

## **Almost Forgotten Deconstruction**

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*Abstract.* I distinguish two senses of the word “deconstruction.” Then I quote a passage by a critic from the 1860s which, together with trends of that time, gives rise to the question of whether deconstructive interpretation existed in the nineteenth century.

*Draft version:* Version 4 (June 14<sup>th</sup> 2022, footnotes and references added).

How old is deconstruction? The practice is especially associated with the controversial philosopher Jacques Derrida and the late 1960s is a sensible answer. I suspect there are cases of it around a century earlier, but first it is useful to have a sense of what deconstruction is, and for some readers that may be where the chief value of this paper lies. Here is an attempt to specify one sense.

*(Philosophical sense)* A person has deconstructed in this sense if and only if:

- (i) There is a tradition of drawing a contrast between two things, A and B.
- (ii) This tradition values A over B, because B is thought parasitic upon A.
- (iii) The person successfully argues against this devaluation by providing a compelling philosophical reason for thinking that A actually depends on B.

Deconstruction in this sense is a philosophical move (see also McDowell 1999: 89). But doesn't deconstruction have to do with literature?

One answer to this question is that there are deconstructions in this sense which matter for the interpretation of literature, such as of speech and writing or the literal and the metaphorical (Derrida 1977; Morris 2000). Another answer is that there is a different sense of deconstruction to do with interpretation, such as interpretation of literature.

*(Interpretive sense)* A person has deconstructed in this sense if and only if:

- (i) There is a tradition of interpreting a work, such as a literary work, which regards some parts of the work as marginal and other parts as of central importance.
- (ii) The deconstructor presents an interpretation of the work which involves taking a part which was previously regarded as marginal, within an interpretive tradition, and according it central importance.
- (iii) The interpretation fits with the relevant evidence no less than the best traditional interpretations.

This distinction between two senses, a philosophical sense and a sense to do with literary interpretation, seems against the spirit of deconstruction, which is about overcoming a division between the philosophical and the literary, but I think the wider influence of the movement is to leave behind these two senses, or roughly these two.<sup>1</sup> It is in this second sense that I think it likely that there were some cases of deconstruction in the second half of the nineteenth century and below I wish to present why.

I opened a book of literary criticism from this period and what it said interested me, for a number of reasons. I wrote down the following passage:

When I first proposed to myself the undertaking of a Course of Lectures upon the Genius of Shakespeare, my first feeling was, that I could scarcely hope to originate any new theory upon the principal characters in his dramas; for they have been subjected to and have passed the ordeal of the most acute critical intellects of the most civilised nations of the world during more than a century past; and therefore for a while I suspended my intention. But then it occurred

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<sup>1</sup> A solution to the splitting of senses into the philosophical and the interpretive is to say that deconstruction proper involves careful interpretation of a text which itself undermines a philosophical dualism. See Edward 2022a.

to me that the secondary movements, the “subordinate characters” in his plots, have, to a considerable extent, been neglected,—the satellites of the several systems have been merged in the rays of their presiding and controlling suns. Of these “subordinate characters” it became my “hint to speak,” according to my homely wit; and I hoped to show passages of beauty that have been either too superficially, even thoughtlessly read, mayhap altogether overlooked, and some delicate points of character that have been undeservedly neglected.

(Clarke 1863: 3)

*Here* one might take the critic to be saying, “I don’t know how to say anything new about the central stuff in Shakespeare, but there are some interesting new points I can make about the marginal stuff.” Probably secondary or subordinate does not quite mean marginal, but let us grant that this crude interpretation is correct. One can readily imagine a critic who has a similar thought and then thinks, “But no one is going to pay attention to such an honest and humble researcher. What I am going to have to do is find some reason for saying that this marginal stuff is actually most important.”

In his essay “The Unknown Public,” Wilkie Collins discusses the penny journals for sale in stationers and tobacco shops, with their serial stories and talk of who does not know the author of Robinson Crusoe, though he cannot find anyone who admits to reading them. So we have journals which sell and people who write fiction for these journals and some literature talk. Ambitious people immersed in literature, in a prestigious sense, though outside familiar literary circles, were surely involved. My mind leaps slightly to the belief that in this time, there were also ambitious critics who planned to focus on material that has been ignored and say, “This is the important stuff!”<sup>2</sup> And occasionally, very rarely perhaps, these people

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<sup>2</sup> A more contemporary case is discussed in Edward 2022b.

had a case. (But you would not want to bring them back! The things they would have been prepared to do to realize their ambitions, including plenty of slander.)

## References

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