

Refracting the Enlightenment: An Exploration and Critique of Postmodernism

Whitney Strub

Faculty Sponsor: David Miller, Department of Philosophy

ABSTRACT

Archimedes sought a point on which he could stand to move the world, thereby setting a precedent for legions of Western philosophers, whose history is marked by metaphysical assumptions exogenous to the systems built around them. This problem has been forcefully and most fully examined by Jacques Derrida and his poststructuralism. Some critics, however, allege postmodernism has deviated from Derrida's initial project.

1. Archimedes Agonistes

Your father will be obeyed. He is willing to hope you to be all obedience, and would prevent any incitements to refractoriness

—Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa* (1747)

How happy is he who is not able to write, and is thereby prevented from signing the death warrants of men

—Bernal Diaz, *The True History of the Conquest of New Spain* (1568)

Proposition VI: To every w -consistent recursive class c of formulae there correspond recursive class-signs r , such that neither $v \text{ Gen } r$ nor $\text{Neg}(v \text{ Gen } r)$ belongs to $\text{Flg}(c)$ (where v is the free variable of r)

—Kurt Godel, "On Formally Undecidable Propositions of Principia Mathematica and Related Systems" (1931)

It's whispered that soon, if we all call the tune, the Piper will lead us to Reason

—Led Zeppelin, "Stairway to Heaven" (1971)

At the *arche* of Western philosophy stands, appropriately enough, Archimedes. Chronologically posterior to Plato and Aristotle, the mathematician nonetheless elucidated the driving maxim of two and a half millennia of philosophical discourse with more clarity and straightforwardness than any thinker before or since. Give me a point to stand on and a fulcrum long enough, he said (or is reputed to have said, though if the story is apocryphal it changes nothing), and I will move the world.

Thus reads the entire history of philosophy: with a variety of levers ranging from Reason to Logic to Sense Perception to Dialectic, each and every philosopher has tried to find that single fixed, absolute point with which he (and it has been *he*, with exceptions few and far between from Hypatia to Luce Irigaray, which may explain the fascination with the lever) can effectively move the world.

To summarize and review: once philosophy crawled out of the murky mists of the *mythos* with the flourishing of Athens, it quickly crystallized into a rule-bound pursuit guided by the dictates of the *logos*, whose poetic relevance for Heraclitus and Empedocles failed to survive the birth of the city-state. By the time of Plato, *logos* basically meant *logic*, which was the technique his favorite gadfly Socrates used to exclude whatever arguments could not mount a reasoned, logically-coherent defense of their foundations. Blame, if it need be placed, need not fall on this duo, however; both Socrates and Plato discreetly implied a fondness for the eloquence of the old *logos* in their manner of speaking and writing, but the close inspection of all discourse by sophists like Gorgias and Protagoras gave them little choice but to shape an impenetrable method of aggressive inquiry.

And so, the fundamental model for Western philosophy may have developed out of a reluctant response to nagging sophists. But it stuck. Aristotle further refined this method, with his carefully organized, conceptually stratified descriptions of just about everything. Arguably, he may have been more of a data-collector than a visionary, but the thought-systems Aristotle expressed sought the Archimedean point everywhere. In drama, the point appears as the well-known unities of setting, character, and time. In metaphysics (though many contest this, it must be noted), prime matter provides the point of departure.

Most significantly for the future, in Aristotle's cosmology, the axiom that nothing comes from nothing set the stage for the longest-lasting absolute point in Western History, the Christian God. For medieval thinkers, God stood as the fixed center of reference for all reality, and the blinding light of Christian devotion radiated enough heat to melt the distinction between philosophy and theology, though it somehow never tamed the papal tumescence that resulted in a slew of "nephews" marauding around the medieval Vatican.

By the early Renaissance, the enclosure movement and technological developments had sent the feudal serfs flocking to new urban settings, and with the mobilized exchange of goods came the exchange of ideas. Philosophy freed itself from its theological fetters, at least to an extent, but the influence of Archimedes remained pervasive. Locke and Hobbes stood together on substance, while the Godpoint held steady for thinkers like Berkeley. Descartes, squeezing his ball of wax as he gave birth to a new mindset of ego-subjectivity, merrily noted his debt to the Greek mathematician. Archimedes, he wrote, "asked only for a point which was fixed and assured. So also, I shall have the right to entertain high hopes, if I am fortunate enough to find only one thing which is certain and indubitable."¹

For a fleeting moment, David Hume broke loose from Archimedes and stood without a point. His chapter "Of personal identity" in *A Treatise of Human Nature* rejected the Cartesian self as "nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement."² No Pre-Socratic rebirth of the *logos* issued forth from Hume's bold declaration, however. The philosopher himself beat a hasty retreat, afraid of the consequences his rejection implied, and the infamy of his no-self looms so large in the traditional history of thought that few ever read deeply enough into the shadows to reach the appendix of Hume's hefty tome, where he confesses, "upon a more strict review of the section concerning *personal identity*, I find myself involv'd in such a labyrinth, that . . . I neither know how to correct my former opinions, nor how to render them consistent."³ Trading a walk-on part in the war for a lead role in the cage, Hume resigned himself to another victory for Archimedes.

For Kant and Hegel, the trend continued unabated, with the transcendental unity of apperception and Absolute Spirit assuming central standing, respectively. Not until Nietzsche was a serious challenge thrown at tradition; while every previous point was in some way synony-

mous with the idea of an absolute Truth, Zarathustra's follower scoffed in a notebook, "That there should be a 'truth' which one could somehow approach!"⁷⁴ For Nietzsche, the entire history of Western philosophy represented a shrieking, hysterical attempt to confine the Dionysian flow of Becoming into Apollonian molds of static Being. This hearkening back to the flowing thought of Heraclitus represented a challenge to traditional, fixed modes of thought. But while Nietzsche could muster up the *pyr* of Heraclitus in his devastating critiques of society and philosophy, his replacement was too pale and weak to bear his own torch. The eternal recurrence and the will to power became Nietzsche's central motifs, and as misunderstood as they have been, neither offers much of a replacement to former thought. Recurrence, supposedly based on then-current physics, even failed to understand thermodynamics, which at the time predicted a heat death for the universe.

But tradition had little chance to rest on the laurels of its canonical library. Edmund Husserl battled upstream all the way to the Cartesian point of the ego, but he reached an impasse. After numerous struggles, he finally ended his philosophical quest not by displacing the ego-point, but simply by pivoting to a new angle still stemming from it. His tradition of phenomenology, taken up by Martin Heidegger, seemed poised to topple metaphysics, but its results have never been agreed on, even among phenomenologists.

It is from the turbulence of the debate over Heidegger, however, that a new stage of thinking emerged. Jacques Derrida, who led the movement, finally saw the point of Archimedes penciled into the history of Western philosophy, and he brought an eraser where his predecessors had only spilled ink.

Derrida called his thought poststructuralism. He titled it, but marking its actual origin is impossible, since according to Derrida it has gone on as long as thought, but unrecognized. Heidegger was no alien to poststructuralism, and his *destruktion* of metaphysics inspired Derrida's method of deconstruction, which shares most everything but the violent name with Heidegger's project. Levinas, Bataille, Merleau-Ponty, and Nietzsche also played formidable roles in the shaping of Derrida's thought, but none of them outraged the nested Archimedean sentiments of the philosophical community like Derrida. The fixed point held steady well into the 1950s. But quoth this *philosophe*, nevermore.

Though his incredible quantity of texts can verge toward the indecipherable, Derrida's general thrust is quite simple: every metaphysical system (by which he means more than merely philosophy—also linguistics, history, anthropology, etc.) is structured around a center which is both inside and outside the text of the system. That is, using God as an example, God is inside the text of Christian metaphysics to the extent that he sanctions certain directions of thought, such as ethics or the origin of the universe. But at the same time, God stands outside metaphysics, above and beyond the capacity of any thought or discourse trying to enclose him in its understanding, thus engendering the very system within which he exists.

Using the terminology of linguistics, the field modernized by Ferdinand de Saussure, Derrida calls God and his Archimedean equivalents 'transcendental signifieds,' which disrupt the balance of semiotic sign-systems. A sign consists of a signified and a signifier, i.e., a bovine grazing and the word "cow." A basic premise of Saussurian linguistics is that each signified has a signifier, which is a necessary result of the long-standing Western thought, running from Parmenides, by way of Hegel, to Heidegger, that *thought* and *being* are the same ("to auto," Parmenides said, the etymological basis for 'tautology').

Transcendental signifieds are literally unthinkable, outside the range of signification, but their existence lies at the center of any metaphysical system. How to reconcile this with the traditional Western idea of a fully transparent language, in which every word denotes a

specific object, wonders Derrida? His answer: the two cannot be reconciled, but both are integral to the functioning of metaphysics. Still, hope prevails; “That the evaded question is properly metaphysical might be understood otherwise.” It might be, but it *has not been*. Derrida identifies an amazing silence on this problem since the dawning of Western civilization, and it is the silence, properly speaking, not the problem itself, which sets deconstruction in motion. “What is metaphysical,” Derrida continues, “is perhaps less the evaded *question* than the *evaded* question.”⁵⁵ Evaded questions abound among the ranks of philosophers, but perhaps the finest example comes from literature; as Robinson Crusoe attempts to indoctrinate Friday into the Christian belief system, the “boy” asks uncomfortable questions about God’s inability to eliminate the Devil. In the context of Derrida, Crusoe’s response carries great meaning: “I pretended not to hear him . . . I therefore diverted the present discourse.”⁵⁶

Deconstruction, then, functions as a sort of philosophical titration in which a metaphysical system reveals the transcendental signified at its origin, an unconcealment which renders the system null and void unless one is willing to accept some basic axioms which can never be justified in the terms of the system. The parallel to Godel’s Incompleteness Theorem is inevitable; in a sense, Derrida’s entire project amounts to a mere philosophical application of Godel’s three-decades-earlier deconstruction of mathematical and logical systems.

In his early texts Derrida uses the word ‘deconstruction’ only in a strict way. Its first appearance was in *Speech and Phenomena*, in which Derrida conceived of deconstruction in a limited sense, exemplified by his rigorous insistence on holding Husserl to his own standards in the *Logical Investigations*, which reveals the distinction between indication and expression to rely on outside metaphysical help. Later, somewhat against the will of Derrida, though his own standards of deconstruction also evolved, the term broadened its scope. To avoid lengthy digressions, I will define deconstruction for now as the technique of threatening the security of Archimedean transcendental signifieds hidden inside metaphysical fortresses. By observing the transcendental signified resting both inside and outside the structure of metaphysics, deconstruction reveals all dichotomies of binary oppositions to participate in pre-formulated constructions of reality, or a text. In short, it finds meta-metaphysics, or ‘The Writing Before the Letter.’

At the end of a deconstruction, an *aporia* is reached. *Aporias* are logical paradoxes or contradictions (like the one earlier examined, about God), where the structure of a text or system breaks down. Epimenides the Cretan delivered a famous *aporia* when he said, “all Cretans are liars,” though for about twenty years in the early twentieth century Bertrand Russell claimed to have resolved this with set theory. Perhaps the most famous Western *aporias* (Eastern thought has always celebrated *aporias*, offering them as koans in Zen Buddhism instead of concealing them, which may be why deconstruction works best on the history of Western Metaphysics— deconstructing Eastern philosophy amounts to a redundancy) come from the Eleatic philosopher Zeno, whose paradoxes of motion have baffled boundless numbers of students. Zeno’s paradoxes also apply to time (if time is a series of discrete instants, how does it progress, since each present ‘now’ has zero duration? But if time flows continuously, how can there be a present instant?), and Aristotle addresses them at the opening of his discussion of time in his *Physics*. But the *aporia*, as always, is evaded and buried at the center of Aristotle’s examination of time, after which “all of metaphysics, so to speak, has been . . . paralyzed in the *aporia* of the exoteric discourse of *Physics* IV.”⁵⁷

It must be remembered, deconstruction works in a strange way; what often gets called deconstruction is really the *recognition* of the self-deconstruction all texts steeped in metaphysics undergo (and all written texts, as well as those spoken in a language, belong to

metaphysics). Many texts apply a strategy of marginalization, by conceding the inherent aporia at their center, but tossing it off nonchalantly, or in the footnotes. Thus Berkeley, as he attempts to weave his Idealism with the thread of God, admits, “That I have any such idea answering the word unity, I do not find,”⁸ but goes on to use precisely the unity of God as the center which prevents Idealism from slipping into solipsism.

So far, Derrida appears to have displaced Archimedes. But so did Nietzsche, until he hit the stumbling block that drove him into the mountains for a solitude which helped his poetry, but not his philosophy. That block, quite simply, is the almost ineffable question, what next? Without an Archimedean point of reference, meaning itself gives way. Nihilism enters the scene as the obvious contender for replacement. Nietzsche got that far. Derrida tries to go further.

Modernity, writes Christopher Norris, is “more or less synonymous with the advance of an instrumental reason that subjugates everything— nature, social existence, art, philosophy, language— to its own homogenising drive,”⁹ a criticism Derrida agrees with. This sets up the poststructuralist, or postmodern, agenda, which seeks to reclaim the various ideas, approaches, people, and histories excluded by the West. “An opposition of metaphysical concepts,” Derrida explains, “is never the face-to-face of two terms, but a hierarchy and an order of subordination. Deconstruction . . . must, by means of a double gesture, a double science, a double writing, practice an *overturning* of the classical opposition *and* a general *displacement* of the system.”¹⁰ The first block is avoided; Derrida rejects the foundations of meaning, but without falling prey to the binary opposition of teleology vs. nihilism in the process. In rejecting Archimedes, he refuses to assume the stance of ‘Anarchymedes.’

Splitting the sign, like splitting the atom, can be dangerous. Even granting that he rejects nihilism, Derrida can still be held up to skeptical claims that his rejection of transcendental signifieds effectively wipes clean all slates and allows for all sorts of worthless gibberish to pass for philosophy. In “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourses of the Human Sciences,” the landmark paper Derrida delivered at a 1966 conference introducing French structuralism to the United States, which effectively announced post-structuralism just as American theorists became acquainted with its predecessor (which may be why U.S. practitioners of deconstruction never quite seem to have understood it), he announces, “the absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely.”¹¹ How can this be read, except as an affirmation of anarchy?

The free, unimpeded play of signification results in *Finnegans Wake*, it results in Mallarmé’s poetry, and it results in Jackson Pollock, but it does not result in the utter dissolution of all classifications of discourse, as some of Derrida’s critics have claimed. The double gesture Derrida mentions consists of maintaining the dichotomies of metaphysics, but using them ‘under erasure,’ or conscious of their ultimate breakdown on the horizon of the aporia. After all, he knows well that “The age of the sign is essentially theological. Perhaps it will never *end*. Its historical *closure* is, however, outlined,”¹² and so its concepts must be retained until that closure leads to an end. In effect, the structure can be tenuously held up, but only with the greatest care, and only with the recognition that it lacks a center.

In place of a center, and as the tool that holds structure in place while simultaneously undermining it, is *differance*. From the French *differer*, ‘to differ’ and ‘to defer,’ *differance* steps in not to fill, but to erase, the hole left by the removal of the Archimedean point. The *a* in place of the *e* makes *differance* passive, but it also combats ‘logocentrism,’ or “the debasement of writing, and its repression outside ‘full’ speech,”¹³ by existing only in written form, since the pronunciation remains the same. Logocentrism, Derrida avers, characterizes the

history of metaphysics; the subjugation of writing to speech pervades the philosophical text. Kant, who clearly never read e.e. cummings, offers an example, calling poetry an “art of speech.”¹⁴

All metaphysics, Derrida holds, have been a ‘metaphysics of presence,’ since in the fundamental opposition of presence to absence the former assumes superiority (which explains logocentrism—in speech, thought is immediately present, whereas writing is only secondary thought). *Differance* contests the metaphysics of presence, though, by emphasizing neither term of the dichotomy, but simply embracing the difference. More importantly, it also escapes the closure of metaphysics, deferring any resolution of terms indefinitely and negating the belief in presence. “To say that *differance* is originary is simultaneously to erase the myth of a present origin,”¹⁵ and so it becomes the non-fixed, non-Archimedean, non-hierarchical basis for Derrida’s project. ‘What is *differance*,’ then, is a question deferred by itself; “if we accepted the form of the question, in its meaning and syntax, we would have to conclude that *differance* has been . . . governed on the basis of the point of a present being,”¹⁶ presupposed by the verb, ‘is.’ What *differance* ‘is’ matters less than what it does.

In his most forceful book, *Of Grammatology*, Derrida puts *differance* into full effect in the texts of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Claude Levi-Strauss. Rousseau’s repeated description of writing as a ‘supplement’ to speech deconstructs the presence of speech, and presence itself, since supplementarity implies a lack or want in the original. Presence becomes a non-presence. Levi-Strauss’ structuralist anthropology bases its fundamental dichotomy of ‘nature’ vs. ‘culture’ on the incest taboo, but Derrida uses this against the system, showing the text’s deconstruction in the necessarily non-originary nature of the taboo, the hinge whose closure of the system swings open under close inspection. If incest taboos derive from something, then the entire distinction falls apart, since culture itself becomes a part of nature. With the centerpoints of the systems removed, “the signified always already functions as a signifier,”¹⁷ and any origin outside the text is displaced.

Among numerous other supporting points, *Of Grammatology*’s major theme summarizes Derrida’s poststructuralist endeavor: “re-presentation is also a de-presentation.”¹⁸ By the time the text of metaphysics reaches an event, the event has always already passed. The only choice discourse of any sort has is to play, pretend, or falsify. Derrida chooses the first and displays the others as the dominant activity of Western philosophy, all the while striving to fashion a new non-system of *differance* in which ‘the Father’s No’ of tradition gives way to let the “heart going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes” of Molly Bloom, well, bloom.

2. A Postmortem Analysis of the Postmodern Paralysis

*The differance lies, as far as I can see,
Not in the thing itself but the degree*

—John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, “A Satire Against Mankind” (1680)

*Now I re-examine philosophies and religions,
They may prove well in lecture-rooms, yet not prove at all under the
spacious clouds and along the landscape and flowing currents*

—Walt Whitman, “Song of the Open Road” (1860)

And she ended up exactly like her mom

—Screaching Weasel, “Mary Was an Anarchist” (1993)

Louis de Broglie, perhaps the Derrida of quantum physics, recognized the aporia in the axioms of Einstein’s corpuscular-wave theory of light and put it into maximum deconstruc-

tive play, resulting in a radical wave theory of matter. Physicists of the time were shocked, but de Broglie's careful, analytic proof persuaded the physics community that matter was, indeed, capable of being expressed as either particle or wave. Yet, once de Broglie's theory earned acceptance, no one challenged the usage of the word 'matter;' it simply went acknowledged that at the far-reaching ends of theory the term broke down, but in ordinary laboratory use its denotation remained stable. As Derrida would say, "like all the notions I am using here, it belongs to the history of metaphysics and we can only use it under erasure."¹⁹

If only the postmodern humanities could be so simple. But denotation has lost its place in an era when even the simplest words carry ideological baggage, or are accused of doing so, and the notion of using metaphysical terminology 'under erasure' has given way to much outright hostility toward language, grammar, and syntax, among numerous other simplified titles. The all-pervasive influence of Derrida's project has spread so far that even the President of the United States has claimed the interpretation of his discourse "depends on what your definition of the word 'is' is," albeit under very conspicuous circumstances hardly qualified as intellectual.²⁰

Clearly, the state of philosophy, and along with it its many subsidiaries— history, literary theory, sociology, etc.— is one of upheaval. But the extent to which this disarray is sanctioned by Derrida's controversial project must be called into question before it loses sight of the multifaceted nature (a word certainly permissible only *sous rature*) of poststructuralism. Deconstruction has blossomed into a prolific industry, shattering canons and calling attention to gender-, sexuality-, and race-based exclusion, but at the same time the institutionalization of postmodernism has reduced Derrida's carefully-argued conclusions (meaningless detached from the context of their specific focal points) to starting axioms from which each new academic endeavor is launched. The itinerary pursued here, then, will be to examine contemporary critiques of postmodern thought, beginning with facile ones and ascending into more weighty concerns, and then to return to the original agenda of Derrida's early work to see what course he outlined in the nascence of the prolonged toppling of the Western tradition that has marked the last three decades.

Perhaps the simplest attack on deconstruction to dismiss is that of the believers in narratives of Truth, Unity, Order, or Progress. Edward O. Wilson, a subscriber to all of the above, offers the prototypical attack of the traditionalists, worth quoting at length:

Each author's meaning is unique to himself, goes the underlying premise; nothing of his true intention or anything else connected to objective reality can be reliably assigned to it. His text is therefore open to fresh analysis and commentary issuing from the equally solipsistic world in the head of the reviewer. . . That is what Jacques Derrida, the creator of deconstruction, meant . . . At least, that is what I think he meant . . . If the radical postmodernist premise is correct, we can never be sure that is what he meant. Conversely, if that is what he meant, it is not certain we are obliged to consider his arguments further.²¹

Wilson goes on to label his portrait 'the Derrida paradox,' which "awaits solution, though one need not feel any great sense of urgency in the matter." Apart from providing a perfect example of the academic climate Derrida sought to displace, Wilson's short-sighted, willfully ignorant reading also serves to highlight the fear raised in the scientific community when its teleology is called into question. It seems reactionary in an almost quaint way, like czarist writings in 1930s Russia: the war has already been lost, and any relevant polemics must face

the current situation and argue from there. Flinging terms like 'solipsistic' at a method which rejects most versions of a self or ego, or feigning paradoxes when even a cursory skimming of Derrida must see the blatant inaccuracy of the accusation, amounts to philosophizing at the level of Dr. Johnson, when he kicked a rock and claimed to refute Berkeley. Smokescreen polemics mask an admission of defeat, and Wilson's shallow but quotable critique fits this description well.

While Wilson fights his Battle of New Orleans, others know the war has ended and try to counter deconstruction on its own ground (or lack thereof). M.C. Dillon, a dedicated phenomenologist, accuses Derrida's project of "semiological reductionism," or the diminishing of all phenomena to textual signs, apart from which all postmodern thought is incoherent.²² This appears to be a powerful refutation, and Dillon displays an admirable mastery of Derrida's work, but the thesis wrongly appeals to a misconception of Derrida's infamous line in *Of Grammatology*, "il n'y a pas de hors-texte." "There is nothing outside the text."²³

Two general reading methods fit this line: one, used by Dillon, sees in it an extension of the mysterious text to all reality, creating a sort of anti-metaphysical field of discourse which subsumes all phenomena. Thus, every 'event' (a word now under erasure) consists of nothing more than text-based activity played out according to a pre-formulated sign system, capable of being described by the linguistic calculus of semiology. This finds easy relevance in any social, or perhaps even most all human activity, but the problems set in when events apparently beyond a text occur: rain, snow, tidal waves, feelings of love or grief that transcend signification. On these grounds, Derrida is dismissed as a trickster.

Another reading, however, keeps two pertinent guidelines in mind: the context of the statement, and a recognition of Derrida's marked propensity for exaggerated catchphrases, which owes more to his stylistic ambitions than his philosophical ones. This line appears in a chapter called 'The Exorbitant. Question of Method,' an explication of the deconstructive technique used on Rousseau and Levi-Strauss in the book. Put in the context of its engulfing paragraph, it reads unambiguously as a stark declaration that, in sharp contrast to Dillon's reading, all texts (or at least Rousseau's, which is the explicit topic of discussion) contain traces of all phenomena that occurred in the context of the writing. Derrida later blurs the edges of 'context' in "Signature Event Context," extending it universally, but even then the meaning remains: texts cannot escape phenomena, but phenomena may escape textuality. The borders of 'meaning' demarcate the ends of textuality; "from the moment that there is meaning there are nothing but signs,"²⁴ but Derrida never foolishly encloses the phenomena before and beyond meaning in the text. Once meaning appears, texts replace events, which is why, for discourse, which is always already engaged in a system of meaning, phenomena are always already gone.

Deconstruction escapes Dillon's criticism, but not entirely; a careful reader cannot disavow the charges of 'semiological reductionism' too haphazardly, for there is no doubt Derrida always plays a double game. Sentences later he reduces the "flesh and bone" activities of Rousseau's life to "arche-writing," which may give renewed life to Dillon's charges, but does not justify their monological approach. Only dialog can ever capture the range of Derrida's writing (this itself may be used against him, though on a Wilson-level criticism: his opacity conceals trapdoors by which he can slide away from points of contention).

Perhaps it is not on a foundational level, then, but on an outcome-based evaluation, that deconstruction and the poststructuralist project reveals its flaws. In the field of literary criticism, the most widespread example of deconstruction in action, the method has quickly gone from a promise of infinite interpretive potential to basic models no less limiting than those of

the earlier readings of modernity.

For instance, the modernist schools had certain approaches to *The Brothers Karamazov* which placed restrictions on the range of interpretations available. Freudians could read it as driven by Oedipal guilt over the death of the father, with Dmitri, Ivan, and Alyosha standing in for the id, ego, and superego, respectively; Marxists could find class struggle everywhere, and the overthrow of the decadent bourgeois Fyodor by Smerdyakov, the proletarian of his own illegitimate making. Similarly with Kafka: existentialists found in *The Trial* and *The Castle* existential angst and religious doubt, while Gregor Samsa's metamorphosis shows a physical manifestation of unconscious self-image.

Postmodern literary theory, rooted firmly in Derrida, promised a rejection of the closed meaning offered by New Critics, Formalists, and Structuralists. Textuality without closure meant room for the 'play' Derrida unearthed with *differance*. But Derrida never offered his fancy sound-bites up for wholesale appropriation without the reasoning behind them, which is precisely what the field of Critical Theory has taken. Without any regard for the intricate, often specific topics to which Derrida applied deconstruction to, literary critics have simplified, universalized, and perverted his words into something almost diametrically opposed to the initial project. Derrida's early work used 'deconstruction' in a highly particular way, based on Heidegger's *destruktion*, as a method of applying a philosophical text's standards to its own method, and flushing out the hidden assumptions. In *Speech and Phenomena* Derrida performs this on Husserl, in an extended, painstaking analysis which takes nothing as a foregone conclusion, working through the *Logical Investigations* slowly and patiently to find Husserl's metaphysical bias.

Postmodern literary critics, however, display little familiarity with Derrida's early work, preferring to use a pervasive image of him as a careless radical opposed to all structure, advocating only playful anarchy. Save for some masterful deconstructors like Paul de Man and Barbara Johnson, the general pattern of deconstruction has broadened the definition to the point where recognizing, say, a certain tendency in the films of Steven Spielberg for white Christian males to act as necessary assistants in the liberation of oppressed minorities (Jews in *Schindler's List*, black slaves in *Amistad*) qualifies as deconstruction. In a brilliant bit of wordplay, de Man once opposed the traditionalist Archie Bunker to deconstruction's arche de-bunkers, but too often, it goes forgotten that simply finding a paradox or revealing a bias often fails to reach the problems at the origin. Legend has it that an aporia killed Homer, but the only dying that takes place in postmodern confrontations with aporias occurs in the Elizabethan sense of the word.

Terry Eagleton provides a convenient segue from the literary problems of deconstruction to the political problems of postmodernism. Highlighting *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, he finds "a thoroughly orthodox heterodoxy" in the general discourse of postmodernism.²⁵ New models emerge to replace the old: Freudian terms can be dropped, but structural motifs fill the void. *The Brothers Karamazov* now becomes a play of signifiers in which the firm organization of the three brothers (and, by extension, the concept 'family') is deconstructed by the excluded term, Smerdyakov, who is precluded from earning 'brother' status by rules supplementary to the basic axioms of kinship. Kafka's angst transforms into the indefinite deferral of closure, with Law, Justice, and Truth as transcendental signifieds forever outside the grasp of K. and Josef K., trapped in the closure of their sign-systems. Many ways of reaching such deconstructive conclusions are available, and the options allow a great deal of creativity in the execution, but the general model remains fairly static, and the differences between *The*

Scarlet Letter and Marlowe's *Edward II* end up less important than their shared self-deconstructing beliefs in archaic notions and logocentrism (the letter inscribed in Dimmesdale's flesh proves as fatal as the grammar of Mortimer's note). To be sure, the postmodern literature of Barth, Pynchon, and others has upped the ante on the requirements of literary theory, in much the same way rational expectations have altered the role of economic policy, but critical theory still seems stuck in a rut, where any text will suffice in order to identify a set of fixed preconceptions.

More important to Eagleton, however, is the relevance of postmodernism for Marxism, which has been largely disabled by critics who relegate it to the netherworld of excluded terms like 'human nature' as a meta-narrative of liberation. To Eagleton, Marxism actually puts into practice what postmodernism dabbles with in *theory*. Marx, he says, believed not in a Platonic, Hegelian, metaphysical unity of History, but in a diverse complex of histories, which can only be brought to life (to play, in postmodern terms) by first rejecting the capitalist History, which lacks real existence, but reigns in the imposed discourse of the power structure. For Marx, simply recognizing History as a falsehood and proclaiming it dead, as postmodernism does, plays right into the hands of the social class hierarchy, on which the recognition has no effect. It is also worth noting that the long-run movement of deconstruction, as outlined in *Of Grammatology*, works along Marxist lines. For the recognition of metaphysical closure, it is "necessary to pass through the logocentric stage,"²⁶ which, like capitalism, gives way to the dictatorship of grammatology, but only for a temporary de-sedimentation which gradually abolishes hierarchy. Marx and Derrida, then, agree on a two-fold path whose mazelike contortions have left the postmodern mainstream lost in the funhouse of the first phase.

Marx, therefore, deserves the title 'postmodern' more than most postmodernists, for whom political action recedes into the distant horizons of the text, which they have misunderstood like Dillan as essentially a new metaphysics. By striving for a radical break with the past (notably, a method Derrida rejects), as postmodernism does, "a supposedly homogenizing Western history is violently homogenized," which amounts to "a lot of self-righteous banging at a door which was never quite so tightly shut."²⁷

Eagleton uses the history of the self to deflate the postmodern rejection of many philosophers as simple, ego-based thinkers. From Aristotle to Lacan, notions of self have been far more complex than the transparent egos they are caricatured as. Deterministic psychologies such as those of Spinoza and Nietzsche never close the door on the plane of context, putting them not implicitly but openly in agreement with Derrida. Even Descartes cannot be reduced to his own famous enthymeme; his whole project, it often goes unrecalled, was not to root Western Man in the ego, but to clear ghosts like God and the ego out of the way for Newtonian physics. Marx certainly falls in with the open-ended theory of the self, writing of Human Nature, or Man in general, "who exists only in the misty realm of philosophical fantasy."²⁸

If even the vibrancy of Marxism is sterilized by postmodernism, the implications for political action by famous theorists suffer a severe stunting. Modernist philosophers like Sartre and Camus left theory at the door when the time for action arose, and the philosopher Lenin rushed the book *State and Revolution* to the press half-written to become the revolutionary Lenin when duty called. But whither has it fled, as Wordsworth would ask, the glory and the dream of philosophical activists? He would not be alone in asking; Christopher Norris, who once asked *What's Wrong With Postmodernism* and spent 300 pages answering, may be the most cogent, formidable critic of the postmodern project, and his *Uncritical Theory*:

Postmodernism, Intellectuals, and the *Gulf War* stands out as an exemplar of philosophical and political protest written quickly and published less as a polished manifesto than as an angry mega-pamphlet in the tradition of Milton's *Areopagitica*. To write, according to Derrida, is "to know that the Book does not exist and that forever there are books,"²⁹ and Norris puts the idea into practice. *Uncritical Theory* brims over with repetition, shaky analysis, and arguments sprinting to conclusions, but it does so in a spirit of immediate intellectual response to a perceived problem demanding quick feedback, not studied detachment.

At the center of Norris' argument, and as that which remains well after the specifics of his hasty generalizations are dismissed, is this rather saddening hypothesis: postmodern academic culture exhibits an "ideological complicity" with the "current U.S. drive for renewed world hegemony,"³⁰ a position that came to light in the rhetoric of the Gulf War, in which the blatant imperialism of the NATO countries, the barrage of falsified information and statistics, and the marginalization of Iraqi deaths elicited almost no response whatsoever from the spokespersons of postmodernism. When response came, it arrived in the form of post-sociologist Jean Baudrillard's essay, "The Gulf War Has Not Taken Place." Baudrillard's noncommittal stance provoked Norris' ire so severely that he wrote his book as a direct attack on postmodern complacency.

At the level of theory, Norris hits his targets with far greater accuracy than the 'smart-misiles' of the U.S. military. With the deconstruction of absolute notions of Truth or Justice, postmodernists have stripped away the ground for cohesive argument against cultural imperialism; any argument opposing the domination of developing nations by 'G-7' nations can be turned back on the critic with the same technique; without recourse to unifying grounds of legitimation, every critique can be in turn criticized as fascist, for silencing another discourse. The cause of this impotence in the face of oppression has been Richard Rorty's neo-pragmatism, where absolute Truth is displaced by impermanent group-consensus truths, and Francis Fukuyama's 'end of history' vision, which basically writes non-industrialized nations out of existence. Norris rages with Nietzschean vitriol against the sheep-mentality of these positions, where clearly-falsified death counts of both NATO soldiers and Iraqi civilians cannot be contested, since they have the acceptance of the pacified majority.

Rorty and Fukuyama receive the most well-argued portions of Norris' wrath, but he also lashes out against Baudrillard and Jean-Francois Lyotard, for reasons that need a bit more explication. Lyotard, whose main project seems to be a synthesis of Wittgenstein's 'language games' with Kant's separation of the faculties, falls prey to what Norris, in the spirit of de Man, calls the aestheticization of politics. For Lyotard, each mode of discourse operates in its own autonomous language game, outside the rules of all others, and so all arguments of fact, meaning, or history reduce to 'differends,' or phrases in dispute, without resolution.

According to Norris, Lyotard's fundamental error results from his reading of Kant at the surface-level, and not beneath. Granted, Kant clearly puts theology beyond the reaches of pure reason but begins his *Critique of Practical Reason* with the assumption of God, necessary to legitimate ethics, which provides Lyotard a basis for keeping the faculties separate. But Norris reads the entire Kantian project as evolving out of a firm belief that the initial space between the faculties of pure reason, practical reason, and judgment could one day be bridged together by a metaphysics validated by an understanding of epistemology.

Neither Norris nor Lyotard disagrees that the Kantian project is doomed to failure, since the movement from a complete epistemology to an ordinary metaphysics is indefinitely deferred, but their readings result in entirely diverging attitudes toward politics. For Norris, pure and practical reason are united, whether or not we ever reach the point of explaining the

bond, and even ivory-tower scholars have an ethical duty to oppose immoral action, which the U.S. manipulation of Iraq, Kuwait, and most of the world, certainly is. For Lyotard, according to Norris, political discourse acts as one of many language games, the sum total of which add up to an inconceivable sublime, or a merely aesthetic entity.

However, Norris fails to pay heed to Lyotard's greater project, in which the reading of Kant never holds an exclusive place of top priority. For Lyotard, "to speak is to fight . . . and speech acts fall within the domain of a general agonistics."³¹ Often guilty of stealing ideas from Derrida and Foucault without giving credit (as in his description of technology as a function of power), Lyotard nonetheless recognizes the definite political thrust of communication.

Uncritical Theory's weakest moments transpire when Norris faults Lyotard for his treatment of Faurisson, a Nazi-sympathizing historian who questioned the existence of the gas chambers by noting no witnesses can testify to their use. Norris, understandably outraged, lets his emotions suppress his reason when he criticizes Lyotard for failing to refute Faurisson outright; the proper rejection of Faurisson, Norris says, lies on the ethical grounds that his position is immoral. But Norris comes across as naive and unsophisticated here; looking at Lyotard's *The Differend*, an entire book devoted to trivializing Faurisson's stance as a language game which may be infallible on its own terms but need not be played by anyone who sees it for the sham it is, one can see a much deeper line of reasoning than that of Norris, and the lack of emotion in the text implies no neutrality on Lyotard's part. The very fact that he wrote an entire book in protest of Faurisson bespeaks a committed feeling of moral repulsion, as well.

Failing to grasp Lyotard's philosophy, Norris also misses out on a chance to reject it for more sound reasons: by recognizing only *differends*, Lyotard joins perspective with an Enlightenment-style thinking Norris never notices. Lyotard's implicit claim that, in lieu of a grounded meta-narrative, all phrases are allowed their own language games amounts to nothing more than a repeat of Ivan Karamazov's Enlightened-existentialist credo that without God, all is permitted.

On Baudrillard, Norris again writes faster than he reads, here simplifying a complex set of ideas into an easily-rejected hodgepodge of postmodern trends. Baudrillard began as a Marxist sociologist, but he grew disillusioned and drifted into postmodernism, which can provide a nice refuge for cynics. But Baudrillard refuses to be pigeonholed as a skeptic; the strangely celebratory tone of his writing covers some, but not all, of the fact that his essays describe a postmodern society where images have replaced events, and reality has been submerged under a gargantuan flood of media projections. In this sense, Baudrillard harmonizes with Norris, who argues that the intense saturation of the media with Gulf War news helped numb the public to the travesties being committed in the name of George Bush's 'new world order.'

Where Norris departs from Baudrillard is on the location of the real. Baudrillard's theories clearly owe much to Daniel Boorstin's portrait of *The Image*, where the American dream has been displaced by 'pseudo-events,' but Baudrillard takes it a step further: the American dream, indistinguishable from the American reality, has become 'hyperreal,' and image has been piled on image in such an infinite progression that simulacra have assumed the place of reality. "The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it."³²

Some obvious criticisms appear ready-made, aimed at Baudrillard. Along with the shift from modernity to postmodernity, other conversions have taken place. Whereas the Enlightenment associates with a strong, Protestant work ethic and emphasizes production, as

Eagleton notes, postmodernity has a consumer-culture bias flowing deep within it. Even Derrida displays this tendency away from production: “the passage beyond philosophy,” he exclaims, “does not consist in turning the page of philosophy, but in continuing to read philosophers in a certain way.”³³ Baudrillard takes this consumer-friendly attitude to new heights, thus setting the tableau for a lazy, complacent society.

Norris picks up this affiliation and lambasts it, but he also goes a step further. Referring to Baudrillard’s Gulf War essay, he accuses the hyperrealist of confusing “an ontological question (what happened?) with an epistemological question (what difficulties do we face in getting to know what happened?)”³⁴ Here, Norris oversteps his bounds. As does Dillon, he reduces a variety of meanings into a singular, monolithic meaning to which Baudrillard never submits.

“Let’s never forget that the real is merely a simulation, a model for regulating and ordering the radical becoming, the radical illusion, of the world and its appearances,”³⁵ Baudrillard reminds, deliberately leaving both doors open. He implies a ‘real’ reality beneath the simulated reality, mentioning a concealed world of radical becoming; this implies his rejection of reality is epistemological. He also quickly adds ‘illusion’ to his description of the ‘real’ reality; this renders his claims ontological. Lyotard called a book *Just Gaming*, and it is entirely possible Baudrillard does nothing more; his chapter heading, ‘Why Is There Nothing Rather Than Something,’ pokes fun at Heidegger’s serious inquiries. But Baudrillard’s statement, “we are in a fractal truth,”³⁶ captures a wealth of meanings, all deeper than games; inside each distinction between simulation and reality lies a whole new dichotomy, and originary ontology stays just out of reach.

Curiously, the exact stance Baudrillard assumes reappears in the fiction of Thomas Pynchon, who Norris professes to admire greatly. At the start of his postmodern masterpiece *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Pynchon writes, “A screaming comes across the sky. It has happened before, but there is nothing to compare it to now. It is too late. The Evacuation still proceeds, but it’s all theatre.”³⁷ The comparison of reality to theater dates back to Shakespeare, and probably earlier, but Baudrillard and Pynchon hyperrealize the postmodern condition: the comparison has exhausted itself, and reality with it. There is nothing to compare it to now.

For all its shortcomings, however, *Uncritical Theory* stands as a unique, compelling book which ultimately leads back to the question of Derrida. How much of postmodernism has sprouted as a result of the seeds disseminated by Derrida’s early texts, and how much of it acts more like a confused student reciting the words but forgetting the deeds of the teacher?

Almost alone among critics, Norris takes a peculiar but convincing view: far from a radical iconoclast, Derrida belongs to the Enlightenment tradition, “sustaining that project by continuing to question its fundamental concepts and values, and by doing so—moreover—in a spirit quite accordant with its own critical imperatives.”³⁸ From this perspective, nearly everyone, even Derrida’s close followers, has gotten deconstruction wrong. To truly understand it, one must trace Derrida’s thinking back not to Heidegger, but to Levinas, who pitted ethics as primary and let all else derive from that.

Problems beset Norris’ interpretation from the start. He confesses two undeniable cross-currents in Derrida’s work: the rigorous, analytical deconstruction of *Speech and Phenomena*, and the zesty play of mystical, poetic texts like *Cinders* and *Glas*. Even within the analytic work, Derrida exhibits tendencies toward “apocalyptic overtones and Nietzschean end-of-philosophy rhetoric.”³⁹ For all that, Norris maintains the true postmodern project initiated by Derrida and overlooked by his followers was to first remove God, meta-narrative, Truth, or whatever transcendental signified dictates and excludes discourse, and secondly, to begin the

true task of thinking, which is to promote ethical action and understanding without recourse to a metaphysical rationality guided by vested interests. The first part has gone over well, perhaps too well, to the point of stagnating into an end and not the mean it was meant to be, but the second part has been entirely ignored, perhaps because the difficulty of finding an ethics without metaphysical ground is even harder than Ivan or Lyotard imagined.

Norris' take on Derrida floats like Huck Finn's raft among the steamboats of institutionalized deconstruction, but it deserves a close look. To give it that, I will conclude by using *Margins of Philosophy*, perhaps Derrida's most stylistically restrained, conventional book, to see what evidence of an ethical thrust shapes Derrida's trajectory. As it turns out, the impact of ethics plays a leading role.

From the first essay, moral-political motives emerge like holograms, waiting to be seen, but only when approached from the correct angle. *Differance* "instigates the subversion of every kingdom," and Derrida explores its qualities. He finds the well-known negations: non-originary, non-present, and so non, but he also notes that *differance* "reigns over nothing, and nowhere exercises any authority."⁴⁰ Not only does this stand in stunning contrast to run-of-the-mill deconstructive thought, where play and *differance* guide the proceedings, but it also delivers a definite political barb aimed at imperialism and domination.

Later, in "Ousia and Gramme," Derrida rejects Heidegger's qualification of certain temporalities as 'authentic' (literally *eigentlich*, or 'proper') not on the basis of metaphysical errors, but because "every ethical preoccupation has been suspended."⁴¹ Here he sounds very much like Levinas, but it is the introductory section to "The Ends of Man" which most forcefully presents the ethical content of Derrida's philosophy. Speaking at a 1968 international colloquium on anthropology and philosophy in New York, Derrida first questions the notion of internationality. When a writer refers to 'us' or 'we,' what does she signify? Exclusion. "The societies, languages, cultures, and political or national organizations with which no exchange in the form of an international philosophical colloquium is possible are of considerable number and extent,"⁴² Derrida says, deflating the seemingly open nature of the event. Next, he confesses he agreed to attend the meeting only after assurances that he would be allowed to state his opposition to the imperialist intervention in Vietnam.

After this introduction, the actual text of "The Ends of Man" suffers from anticlimactic mediocrity, but Derrida revives himself for the conclusion, in which he confronts common misunderstandings of his thought and makes perhaps the most straightforward declaration of purpose to be found in his immense body of work: his goal is neither to "restore the classical motif" of Western metaphysics by finding and solving its aporetic problems, nor to "erase or destroy meaning." Rather, the Derrida project "is a question of determining the possibility of *meaning* on the basis of a 'formal' organization which in itself has no meaning."⁴³ This clearly vindicates Norris' understanding of Derrida as a philosopher in search of an ungrounded ethics. The shattering of Truth, far from a nihilistic gesture, instead serves to open the floodgates for the inclusion of truths never permitted under Truth's operative system of exclusion. The new challenge, then, is to find a new criteria of tolerance by which truths can be evaluated.

Postmodernism, from this perspective, has paralyzed itself with its playful fixation on aporias, failing to adhere to the full thinking of the man most responsible for its inception. Since its beginnings in ancient Greece, philosophy has been situated toward death; as Socrates said, "those who apply themselves correctly to the pursuit of philosophy are in fact practicing nothing more nor less than dying and death."⁴⁴ Perhaps the time for death has passed with the time for metaphysics, and postmodernism must be the final fatality. Perhaps the time has come to look for life.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My gratitude must be offered to four parties: Dr. Aaron Monte & the UW-L Undergraduate Research Program for funding and support, Dr. David Miller for patient guidance, Dr. Ken Maly for challenging and thereby strengthening my perspective, and Dr. Lalita Pandit for helping me explore the intricate nooks and crannies of critical theory. My appreciation extends to all of the above at a level that transcends the grasp of deconstruction; their aid is the ontological foundation of this project.

¹*Meditations on the First Philosophy*, trans. F.E. Sutcliffe (New York: Penguin, 1968), p.102

²*A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), p.252.

³*Ibid.*, p.633.

⁴*The Will to Power*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufman (New York: Vintage, 1967), p.247

⁵*Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p.47.

⁶*Daniel Defoe*, Robinson Crusoe(USA: Spencer Press, 1937), pp.222-23.h

⁷*Margins of Philosophy*, p.48.

⁸*A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1982), p.28.

⁹*What's Wrong With Postmodernism: Critical Theory and the Ends of Philosophy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), p.68

¹⁰*Margins of Philosophy*, p.329.

¹¹*Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p.280.

¹²*Of Grammatology*, corrected edition, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p.14.

¹³*Ibid.*, p.3.

¹⁴*Meditations on the First Philosophy*, trans. F.E. Sutcliffe (New York: Penguin, 1968), p.102

¹⁵*Writing and Difference*, p.203.

¹⁶*Margins of Philosophy*, p.15.

¹⁷*Of Grammatology*, p.7

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p.203

¹⁹*Of Grammatology*, corrected edition, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p.60.

²⁰Heard on a radio news brief during the interminable 1990's equivalent of the Puritan witch-hunts or the 1950's HUAAC commie-hunts, the Monica Lewinsky investigation.

²¹*Consilience: The Unity of All Knowledge* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), p.41.

²²*Semiological Reductionism: A Critique of the Deconstructionist Movement in Postmodern Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995).

²³*Of Grammatology*, p. 158.

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 50

²⁵*The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), p.26

²⁶*Of Grammatology*, p. 285.

²⁷*The Illusions of Postmodernism*, p.34, p.90.

²⁸Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, trans. Samuel Moore (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1967), p.111.

²⁹*Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p.10.

³⁰*Uncritical Theory: Postmodernism, Intellectuals, and the Gulf War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), p.27, p.25.

³¹*The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington & Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p.10.

³²*Selected Writings*, Mark Poster, ed. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), p.166.

³³*Writing and Difference*, p.288.

³⁴*Uncritical Theory*, p.122.

³⁵*Paroxysm: Interviews With Philippe Petit*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 1998), p.69.

³⁶*Ibid.*, p.73.

³⁷*Gravity's Rainbow* (New York: Penguin Books, 1973), p.3.

³⁸*Uncritical Theory*, p.35.

³⁹*What's Wrong With Postmodernism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), p.56.

⁴⁰*Margins of Philosophy* trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p.22.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, p.63.

⁴²*Ibid.*, p.112.

⁴³*Ibid.*, p.134.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, p.50.