A Critique of Postcolonial Reason

Toward a History of the Vanishing Present

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The term “deconstruction” was coined by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930–) between the two appearances of the material that, in its second version, became part of De la grammatologie (1967). In its first appearance, in 1965–1966, as a series of reviews in the French journal Critique, it contained the term “destruction.” The word owed something to Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), especially to the projected second part of his Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics (1929), which was to have had the title of The Fundamental Characteristics of a Phenomenological Destruction of the History of Ontology under the Guidance of the Problematic of Temporality. The naming of “deconstruction,” then, is, among other things, something like a definitive modification of a Heideggerian program. It should be remembered that Heidegger was a strong reader of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), in whose work also “destruction” played a special part.

This essay interprets deconstruction specifically in Jacques Derrida’s work.

Deconstruction, as it emerged in Derrida’s early writings, examined how texts of philosophy, when they established definitions as starting points, did not attend to the fact that all such gestures involved setting each defined item off from all that it was not. It was possible, Derrida said, to show that the elaboration of a definition as a theme or an argument was a pushing away of these antonyms. Such demonstrations involved tracking the rhetorical maneuvers performed by words such as
“supplément” in Jean-Jacques Rousseau (*Grammatology*), or *pharmakos* and *hama* in Plato and Aristotle (“Plato’s Pharmacy,” 1968, in *Dissemination*: “Ousia and Grammê: Note on a Note from Being and Time,” 1968, in *Margins*). What these maneuvers seemed to conceal was the track of the first *différance* (a word coined by Derrida)—the setting off described above—as well as its continuation—the pushing away, also described above. This track, of a previous differentiation and a continuous deferment, is called “trace.”

The structuralists had emphasized language, or rather sign-systems, as explanatory models of the last instance. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida submitted that Ferdinand de Saussure (1857—1913) had not been able to admit in his work the implications of his insight that the origin of the possibility of language was the capacity to articulate differences among linguistic and verbal units rather than some internalized knowledge or reservoir of chunks of language. In “Speech and Phenomena” (1967, in *Speech and Phenomena*), Derrida argued that Edmund Husserl’s (1859—1938) phenomenological notion of “the living present” entailed the subject’s death, since it implied a present extending before and after any given subject’s livingness or life. In “Différance” (1968, in *Margins of Philosophy*), an important theoretical intervention presented before the Société française de philosophie, he named this inevitability of the differentiation (setting off) from, and deferment (pushing away) of the trace or track of all that is not what is being defined or posited, as *différance*. It was a “necessary but impossible” move (a formula to become useful for deconstruction); because, in being named, *différance* has already submitted to its own law, as outlined.

This irreducible work of the trace not only produces an unrestricted economy of same and other, rather than a relatively restricted dialectic of negation and sublation, in all philosophical oppositions. It also places our selfhood (ipseity) in a relationship of *différance* with what can only be “named” radical alterity (and thus necessarily effaced). This rich essay suggests certain rules of thumb for the deconstructive philosopher.

In “Signature Event Context” (1977, in *Margins*), Derrida suggested that J. L. Austin (1911—1960), in founding Speech Act theory, which investigates language as not merely statement but act, acknowledged the role of force in signification. He could not, however, admit the consequences of his irreducibly “locutionary” perception of language: that truth-telling is also a performative convention, producing an effect not limited to the transference of a semantic content. Each effective situation alters the truth iterated. “Speech” shares the structure we commonly call “writing,” which is given over to the openness of use in unmarked and heterogeneous situations.

Derrida’s kinship with other philosophers such as Immanuel Kant (1724—1804), Georg Friedrich Hegel (1770—1831), Søren Kierkegaard (1813—1855), Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud (1856—1939), Edmund Husserl, Walter Benjamin (1892—1940), and Emmanuel Levinas (1906—1995), to name only a few, has been established. But it cannot be denied that, all through these philosophical essays and his other early work, the Heideggerian theme of the priority of the question (of Being, to all ontological investigation, as indicated in the projected title of the *Kantbook 2*, for example) is never absent. It is therefore significant that, in “Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas” (1964, in *Writing and Difference*), Derrida embraced Levinas’s critique of Heidegger, even as he subjected it to a dismantling similar to the ones already mentioned.

Such critical intimacy—rather than the usual critical distance—is a mark of affirmative deconstruction.

In “The Ends of Man” (1968, tr. 1972, in *Margins*), Derrida once again laid out his own project by distinguishing it from Heidegger’s. That essay was perhaps Derrida’s first articulation of the argument, continued in *Of Spirit* (1987) and beyond, that after the famous turn or *Kehre* of the thirties, Heidegger betrayed his insistence that, at the start of all investigative questioning was a prior question that could not be adequately answered. It is to be noted that Derrida’s important essay is open-ended, signaling toward an indefinite future.

At the conference entitled “The Ends of Man” held in 1982 at Cerisy-la-Salle, Derrida described a movement in his own work as well. It was a turn from “guarding the question”—insisting on the priority of an unanswerable question, the question of *différance*—to a “call to the wholly other”—that which must be differed-deferred so that we can posit ourselves, as it were. As we have seen in our discussion of radical alterity in “Différance,” a similar double program was figured in his work from the start. The movement now announced by Derrida—
understood as an other-directed swerve away from mere philosophical correctness, alerts us to a greater emphasis on ethics and its relationship to the political.

An early text prefiguring the turn is “Declarations of Independence” (1976, tr. 1982, in New Political Science 15). Here Derrida, borrowing terminology from Austinian Speech Act theory, argues that the constitutional subject is produced by the performative of a declaration of independence, which must necessarily state itself as already given, in a constative statement of national identity. (For the important distinction between “performative” and “constative,” see J. L. Austin, How to Do Things with Words [1962].) This text illuminates Derrida’s many incursions into the question of philosophical nationalisms, and indeed his readings of all acts of institution.

“Force of Law: the Mystical Foundation of Authority” (1989) can be identified as the central statement of Derrida’s ethical turn: from “guarding the question” to a “call to the wholly other [radical alterity].” If we consider Given Time (1991), The Gift of Death (1992), and Aporias (1993) with it, we will see some major ideas in play.

The earlier work—broadly grasped as the necessary yet impossible argument from difference—insisted that all institutions of origin concealed the splitting off from something other than the origin, in order for the origin to be instituted. This was a making indeterminate of any answer to questions of origin, as to what it was from which the supposedly original thing or thought, in description or definition, was being differantiated. It is this question, instituted at the origin, that had to be guarded or kept as a task in the first phase of deconstruction.

If Derrida’s own ad hoc periodization is to be credited, the second phase is more “affirmative,” a word he used in the mid-seventies. The affirmative call or appeal to the wholly other presumably addressed whatever may be prior to the trace of the other-than-origin instituting the origin; most often through the new concept-metaphor of “the experience of the impossible.” If radical alterity was earlier conceived of as a methodologically necessary presupposition that is effaced in being named, now the category of presupposition is deliberately blurred and made more vulnerable as “experience.”

Now such imponderables as justice and ethics can be seen as “experiences of the impossible” experiences of radical alterity. As such, they are undeconstructible, for to open them to deconstruction is to open them to the law of difference. Decisions based on such experiences involve aporias, or non-passages. Aporias are distinguished from logical categories such as dilemmas or paradoxes; as experience is from presupposition. Aporias are known in the experience of being passed through, although they are non-passages; they are thus disclosed in effacement, thus experience of the impossible. Formalization is achieved by passing through or “solving” aporias, treating them as practical logical problems. In the second phase of deconstruction, then, formalizations can therefore be seen as a halfway house toward the open end of a “setting to work.” (The last theme had been broached in a text of the early eighties: “The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of its Pupils,” 1983, invoking not only a Heideggerian text of the same title, but also the older philosopher’s famous rectorate address of 1933.)

“Law is not justice, [although] it is just that there be law,” says “Force of Law” (notice that the connective has to be supplied; Derrida philosophizes interactively—the reader provides connections in order to make the text work—because he uses the rhetorical dimension of language).

Justice cannot pass in a direct line to law; that line is a non-passage, an aporia. Yet justice is disclosed in law, even as its own effacement. This is the peculiar nature of the deconstructive embrace. Ethics as “the experience of the impossible” and politics as the calculus of action are also in a deconstructive embrace. The space of being is the gift of time (so to speak)—we fall into time, we begin to “be,” unanticipatably. To call it a gift is to solve that aporia by thinking of some other (one) that “gives” time. Thus life is lived as the call of the wholly other, which must necessarily be answered (in its forgetting, of course, assuming there had been a gift in the first place in the subject’s unanticipatable insertion into temporality), by a responsibility bound by accountable reason. Ethics as experience of the impossible—therefore incaulable—is lived as the possible calculus that covers the range between self-interest and responsibility that includes the politico-legal. Justice and law, ethics and politics, gift and responsibility are structureless structures because the first item of each pair is neither available nor unavailable. It is in view of justice and ethics as undeconstructible, as experiences of the impossible, that legal and political decisions must be made, empirically scrupulous but philosophically errant. (Even this opposition, of course, is not tenable to the last degree.) Here is a summary, made in view of the possibility that to summarize is to efface necessary
discontinuities: The calculus of the second item in each pair such as the ones named above is imperative for responsible action, always in view of this peculiarity. These pairs are not interchangeable, but move on an unconcatenated chain of displacements. In each case, the "and" in the pair opens up the task entailed by what Derrida had formalized in "The Supplement of Copula: Philosophy before Linguistics" (1971): that the copula "and" is a "supplement"—that slippery ("undecidable") word that he had first tracked in Rousseau—covering an indefinite variety of relationships, since the supplement both supplies a lack and adds an excess. As "Principle of Reason" and "Mobius; or, The Conflict of the Faculties" (1980, tr. 1984, in Logomachia) argue, if responsible action is fully formulated or justified within the system of the calculus, it cannot retain its accountability to the trace of the other. It must open itself to being judged by a setting to work that cannot be defined from within the system. One instantiation of this is to be found in the discussion of messianism in Specters of Marx (1993).

Is there a relation of reinscription between this "setting to work" and the rather carefully defined "ins Werke setzen"—setting or positing in the work—to be found not only in Being and Time, but most particularly elaborated in the later Heidegger’s “Origin of the Work of Art” (1935, tr. 1950 and 1960), a piece discussed by Derrida in The Truth in Painting (1978)? In this brief compass, suffice it to say that whereas in Heidegger every conflict of worlding upon resistant ground is posited in the lineaments of the work of art as work, for Derrida what the word “work” marks is outside and discontinuous with the formulations of philosophy as an end in itself, with a logical systematicity that is mere calculus. This idea of a work outside or beside the disciplinary work of philosophy is laid out by Derrida, thematically as well as rhetorically, in parts of essays entitled exergue or parergon. In “Of Grammatology as Positive Science,” Derrida had repeatedly stated that grammatology could not be a positive science because the philosopher could not or would not “venture up to the perilous necessity” of facing unanswerable questions at the origin. It is as if the mature philosopher now acknowledges the peril and steps out of “the shelter” he had invoked in the earlier text. At the origin now is the necessary experience of the impossible, which is lived as a calculus without guarantee.

Literature—more specifically, poetry—remains a figure that provides an experience of the impossible; as suggested in the discussion of Paul Celan’s work in Schibboleth (1986). Derrida’s earlier discussions of Stéphane Mallarmé (“The Double Session,” 1970, in Disseminations), Francis Ponge (Signsponge, 1975), and Maurice Blanchot (in Parages, 1986), circulate and cluster around this position. His intuitions about the visual arts are not inconsonant, but less assured. Truth in Painting, 1978, focusing on “Peasant Boots” by Vincent Van Gogh, the picture that Heidegger considers in the essay mentioned above, asks the simple question: what would be “idiom” (a subsystemic production of meaning) in art, a signifying logic that could lead to a calculable meaning system, which would then provide a springboard for any investigation of “truth” in painting?

It is a curious fact that many so-called ethno-philosophies (such as the Tao, Zen, Sunyavāda, the philosophy of Nāgārjuna, varieties of Sufi, and the like) show affinities with parts of deconstruction. This may relate to their critique of the intending subject. Insofar as they transcendentalize extra-subjective authority, they are not quite “the same thing” as deconstruction. But insofar as they locate agency in the radically other (commonly called “fatalism”), the ex-orbitancy of the sphere of work in the ethical as figured by Derrida has something like a relationship with them. Thus, although Derrida himself is at best cautious about resemblances between his own system and any “theologies” (“Onto-Theology of National-Humanism: Prolegomena to a Hypothesis,” 1992, in Oxford Literary Review 14.1—2), deconstruction after the turn, in its “setting-to-work” mode, may be of interest for many marginalized cultural systems as a development from within the aftermath of the Kantian Enlightenment, whereby their own calculuses, dominant in reaction, have become as compromised (especially gender compromised) and stagnant as anything perceived by Heidegger in the Kantian line itself. Of course, the possibility of these connections remains dubious as long as the “setting-to-work” mode remains caught within the descriptive and/or formalizing practices of the academic or disciplinary calculus. And as long as the othering of deconstructive philosophy remains confined to discourses at least accessible to related academic disciplines (such as literature, architecture, theology, or feminism), it gives rise to restricted but useful debates.

Currently the most critical and dynamic enclave of marginalized cultural systems is in counterglobalist or alternative-development activism (just as the financialization of the globe is the most robust vanguard of
In this area, the "setting-to-work" mode of deconstruction breaks hesitantly into an active resistance to the inexorable calculus of globalization, where "democratization" is often a description of the political restructuring entailed by the transformation of state capitalism and their colonies to tributary economies of rationalized financialization; or it may be engaged in displacing the binary opposition between economic growth and well-being by proposing alternatives to "development." These efforts do not, of course, produce a sustained formalized theory that is recognizably deconstructive. This is the risk of a deconstruction without reserve.

The aporia of exemplarity is most keenly felt here. The subjects and collectivities that produce the examples are in an aporetic bind with those who, far from and often ignorant of their field of work—globalization and development—yet produce the systematic formalizations. The situation may be described by way of the definition of irony (akin to our general sense of allegory) given by the U.S. deconstructionist literary critic Paul de Man (1919–1983): permanent parabasis or sustained interruption from a source relating "otherwise" (allegerein = speaking otherwise) to the continuous unfolding of the main system of meaning—both the formalization of deconstruction and, on another level of abstraction, the logic of global development. Further, if the splitting off of socialism from capitalism is perceived as grounded in the prior economy between self-preservation and the call of the other, this setting-to-work of deconstruction without reserve, quite unlike the failures of establishing an alternative system, may be described as a constant pushing away—a differing and a deferral—of the capital-ist harnessing of the social productivity of capital.

The structureless structure described above, where an item of a pair is both available and unavailable in an experience of the impossible, can be aesthetically figured in various ways. In the novel Beloved (1987), Toni Morrison places the "Africa" that is the prehistory of Afro-America or New World African—to be strictly distinguished from the named contemporary continent—in the undeconstructible experience of the impossible. As this call of the other is lived in the calculus of an Afro-America conscious of its rights, Beloved figures this disclosure, in effacement, as a maternal sacrifice, "not to be passed on." History requires it on the impossible passage, and does not stay the mother's hand. The central character kills her child to save it from the white world. The ring of the covenant—the brand on her own nameless slave-mother's breast—does not ensure continuity. Historiality is not changed into genealogy.

Two matters should be mentioned in conclusion. First: Derrida's own position, as a Franco-Maghrebian—being of Algerian Jewish extraction he has described himself this way— tends not toward global struggles in a general rather than a deconstructive way: in the call for an economically aware human rights vision, advanced in Specters. His more elaborated arguments are drawn from migrancy: the double responsibility of the New Europe (The Other Heading, 1991), a critique of "ontology"—something like (multi)cultural identitarianism—"an axiomatics linking indissociably the ontological value of present-being [on] to its situation, to the stable and presentable determination of a locality, the topos of a territory, native soil, city, body in general," Specters, p. 82; and figures of the absolute arrivant (the undeconstructible figure of alterity which is lived as any calculable diaspora). When he refers to his early years in Algeria ("Circumferences," 1991, in Jacques Derrida), Derrida is not speaking of a country that has undergone a recent national liberation and is therefore not "postcolonial" in any precise sense. And second: the scholarship on Derrida's ethical turn and his relationship to Heidegger as well as on postcolonialism and deconstruction, when in the rare case it risks setting itself to work by breaking its frame, is still not identical with the setting to work of deconstruction outside the formalizing calculus specific to the academic institution.