
How Radical is Derrida's Deconstructive Reading?

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Abstract

The aim of my paper is to focus upon those aspects of Derrida's relation to language and textual interpretation that have not been adequately dealt with by either proponents of deconstruction, who take Derrida to have effected a total revolution in the way in which we must read texts, or those critics who view deconstruction as having subverted all possible criteria for a valid interpretation leading, thus, to an anarchical textual 'freeplay'. This inadequate approach by both proponents and critics is the result of a failure to consider Derrida's deconstructive approach as enacting a process of 'double reading.' This 'double reading' commences with an initial stage or level which seeks to reconstruct a text's authorial intention or its *vouloir dire*. This initial level then prepares the text, through the identification of authorial or textual intention, for the second stage or level. At this second stage or level, which is the passage to deconstructive reading *per se*, the blind spots and aporias of the text are set forth. Through this focus upon the process of deconstructive reading as 'doubling reading,' it becomes evident that deconstruction is not as revolutionary as proponents or critics have assumed. For, Derrida's initial reading, or the 'doubling' of a text's authorial or textual intention is firmly set within a traditional interpretative form.

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For Jacques Derrida, the entirety of the history of western thought, and the texts produced within this tradition, with only some singular exceptions (for example, Nietzsche), are constituted by hierarchical binary oppositions. This hierarchical ordering is produced by the primacy accorded to the term of the opposition related to an originary 'presence,' while the other term is considered as the subordinate

member of the pair (for example, identity/difference, speech/writing, intelligible/visible, man/woman, nature/civilization, good/evil, and so on).

In relation to this history, deconstructive reading, as practiced by Derrida during the 1960s and 1970s, is characterized by a specific approach through which this tradition is placed into question. The initial gesture is to reveal the latent metaphysical structure, which is represented by the presence of these hierarchical binary oppositions within these texts. From this, it then concentrates on those elements of a text which not only cannot be incorporated to the ‘metaphysics of presence,’ but also disorganize it, making apparent another logic that is not of that of traditional metaphysics.

According to Derrida, a metaphysical text is *never* ‘homogeneous’, ‘self-identical’, or ‘never totally governed by “metaphysical assumptions”’. Together with the ‘dominant’ ‘metaphysical model’, there are ‘counter-forces which threaten or undermine this authority’ (Derrida 1992, 53). More specifically, Derrida’s claim is that the metaphysical text cannot maintain the seemingly uncrossable boundary line between the two poles of every oppositional pair (for example, remedy/poison, inside/outside, and so on) because linguistic meaning is conditioned by difference and deferral (*différance*). Every time a metaphysical author attempts to use an *equivocal* term (for example, the *pharmakon* in Plato or the *supplement* in Rousseau) or a binary opposition (for example, speech/writing) in one of its two senses, sooner or later, due to the ‘differential’ constitution of opposites—namely the presence of the ‘trace’ of the one term within the other—the other meaning also comes to the fore in order to haunt the text, despite its author’s intentions. The principle of *différance* is presented as working by itself tirelessly in the texts of the philosophical tradition against their authors’ explicit intentions. In this manner, a philosopher’s views do not subsist until refuted by another philosopher. They are always already refuted by language itself, which exceeds the will of authorial intention.

In *Of Grammatology*, in the Chapter entitled ‘The Exorbitant. Question of Method,’ Derrida notes that deconstructive reading situates itself in the gap between what the author ‘commands’ within her text and what she does not ‘command,’ that is, what takes place in her text without her will. This distance, fissure or opening is something that deconstructive reading must ‘produce’ (Derrida 1976, 158; Derrida 1967a, 227). Yet, in order to produce this fissure or opening, deconstructive reading must first reproduce what the author ‘wants-to-say,’ something that requires the submission to classical

reproductive reading practices. As Derrida points out in one of his latest texts entitled '“To Do Justice to Freud”: The History of Madness in the Age of Psychoanalysis' (1991):

In a protocol that laid down certain reading positions...I recalled a rule of hermeneutical method that still seems to me valid for the historian of philosophy...namely the necessity of first ascertaining a surface or manifest meaning...the necessity of gaining a good understanding, in a quasi-scholastic way, philologically and grammatically, by taking into account the dominant and stable conventions, of what Descartes *meant* on the already so difficult surface of his text, such as it is interpretable according to classical norms of reading: the necessity of gaining this understanding... *before and in order to* destabilize, wherever this is possible and if it is necessary, the authority of canonical interpretations. (Derrida 2001, 84)

The *traditional* reading (the reproduction of the authorial or textual intention) is then *destabilised* through the utilisation of all those elements that have refused to be incorporated within it, with the result that the meaning of the text is different from that which its author intends it to say. For example, in *Of Grammatology*, Derrida writes:

To speak of origin and zero degree in fact comments on Rousseau's declared intention [*intention déclarée*]...But in spite of that declared intention, Rousseau's discourse lets itself be constrained by a complexity which always has the form of the supplement of or from the origin. His declared intention is not annulled by this but rather *inscribed* within a system which it no longer dominates. (Derrida 1976, 243; Derrida 1967a, 345)

Hence, the meanings produced during the *first* reading of deconstructive reading become 'disseminated' during the *second* reading. In other words, during the second reading the text loses its initial appearance of semantic determinacy, organized around the axis of its authorial intention, and is eventually pushed into producing a number of incompatible meanings which are 'undecidable', in the sense that the reader lacks any secure ground for choosing between them.

In 'Plato's Pharmacy', Derrida exhibits the way in which the text of the *Phaedrus*, despite Plato's intention to keep the two opposite meanings of *pharmakon* separate—namely 'remedy' and 'poison'—ends up affirming *à la fois* both, thus exhibiting another logic, that of both... and' (namely, *pharmakon* is 'both remedy and poison', both beneficent and maleficent) (Derrida 1981, 70; Derrida 1972, 87). This, other, logic cannot be incorporated by metaphysics since it finds itself in opposition to the logic of identity and non-contradiction. This logic of the 'both... and', Derrida names the 'logic of supplementarity' [*logique*

de la supplémentarité] (Derrida 1976, 144–5, 215; Derrida 1967a, 208, 308).

A deconstructive reading, therefore, contains both a ‘dominant,’¹ reproductive reading and a ‘critical’, productive reading. The *first* reading, which Derrida calls a ‘doubling commentary’ [*commentaire redoublant*] (Derrida, 1976, 158; Derrida 1967a, 227), finds a passage ‘lisible’ and understandable, and reconstructs the *determinate* meaning of the passage read according to a procedure that the deconstructive reader shares with common readers. The *second* reading, which he calls a ‘critical reading’ or an ‘active interpretation’, moves on to *disseminate* the meanings that the *first* reading has already construed. In the *Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (1992), Simon Critchley summarises deconstruction’s ‘double reading’, as follows:

What takes place in deconstruction is reading; and I shall argue, what distinguishes deconstruction as a textual practice is *double reading*²—that is to say, a reading that interlaces at least two motifs or layers of reading, most often by first repeating what Derrida calls ‘the dominant interpretation’ of a text in the guise of a commentary and second, within and through this repetition, leaving the order of commentary and opening a text up to the blind spots or ellipses within the dominant interpretation. (Critchley 1992, 23)

In this double reading or ‘double gesture’ [*double geste*] (Derrida 1988, 21; Derrida 1990, 50), Derrida is obliged to use classical interpretative norms and practices and, at the same time, to negate their power to ‘control’ a text, to thoroughly construe a text as something determinate, and to ‘disseminate’ the text into a series of ‘undecidable’ meanings (Abrams 1989, 44).

Derrida’s ‘double’ interpretive procedure is one which can only subvert a text from the tradition from a position in which its meaning has been held to have a high degree of determinacy. In order for a text’s *intentional* meaning to become destabilised, the text needs to possess a certain stability so that it can be rendered determinate. However, the fixity generated by this preliminary procedure is necessarily undermined by Derrida’s subsequent destabilization of this textual structuration of meaning which precludes the accordance of any (even ‘relative’) stability to it.³ It is this shift between the two layers of reading which reveals a tension within this procedure. Hence, despite the fact that he thinks that no communicative action or textual practice is able to prevent the *dissemination* of meaning—a *dissemination* which is ‘irreducible to *polysemy*’ (Derrida 1988, 20–1; Derrida 1990, 50)—or despite all he says about the endless play between concepts, the fissure that *différance*

effects on the core of presence, the sign which is just a 'trace', or, putting it in the language of the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure, despite the fact that 'the self-identity of the signifier conceals itself unceasingly and is always on the move' (Derrida 1976, 49; Derrida 1967a, 72), Derrida treats authorial or textual intention as something which can be determined *univocally*.

This seems to flow from the necessary prerequisites of deconstruction itself. Deconstruction is installed between a text's intended meaning (its *declarative* layer) and the text itself (its *descriptive* layer). Derrida's deconstructive reading repeatedly uncovers opposed meanings between what the metaphysical author (for example, Rousseau) 'wishes to say' and what 'he says without wishing to say it,' or between what the author 'declares' and what the text 'describes without Rousseau's wishing to say it':

He *declares* what he *wishes to say* [Il *déclare* ce qu'il *veut dire*], that is to say that articulation and writing are a post-originary malady of language; he says or describes that which he does not wish to say [Il dit ou *décrit* ce qu'il *ne veut pas dire*]: articulation and therefore the space of writing operates at the origin of language. (Derrida 1976, 229; Derrida 1967a, 326)

Or

Rousseau *would wish* [*voudrait*] the opposition between southern and northern in order to place a natural frontier between different types of languages. However, what he *describes* [*décrit*] forbids us to think it... We must measure this gap between the description and the declaration. (Derrida 1976, 216–17; Derrida 1967a, 310)⁴

What Rousseau declares and wishes to say is what is construed by standard reading; what the text ungovernably goes on to say, unbeknownst to the writer, is what gets disclosed by a deeper deconstructive reading.

In this context, if a text's authorial intention were not fixed and univocal, then it would be difficult for deconstruction to juxtapose against it contradictory elements found in the same text. Thus, contrary to the text as a whole, which Derrida treats as heterogeneous and equivocal, authorial or textual intention is presented as always possessing coherence, homogeneity and as being characterised by a lack of ambiguity. Hence, for example, in 'Violence and Metaphysics', Derrida explicitly declares that '[w]e will refuse to sacrifice the self-coherent unity of intention [*l'unité fidèle à soi de l'intention*] to the becoming which then would be no more than pure disorder' (Derrida 1978, 84; Derrida 1967b, 125). Despite Derrida's claim that the meaning

of a text is never exhausted by the intention of its author, the way in which deconstruction treats a text during the *first* reading is as if, beneath the text, runs a *unifying* essence known as ‘authorial’ or ‘textual intention’ which can be determined *unequivocally*. In Derrida’s *univocal* reading of a text’s *vouloir dire*, successfully *contradictory* intentions are ruled out. While deconstruction concentrates on the existence of contradictory statements, there is nowhere any reference to the possibility of the existence of contradictory intentions. Derrida’s critical reading never questions the status of its ascription to the author of such regimented and unilinear designs.

Even the division of the text into a *declarative* and a *descriptive* layer often seems forced, or even sometimes arbitrary. There are times at which Derrida exaggerates the distinction, and not only by his critical inventiveness in teasing out hidden textual implications, but also through a somewhat rigid and constraining interpretation of what the author actually means to say. Authorial intention always and everywhere is interpreted with an *ungenerous* literality.⁵ The author’s failure to perceive the supplementary threads in his texts must be absolute, never partial. In ‘No More Stories, Good or Bad: de Man’s Criticisms of Derrida on Rousseau,’ Robert Bernasconi, an advocate of deconstruction, does not hesitate to adopt Paul de Man’s characterization of Derrida as an ‘ungracious’ reader: ‘De Man is surely correct when he portrays Derrida as an ungenerous reader of Rousseau—or to use de Man’s own term, an “ungracious” reader’ (Bernasconi 1992, 148). For Bernasconi, in order to be able to support the distinction between ‘what Rousseau wants to say’ and ‘what Rousseau actually says,’ Derrida ‘must refuse to attribute to “what Rousseau wants to say” statements that Rousseau clearly meant. In other words, there are passages which express Rousseau’s intentions, but which Derrida finds obliged to refer simply to what Rousseau “says without saying”’ (Bernasconi 1992, 148).

Moreover, Derrida not only treats the text, during its *first* reading, with an *ungenerous* literality but also as if only *one* interpretation of authorial intention were possible. In the ‘Afterword,’ Derrida declares, in conformity with what he thinks about language and meaning, that ‘“doubling commentary” is not a moment of simple reflexive recording that would transcribe the originary and true layer of a text’s *intentional meaning*, a meaning that is *univocal* and self-identical’ (*italics added*) (Derrida 1988, 143; Derrida 1990, 265). However, *in practice*, Derrida treats the ‘doubling’ of a text’s authorial intention according to those terms that he denounces above. Indicative of this attitude is the fact that from his multiple readings, *hesitation* is completely absent. He

never examines the possibility that other interpretations of authorial intention are also possible (without being theoretically able to preclude such a possibility). The aim of this is to protect the effectiveness of the strategy of deconstruction. If Derrida accepted, even potentially, that other interpretations of a text's *vouloir-dire* were possible, then he could not preclude the possibility that other, non-metaphysical determinations of a text's intentional meaning could be feasible determinations that would not thus be in dire need of deconstruction.

This, in turn, would affect his whole 'narrative' about 'Western philosophy' as 'logocentrism' or 'metaphysics of presence,' which is animated by the spirit of an *unequivocal* interpretation of the texts of the philosophical tradition, thereby depriving it of much of its credibility. Moreover, if he conceded the possibility of the existence of other plausible interpretations, either metaphysical or not (although this is something that he could not know in advance), then the deconstruction of merely *one* interpretation out of this potential plethora of plausible interpretations would have a far more limited significance and effectiveness.

The degree of certainty about a text's 'wants-to-say' [*vouloir-dire*] that deconstruction requires, is possible only if authorial meanings are pure, solid, 'self-identical' facts which can be used to anchor the work. However, this way of conceiving meaning is in direct opposition to deconstruction, for which, meaning is impossible to determine in terms of a fixed entity or substance. An author's intention is itself a complex 'text', which can be debated, translated and variously interpreted.⁶

It is remarkable that Derrida, despite the way in which he conceives the constitution of linguistic meaning as a differential 'game' [*jeu*] of signs without beginning and end,⁷ despite the fact that he adduces this kind of constitution in order to justify the deconstruction of authorial or textual intention, seems paradoxically to share the prejudgement that philosophical texts, at least if *only* at an initial level, are integrated wholes, as if the unity of the work resides in the author's all pervasive intention. However, there is, in fact, no reason why the author should not have had several mutually contradictory intentions, or why her intention may not have been somehow self-contradictory. This is actually a possibility that Derrida does not consider at all. The way in which authorial intentions appear in texts does not necessarily form a consistent whole, and it may be unwise to rest upon this assumption too heavily, particularly if one speaks, as Derrida does, about intention as 'only an effect.' For example, in 'Limited Inc a b c...', Derrida calls for 'the substitution... of intentional effect for intention [*d'effet intentionnel à intention*]' (Derrida 1988, 66; Derrida 1990, 128). Also,

in the same text, Derrida speaks about intention as ‘a priori (at once) *différente*: differing and deferring, in its inception’ [‘L’intention est a priori (aussi sec) *différente*’] (Derrida 1988, 56; Derrida 1990, 111). So, there is absolutely no need to suppose that authorial or textual intention either does or should constitute a harmonious whole.

In this sense, Derrida’s stance towards a text’s authorial intention could be described, in practice, as juridical: anything which cannot be herded inside the enclosure of ‘probable’ authorial meaning is brusquely expelled, and everything remaining within that enclosure is strictly subordinated to this single governing intention. Under such an approach, authorial ‘indeterminacies’ are abolished, in order to be replaced with a stable meaning. They must be ‘normalised’. Such a ‘doubling commentary’ [*commentaire redoublant*] (Derrida 1976, 158; Derrida 1967a, 227) of authorial or textual intention is obliged to render mutually coherent the greatest number of a work’s elements. Hence, it would not be ‘exorbitant’ to attribute to Derrida, in his treatment of authorial or textual intention,⁸ the same accusations he attributes to the metaphysical tradition concerning the way in which it treats texts as unified wholes.⁹

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Notes

1. Derrida calls this initial reading that deconstruction enacts on the text, 'dominant interpretation' [*interprétation dominante*] (Derrida, 1988, 143; Derrida 1990, 265).
2. Some other critical readers of Derrida who have also described deconstructive reading as 'double reading' are Robert Bernasconi in 'No More Stories, Good or Bad: de Man's Criticism of Derrida on Rousseau', 147 and M. H. Abrams in 'Construing and Deconstructing', 38.
3. For this contradiction, see Kakoliris 2004, 283–92.
4. See also, Derrida 1976, 200; 238; 242; 245; 246 and Derrida 1967a, 286; 338; 344; 348; 349.
5. Derrida's ungenerous interpretation of Rousseau's intention is also underscored by Sean Burke, who, in the *Death and Return of the Author*, writes: 'That there might be a speculative side to the *Essay*, that Rousseau might be asking that we chance a journey to the origin of languages, and in the expectation of discovering all sorts of things on the way, is never taken into account. Rather the text must always and everywhere be interpreted with an *ungenerous*, and intractable literality' (Burke 1992, 146).
6. See Derrida 1988, 143; Derrida 1990, 265.
7. Derrida, in *Of Grammatology*, defines 'play' as follows: 'One could call *play* the absence of the transcendental signified as limitless of play, that is to say as the destruction of ontotheology and the metaphysics of presence' (Derrida 1976, 50; Derrida 1967a, 73. Also, in 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', Derrida mentions: 'The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely' (Derrida 1978, 280; Derrida 1967b, 411). Strangely enough, no one of the aforementioned positions seems to have, for Derrida, any implications for the way in which he understands the 'doubling' of authorial or textual intention by deconstructive reading during its initial phase.
8. To the question, 'does the "doubling commentary", in practice, really differ from other traditional reconstructions of a text's authorial intentions?' the answer would be rather 'no'. Derrida seems paradoxically to agree with it: 'And you are right in saying that these "practical implications for interpretation" are "not so threatening to conventional modes of reading"' (Derrida 1988, 147; Derrida 1990, 271). Although Derrida, in 'Signature, Event, Context' claims that '[w]riting is read; it is not the site, "in the last instance," of a hermeneutic deciphering, the decoding of a meaning or truth', however, the reading-writing that the 'doubling commentary' enacts is, in practice, clearly orientated towards such a hermeneutic deciphering or decoding that Derrida rejects (Derrida 1988, 21; Derrida 1990, 50).
9. I would like to thank Dr Peter Langford for his invaluable help.

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