by a shift towards overtly political topics. This 'political turn' of deconstruction takes place in Derrida's discussions of repressed others (e.g. the immigrant), violence, the question of human rights and so forth. From the early 1990s on, Derrida's books are considerably preoccupied with these problems¹⁷ but it seems unlikely that the impact will be similar to that of *Of Grammatology*.

The turn towards the political has finally marked the beginning crisis of deconstruction. A basic tenet of deconstruction was that despite Nietzsche's, Heidegger's and perhaps even Derrida's powerful efforts to go beyond metaphysics 'the destruction of metaphysics remains within metaphysics'.¹⁸ In the long run, sticking to the text means remaining within the gloomy hopeless state called metaphysics without ever going beyond. But at a time when critics become more and more engaged in social and political problems, saying 'it's the text!' indeed may appear a little defensive. Accordingly, critics have recognized an 'apparent detachment of much theory from overtly political questions'.¹⁹ The text becomes too restraining a category, a 'prison house of language' (Jameson) that, ultimately, can only be undone by social practice: finally the social 'something' cries out for more thorough treatment. Since the early 1990s, many literary critics who started out as 'new New Criticism' deconstructionists have become feminist, post-Marxist, or New Historicist critics working on the problems of social change, inequality and repression. The ironic consequence of 'deconstruction as industry' was that the political implications of deconstruction led to its own deconstruction. To an increasing number of critics, a paradigm once again looks like a dead end: after the 'linguistic turn' (Rorty) the 'political turn'.

16. Jacques Derrida, *Du Droit à la philosophie* (Paris: Galilée, 1990), p. 452. All translations from the French original are mine.

17. For instance, Jacques Derrida, *Force de Loi. Le 'fondement mystique de l'autorité'* (Paris: Galilée, 1994) and *idem, Le Droit à la philosophie du point de vue cosmopolitique* (Paris: Verdier, 1997).

18. Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 48.

19. Guillory, *Cultural Capital*, p. 176.

The theory of Pierre Bourdieu has lately been received as one of the most promising approaches for dealing with the social origins of symbolic power.²⁰ A reading of Flaubert's *L'Education sentimentale* will serve to introduce his general approach.

Flaubert's ironical realism

In *Les Règles de l'art*,²¹ Bourdieu takes Flaubert's *L'Education sentimentale*²² as an example to analyse the social context and history of late nineteenth-century French literary production.

L'Education sentimentale, like *Madame Bovary*, caused a great deal of controversy, even hostility, among Flaubert's contemporaries. The plot is centered around Frédéric, a young *bobème* prosperous enough to live off his fortune in Paris in the time before and after the revolution of 1848. The most characteristic feature of the novel's figures is their mediocrity; the distinctive feature of the plot is its slowness. Frédéric never ceases to court one or two mistresses and, because of his idleness, experiences a gradual decline of his material situation. He is torn between the artistic and the bourgeois world and succeeds in neither of them. The tension that he epitomizes between the artistic-intellectual *bobème* and the *grand monde* remains unresolved.

What is striking is Flaubert's minute and sophisticated description of this long non-event. He gives an extremely accurate representation of the time and its figures, who were taken from 'real life'. The description of seemingly minor details, such as the way of speaking, background events of daily and social life, the fashions and customs of the time, was preceded by an accumulation of notes and papers, interviews and thorough research. In terms of his obsession with reality, Flaubert is a full-blown realist.

The formal aspect of the Flaubertian novel, its style, is perhaps what it is most famous for and the result of an unusual amount of energy on Flaubert's part. The Flaubertian style is strikingly clear and precise, economically producing the desired effects. The concise and skilful articulation of his observations, carefully placed between the actually spoken words of the figures, gives a rich and lively touch to the text. Through these interventions, Flaubert skilfully evokes powerful overtones, which permit the impression of 'actually being there'. This 'effect

20. Cf. Guillory, *Cultural Capital*.

21. Pierre Bourdieu, *Les Règles de l'art. Genèse et structure du champ littéraire* (Paris: Seuil, 1992).

22. Gustave Flaubert, *L'Education sentimentale* (Paris: Garnier, 1965 [1869]).

of the real' (Barthes) passes through these brief remarks; they seem to move the text close to the world presented.

Yet, although presenting reality as faithfully as possible, the author is never totally absent. This demi-presence can be seen in Flaubert's frequent use of the *style indirect libre*. The distinction between spoken truth and written commentary breaks down; the author invades the words of his figures. The spoken words begin to oscillate between voice and writing. A distance opens up between the words and the actual situation where they were uttered. The effect of this technique is irony.

Irony pervades Flaubert's text everywhere. It is this strange distancing opening up between the spoken words and the author's remarks, between reality and style, that creates irony. Since Flaubert is neither positively nor negatively attached to the universe, he depicts his attitude as always being that of a critical observer who describes every detail he perceives without ever emotionally committing himself to this world. Flaubert's irony results from his unresolved position in a social universe determined by conflicts over symbolic and economic capital.

Bourdieu's analysis of the social conditions of literary production

Bourdieu's point is that the reasons for Flaubert's style and the success it met with are not to be sought in the personal brilliance of the author but, instead, in the conditions of intellectual production at that time. Bourdieu gives historical explanations of the battles and relations dominating and making possible the field of art and literature. This field is structured according to the composition and volume of capital the actors in the field dispose of. There is always a (real or potential) conflict between the unequal participants of the game. In late-nineteenth-century France, for instance, there were, on the one hand, those who, by their institutional position (for instance in the Académie française or the French state), by their prestige, and/or by their commercial success were the most powerful and accomplished in producing and reproducing the rules of the literary 'game'. On the other hand, there was an increasing reservoir of mostly obscure and young aspiring writers who, because of their lack of one or several forms of capital, never succeeded in attaining the recognition and success they were striving for. Due to improved educational opportunities for large parts of the population, an increasing number of young intellectuals came to Paris trying to make their living as writers or artists. In this increasingly competitive situation high institutional positions, broad popularity or sweeping commercial successes were no longer sufficient to guarantee the writer's recognition

by other players of the 'game'. At some point in the 1860s and 1870s the redefinition of the intellectual's role brought about the restricted mode of cultural production, where commercial success was low but the profit of cultural capital high. This structural change in the field of literary production went hand in hand with the necessity of the artist's total devotion to a pure, detached art for art's sake. No longer did the writers consider themselves as the carriers of a moral message. Instead, they soon defined writing as '*L'art pour l'art*', that is, as independent of any moral meaning or social commitment (cf. Baudelaire).

Flaubert's ironical realism is one of the first crucial expressions of this restricted mode of production. A consequence of his social background, Flaubert's position was highly privileged in terms of both economic and cultural capital. This 'double bind' of his real social position is the reason for the apparent indifference expressed in his novels. The irony of his style is the sublime expression of his position in between the economic and the intellectual. His objectively independent position enabled him to observe the social milieu he lived in with distance and aloofness, an attitude that helped initiate a revolution in the field of literary production of his time.

Flaubert's effect of the real versus Bourdieu's reality

Bourdieu is both fascinated by and dismissive of Flaubert's ironical realism. The crucial concept with which he analyses Flaubert is the underlying structures and dispositions guiding our interpretation: our habitus. According to Bourdieu, for an author to be understood by a reader it is necessary that both believe that the 'game' played in the field—be it in the ordinary world, in literature or in science—is worth it, has to be taken seriously by the actors. To support this argument, Bourdieu cites the example of Durkheim's 'logical conformism',²³ the basic agreement between the actors on the fundamental schemes of perception, without which there would be no meaning. It is the fundamental belief of the participants in the 'games of society' in the reality of the game, 'a fundamental *illusio*, a belief in the reality of the world'²⁴ which is the origin of all meaning. Without such a fundamental socialization, the 'incorporation of shared structures' and the basic condition for the production of meaning would be missing.

Flaubert has an excellent command of the underlying incorporated structures of the shared common sense. He skilfully plays with the

23. Bourdieu, *Règles*, p. 452.

24. Bourdieu, *Règles*, p. 456.

reader's anticipations, which gives his fiction its realistic touch. Reader and writer are united by a 'consensus on the sense of the world'.²⁵ This 'common sense', an incorporated structure like the habitus, is what generates certain expectations within the reader which are consciously created by Flaubert. When he uses familiar stereotypes, for instance, the reader imagines himself or herself to be on familiar territory, but this assumption is soon overturned. It is this sobering effect which creates Flaubert's irony. This half-serious play is what makes his fiction 'more real than what is immediately given to the senses'.²⁶ And it is this fundamental sobriety, irony and detachment from the ordinary games of social life which made Flaubert's work scandalous for his contemporaries and appealing for Bourdieu.

Yet, in the case of Flaubert, Bourdieu never speaks of reality but always of *le réel* (the real), or the effect of the real. The real is the reality of the fictional that has recourse to concrete histories and singular events. Since the functioning of the 'effect of the real' depends on the meaning-generating structure of shared schemes of perception, the fictional representation of reality is ultimately limited by the common sense: 'This suggestive, allusive, elliptical form is what makes...the literary text deliver the structure, but by covering and stealing it from sight.'²⁷

Thus Bourdieu makes a very clear distinction between fiction and a scientific representation of reality. To analyse the Reality of the sociologist, it is necessary to be scientific, to present things objectively, and not to have recourse to the singular event and a real that is just the effect of latent structures of the common sense. Literature, by contrast, is always caught in the 'games' that only work because they are taken seriously by the actors. For a statement to be scientific, reality has to be represented by representative samples that 'exemplify very concretely, like the piece of a tissue, the whole part'.²⁸ Reality has to be measured, quantified and objectified. Ultimately, only the sociologist is able to perform this task and 'pronounce the things as they are, without euphemisms, without demanding to be taken seriously'.²⁹

Bourdieu wants to render 'the things as they are' and 'without demanding to be taken seriously' since a scientific representation of Reality does not need to have recourse to the 'games of society', to a fundamental belief, or to the common sense. But if meaning is

25. Bourdieu, *Règles*, p. 457.

26. Bourdieu, *Règles*, p. 457.

27. Bourdieu, *Règles*, p. 458.

28. Bourdieu, *Règles*, p. 458.

29. Bourdieu, *Règles*, p. 458.

constituted by the shared expectations of the 'players', how would Bourdieu be able to give an account of Reality that would not need to have recourse to a fundamental 'belief'? How would the author—no matter whether scientific or literary—sidestep the shared structures of common perception and immediately grasp Reality as such?

Meaningless reality?

It may be true that Bourdieu cannot claim a personal rendez-vous with Reality but at least he is confidently waiting for a date to be fixed. A reading 'taking seriously' his actual writing reveals that Reality elegantly does without 'demanding to be taken seriously' by the 'participants of the game'. Consequently, the high priest of Reality—the sociologist—must never allow the holy Truth to enter the play of the written. Ironically, this orthodoxy has been called into question by a Jesuit, Michel de Certeau, who considers Bourdieu's theory—in stark contrast to his actual empirical research—'mystical', 'aggressive' and a 'fetish' because of its 'totalizing' tendency.³⁰ The contradiction between subtle analysis and 'theory' seems equally at work in the discussion of Flaubert. Bourdieu's theory claims that Reality, unlike 'the effect of the real', comes without the trace of the written: 'things as they are'. It seems that Culler's remark on the problems of philosophy holds equally true for Bourdieu's theory: 'Philosophers write, but they do not think that philosophy ought to be writing.'³¹ This paradox is the unacknowledged irony of Bourdieu's admirable analysis of late-nineteenth-century French literature. What Bourdieu's theory manifestly means to say is countered by what he is nevertheless forced to say: that there are no referential contents without textual form. Reality cannot but be represented through writing: a reality (at least with a small 'r') that is always written.

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30. Michel de Certeau, *L'Invention du quotidien. I. Arts de faire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), pp. 94, 96.

31. Culler, *On Deconstruction*, p. 89.

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Performance Theory, Practice and the Intrusion of the Real

The relationship between theatrical theory and practice is being reconfigured by the encroachment of the 'real', with consequences for the form of both fields, as well as the form of performance itself. Any consideration of this area of disciplinary reconstruction will inevitably involve an attempt to define the 'real', while the performances under consideration often fall outwith the remit of academic assessment, and, in breaking the containing physical boundary of the performer's skin, challenge traditional stage conventions and notions of 'good taste'.

Performance theory is nothing new. Theatre practice has always been shadowed by an echolalia of comment and criticism, where the immediacy of enactment is haunted by its very own ineluctable Other. Aristotle's *Poetics* and Plato's *Republic* contain moments of textual prescription, and works such as Artaud's *The Theatre and its Double* demonstrate the way in which theory can fuel performance as well as shadow it.¹ Artaud's inability to put his theoretical construct, 'the impossible theatre', into practice, generated innumerable future attempts.

Furthermore, the close relationship between the academy and many performers provides a space for the entry of the 'non-real' of theory into concrete practice. The work of Orlan, a French performance artist, is the perfect example of this tendency. She is a professor at the College of Art in Dijon, and her choreographed explorations of the field of radical cosmetic surgery often include quotations from philosophers and psychoanalysts (including Lacan and Artaud) which she reads aloud while undergoing surgery: art, life and the commentary upon it all in one.

This is symptomatic of the way in which performance theory has recently begun to widen its scope. It no longer limits its enquiries to the straightforwardly performative, but stretches its interests to include the

1. Aristotle, *The Poetics* (ed. and trans. S. Halliwell; Cambridge, MA, 1995); Plato, *Republic* (trans. R. Waterfield; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); A. Artaud, *The Theatre and its Double* (London: Calder Publications, 1993).