

Doing History: Deconstructing Text and Context

Willy Maley

Whatever one might think of the theoretical positions of Michel Foucault there is no doubt that it is he, and not Jacques Derrida, who has actually done some history rather than just talk about it.

Terry Eagleton, "Last Post" (110)

Terry Eagleton's view of deconstruction's refusal to engage with 'history' is shared by many 'Left' English literary theorists. History, whether it is understood, as in the above quotation from Eagleton, as archival research undertaken within the university, or, equally typically, as that which exists, not simply outside the university, but absolutely anterior to discourse, is more immediately associated with Michel Foucault's 'archaeological' project –investigating the discursive formations around institutions, professions, and disciplines– than with the writings of Jacques Derrida. As Eagleton puts it, Foucault has, at least in the eyes of his pupils, "actually done some history". Derrida has only deigned to "talk about it", and that only very rarely.¹

Foucault's historical approach to discourse analysis has found a place within the British empirical tradition much more readily than the seeming 'textualism' of deconstruction because its critical categories and rhetorical presentation fit easily into the established forms of academic work. Deconstruction is not so smoothly absorbed into the teaching system exactly because it refuses to speak the language of the academy, and, in this refusal, it questions those oppositional discourses which have already found a place of prominence in that system. Derrida responds to those who would charge him with being apolitical by arguing that there is an alternative to the dogmatic, stereotyped forms of political protest, and by suggesting that deconstruction avoids the pitfalls of conventional Left intellectual discourse:

... in many departments what is considered threatening is not a politically revolutionary position, if it is expressed in a coded and traditional way, rather, it is something which sometimes doesn't look political but disturbs the traditional ways of reading, under-

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standing, discussing, writing, using rhetoric, etc. –because this undermines, or not necessarily undermines, but at least discovers, what was hidden in the institution. (Derrida, “Some Questions and Responses” 256)

In an essay which announced a shift in his work from a history of modern institutions, and the discourses which informed them, to a history of subjectivity, Foucault, having stressed that institutions “constitute a privileged point of observation, diversified, concentrated, put in order, and carried through to the highest point of their efficacy,” goes on to suggest that we:

analyse institutions from the standpoint of power relations, rather than vice versa, and that the fundamental point of anchorage of the relationships, even if they are embodied and crystallized in an institution, is to be found outside the institution. (Foucault, “The Subject and Power” 791)

For Derrida, there is no “outside the institution”. Derrida’s perception of the deconstructive approach to history differs from the Eagletonian stereotype of a determined ahistoricism:

One of the most necessary gestures of a deconstructive understanding of history consists...in transforming things by exhibiting writings, genres, textual strata (which is also to say –since there is no outside-the-text, right– exhibiting institutional, economic, political, pulsive [and so on] ‘realities’) that have been repulsed, repressed, devalorized, minoritized, deligitimated, occulted by hegemonic canons, in short, all that which certain forces have attempted to melt down into the anonymous mass of an unrecognizable culture, to ‘(bio)degrade’ in the common compost of a memory said to be living and organic. (Derrida, “Biodegradables” 821)

Surely few Foucauldians would wish for a more lucid manifesto for their own project?

While deconstruction and discourse analysis remain two of the most influential ways of reading in contemporary interdisciplinary theory, the uncritical adoption of Foucault by a number of English critics has meant that Derrida, somehow seen as ‘on the other side’, has been either denounced or dismissed, or both. The public exchange between Derrida and Foucault which inaugurated, at least in the minds of some readers, the irreconcilable split between these two theorists, has been amply documented.⁶ I want to suggest, briefly, that the selection process which has permitted Foucault to gain preeminence over Derrida in certain sections of English academia, particularly amongst so-called ‘cultural materialists’ and ‘marxists,’ though frequently presented as a triumph of engaged, political commitment over abstract, ahistorical idealisation, is in fact laden with questionable assumptions about the nature of history and language.

In “Cogito and the History of Madness”, a review of Foucault’s first major work, *Madness and Civilization* (1961), Derrida attacked Foucault’s reconstructive “archaeology of silence”. Derrida’s chief objection to this archaeological project –a history of the exclusion, since Descartes, of the speech of madness from the discourse of reason– was that it reproduced the repressive hypothesis it set out to undermine, an hypothesis which Derrida felt was itself mistaken:

Is not an archaeology, even of silence, a logic, that is, an organized language, a project, an order, a sentence, a syntax, a work? ... A history, that is, an archaeology against reason doubtless cannot be written, for, despite all appearances to the contrary, the concept of history has always been a rational one. It is the meaning of ‘history’ or *archia* that should have been questioned first, perhaps, a writing that exceeds, by questioning them, the values ‘origin,’ ‘reason’ and ‘history’ could not be contained within the metaphysical closure of an archaeology. (“Cogito and the History of Madness” 36)

Thus Derrida indicates that the Foucauldian idea of reconstructing madness as the Other of reason calls upon reason for that very act of reconstruction. Instead, Derrida proposes –and he generously acknowledges Foucault’s own allusions in this direction– that the history of madness, coincidental as it is with the madness of history, might be used to deconstruct the notion of historicity. This corrective to Foucault’s project is commensurate with Derrida’s continuing work on the reading and writing of histories.

Foucault’s response to Derrida’s criticisms was unequivocal:

Today Derrida is the most decisive representative of the [Classical] system in its final brilliance; the reduction of discursive practice to textual traces; the elision of the events that are produced there in order to retain nothing but marks for a reading; the invention of voices behind texts in order not to have to analyse the modes of implication of the subject in discourse; assigning the spoken and the unspoken in the text to an originary place in order not to have to reinstate the discursive practices in the field of transformations where they are effected.

I do not say that it is a metaphysics, metaphysics itself or its closure, which is hidden in this ‘textualization’ of discursive practice. I shall go much further: I shall say that it is a trifling, historically well-determined pedagogy which very visibly reveals itself. (cited in Harari 41)

Note here the way in which Foucault opposes “discursive practice” to “textual traces”, as though the latter were easily assimilated into the former, and as if it were simply a matter of a negative ‘reduction’ of his work, rather than a positive redaction.

If the differences between Derrida and Foucault are significant, so too are the similarities. The competitive domain of academia forces critics to make choices; to elect patrons; to form 'schools of thought'. There is often little room for compromise. Yet it could be argued that Derrida's generalised notion of text and some version of the theory of discourse have shared concerns. Certainly, recent statements by the founder of deconstruction on the one hand, and a follower of Foucault on the other, suggest that there is potential common ground. Derrida's own definition of text does not quite square with Foucault's account of the textualism of deconstruction:

... text, as I use the word, is not the book. No more than writing or trace, it is not limited to the paper which you cover with your graphism. It is precisely for strategic reasons that I found it necessary to recast the concept of text by generalizing it almost without limit, in any case without present or perceptible limit, without any limit that is. That's why there is nothing 'beyond the text'. That's why the text is always a field of forces: heterogeneous, differential, open, and so on. That's why deconstructive readings and writings are concerned not only with library books, with discourses, with conceptual and semantic contents. They are not simply analyses of discourses... They are also effective or active interventions, in particular political and institutional interventions that transform contexts without limiting themselves to theoretical or constative utterances even though they must also produce such utterances. (Derrida, "But Beyond..." 366-67)

Conversely, Ernesto Laclau's view of the materiality of discursive practices sits awkwardly beside Derrida's separation of discourse analysis from "particular political and institutional interventions":

By 'discursive' I do not mean that which refers to 'text' narrowly defined, but to the ensemble of the phenomena in and through which social production of meaning takes place, an ensemble which constitutes society as such. The discursive is not, therefore, being conceived as a level or even as a dimension of the social, but rather as being co-extensive with the social as such. This means that the discursive does not constitute a superstructure (since it is the very condition of all social practice) or, more precisely, that all social practice constitutes itself as such insofar as it produces meaning. Because there is nothing specifically social which is constituted outside the discursive, it is clear that the non-discursive is not opposed to the discursive as if it were a matter of two separate levels. History and society are infinite text ... Economic practice should thus be considered as discourse.³

This passage has prompted one reader to accuse Laclau of seeing "peasants being driven off their lands as a discursive phenomenon". If discourse,

language, and text, however they are ultimately theorised, are conceived of, first and foremost, as material practices, are they not then part of a physical whole, and does not this 'fact' go against the grain of any naive separation of 'History' and 'history' such as that invoked by Eagleton, following Foucault?

Recent work on 'the ethics of reading' suggests that there ought to be certain rules of engagement in theoretical debates amongst professionals.⁴ It may be that these protocols of reading are more suited to Theory with a capital T than they are to a world in which competing theories are pitted violently against one another for stakes that are often too high for the protagonists to pause for ethical considerations. If there is a strong argument for a prescriptive ethics, or a *politesses* of reading, then there is surely a case to be made for a politics of reading, one which, while encouraging the vigorous elaboration of one position, would demand that other sides of a particular issue or question were also addressed. It is with just such a politics of reading in mind that I now wish to read Foucault.⁵

I shall focus upon a remarkable passage in Volume One of the *History of Sexuality*, one of his most mature works, which seems to me to highlight the dangers inherent in any project as ambitious as that undertaken by Foucault, namely, the tendency to totalise. Having introduced his critique of "the repressive hypothesis" by way of a discussion of the "incitement to discourse", singling out the anonymous Victorian autobiography *My Secret Life* as an exemplary text in the genre of confessional sexuality, Foucault proceeds to recount an historical event which unfolded in France at a time roughly contemporaneous with that book's composition:

One day in 1867, a farm hand from the village of Lapcourt, who was somewhat simple-minded, employed here then there, depending on the season, living hand-to-mouth from a little charity or in exchange for the worst sort of labour, sleeping in barns and stables, was turned in to the authorities. At the border of a field, he had obtained a few caresses from a little girl, just as he had done before and seen done by the village urchins round about him; for, at the edge of the wood, or in the ditch by the road leading to Saint-Nicolas, they would play the familiar game called 'curdled milk.' So he was pointed out by the girl's parents to the mayor of the village, reported by the mayor to the gendarmes, led by the gendarmes to the judge, who indicted him and turned him over first to a doctor, then to two other experts who not only wrote their report but also had it published. What is the significant thing about this story? The pettiness of it all; the fact that this everyday occurrence in the life of village sexuality, these inconsequential bucolic pleasures, could become, from a certain time, the object not only of a collective intolerance but of a judicial action, a medical intervention, a careful clinical examination, and an entire theoretical elaboration. The thing to note is that they went so far as to measure the brainpan, study the facial bone structure, and inspect for possible

signs of degenerescence the anatomy of this personage who up to that moment had been an integral part of village life; that they made him talk; that they questioned him concerning his thoughts, inclinations, habits, sensations, and opinions. And then, acquitting him of any crime, they decided finally to make him into a pure object of medicine and knowledge –an object to be shut away till the end of his life in the hospital at Mareville, but also one to be made known to the world of learning through a detailed analysis. One can be fairly certain that during this same period the Lapcourt schoolmaster was instructing the little villagers to mind their language and not talk about all these things aloud. But this was undoubtedly one of the conditions enabling the institutions of power to overlay this everyday bit of theatre with their solemn discourse. So it was that our society –and it was doubtless the first in history to take such measures– assembled around these timeless gestures, these barely furtive pleasures between simple-minded adults and alert children, a whole machinery for speechifying, analysing, and investigating.

Between the licentious Englishman, who earnestly recorded for his own purposes the singular episodes of his secret life, and his contemporary, this village halfwit who would give a few pennies to the little girls for favours the older ones refused him, there was without doubt a profound connection: in any case, from one extreme to the other, sex became something to say, and to say exhaustively in accordance with deployments that were varied, but all, in their own way, compelling. Whether in the form of a subtle confession in confidence or an authoritarian interrogation, sex –be it refined or rustic– had to be put into words. A great polymorphous injunction bound the Englishman and the poor Lorraine peasant alike. As history would have it the latter was named Jouy. (pp. 31-2)

Foucault's famous penchant for the minutiae of social intercourse, his passionate feel for facts, and his inordinate ability to tease out of a superficially coherent sequence of events or utterances the lineaments of a profound discontinuity –all these aspects of his methodology are evident here. But there is something missing. It will soon become obvious that Foucault reproduces the faults he so eloquently castigates 'the system' for committing. He acts as a Panopticon, casting a Cyclopean eye over only one side of an incredibly complex social narrative. Settling on the familiar theme of the individual versus the bureaucracy, he champions one participant. In doing so, he excludes from analysis matters which may appear at first sight marginal, tangential, incidental to the discourse, but which, on closer examination, reveal themselves to be absolutely central to the text.

As a reconstruction of the past, this analysis is found wanting in a number of crucial respects. I have room here to draw attention only to the most glaring oversights. My initial point addresses Foucault's representations of Jouy's consciousness, intelligence, or presence of mind. The thing to note is that Foucault casually refers to Jouy in his opening sentence as "somewhat simple-minded". He goes on to repeat this charge when he alludes to the "barely furtive pleasures of simple-minded adults and alert children". In the concluding paragraph of his analysis, he describes the same individual as "a village halfwit". All of this sits rather awkwardly beside the eloquent outrage directed against those members of the medical profession brought in by the judge to examine Jouy. We are told:

... that they went so far as to measure the brainpan, study the facial bone structure, and inspect for possible signs of degeneration the anatomy of this personage who up to that moment had been an integral part of village life. (p. 31)

Yet, despite the cultivated tone of indignation, Foucault himself was able to come to precisely the same conclusion as the 'experts' he so articulately denounces, and without recourse to the biological chauvinism of a phrenological investigation. The disturbing equation which Foucault appears to formulate presumes an identity between manual labour and intellectual deficiency, an assumption founded not upon medical examination but, worryingly, upon an unselfconscious social prejudice.

My second point involves the question of labour and political economy. The Jouy of the closing paragraph, "this personage who up to that moment had been an integral part of village life," is a very different personage from the Jouy of the opening paragraph. We recall that this earlier Jouy was "employed here then there, depending on the season, living hand-to-mouth from a little charity in return for the worst sort of labor, sleeping in barns and stables." What kind of integration is being talked about here? What authorities would remove from the community a personage who was an integral part of that community? Was it not the very fact that Jouy, as a victim of the socio-economic changes then ravaging the French countryside, was no longer an indispensable element in the production process, which encouraged the local authorities in their moves to investigate, interrogate, and, ultimately, to incarcerate this "integral part of village life"? Is there anything 'timeless' or 'eternal' about the preponderance of surplus agrarian labour in Bonapartist France?

Foucault's version of events is curiously at odds with other comments he has made, after Marx, concerning (relative) surplus labour in nineteenth-century France (*Discipline and Punish* 221). Here, he is more interested in defending the old order of things than in condemning the new. What gets left out of this account altogether is the way in which the emergence of a whole series of professions and institutions of power/knowledge coincided with the creation of a mass of unwanted labour. Jouy's withdrawal from society is as much about responses to the

perceived threat of social disorder from masterless men as it is about control of (male) sexuality.

My third point concerns one character in Foucault's critical narrative who receives scant attention during the course of his subtle and searching analysis – the little girl with whom Jouy plays the “familiar game called ‘curdled milk’”. It is significant that Foucault chooses to retain this euphemistic term for what actually happened between Jouy and the little girl. Perhaps the reader's sympathy for the male victim of Foucault's account –and it is obvious throughout that it is Jouy that we are being asked to identify with, his plight we are meant to deplore– would have been modified had other expressions such as ‘masturbation’, ‘interference’ or ‘paedophilia’ been used. Foucault's negative thesis on the Enlightenment –broadly, he argues that new and sophisticated forms of oppression went hand-in-hand with putative liberalisation– has been the subject of adverse reviews from the bourgeois liberal tradition in Anglo-American historiography (see Stone 1987).

In my judgement, there is much to be said for the scepticism expounded by Foucault, and his pessimistic view of history is borne out by recent work on child abuse in nineteenth-century England, which suggests that state intervention on behalf of maltreated children was fuelled almost entirely by fear of delinquent disorder rather than any genuine feelings for the young person at risk. Foucault refuses to extend his critique of the Jouy case to an indictment of official hypocrisy, electing to dismiss the little girl rather than question the motives of her guardians, and in doing so he undercuts the radicalism of his arguments by being as myopically authoritarian as those whom he purports to oppose.

The act of interference itself is introduced in a carefully staged manner. Indeed, Jouy is exonerated almost immediately on the grounds that his actions were a dumb imitation of those of “the village urchins round about him”. We learn first that “he had obtained a few caresses”. Later, we are informed that he did so in exchange for a “few pennies”, and that he was compelled to resort to this activity with “little girls” due to the fact that these were “favours the older ones refused him”. In order to emphasise the mental incapacitation of Jouy, Foucault contrasts “simple-minded adults” with “alert children”. At least one of them was alert enough to distinguish a childish game with a childish name from sexual abuse by an adult. What is significant about this story is not the pettiness of it all but rather its social significance. The tragedy of agrarian unemployment and its concomitant, rural poverty, is here compounded by the indefensible transgression of child abuse. In his efforts to protect Jouy from the bureaucratic authorities he so despises, Foucault is forced to defend the reprehensible actions of one unfortunate individual against the interests of another, largely-ignored victim of the events in question. Foucault elides the actual historical conditions which gave rise to Jouy's presence in a community of which he was far from being an integral part. Foucault is guilty in this instance of encyclopaedophilia, of a totalitarian, completely one-sided, all-encompassing approach to a cultural problem of exceptional density. In looking over the evidence with such a panoptic eye, he

overlooks key aspects of the socio-historical context. In defending Jouy's honour, he puts one individual before another. His passionate critique of the Panopticon devised by Jeremy Bentham for the surveillance of prisoners in early nineteenth-century England ("Panopticism", *Discipline and Punish* 195) is undermined by the fact that this Cyclopean instrument appears to be his own chosen mode of observation in recounting the Jouy case, giving rise in the end to a stultifying, cellular perspective.

Foucault is rightly renowned as an eloquent spokesperson for the deviant against the dominant, but in his partisan report upon the Jouy incident his propensity for berating the system overcomes any concern for dialectics or dialogue.⁶ The politics of Foucauldian discourse analysis are here seen to falter visibly before questions of class and gender. Foucault's reading of the text on Jouy is clearly weighted in favour of male pleasure and activity as against female passivity, receptivity, complicity, acquiescence, and, as is implied in the allusion to "alert children", deviousness.

In spotlighting Foucault's ahistoricism and chauvinism in this particular passage, I am doing more than pointing out a blindspot in one of his numerous texts. Rather, I am arguing that the very nature of Foucault's ambitious project – archaeological, genealogical, historical – is such that he must inevitably succumb to the chauvinism of universalism. This sidelight on Foucauldian discourse theory brings into sharp focus the shortcomings of an approach which is, on the one hand, systematising, and, on the other, reductive. To contend that this one example of misreading throws into doubt the whole critical enterprise of Foucault might seem an extreme position to assume, but it agrees with Foucault's own insistence upon the tangential case as one which reveals the workings of the system in its entirety. In grappling with Marxism, Foucault urges us to view the labour camps of the Gulag Archipelago not as an aberration, but as an indictment of the system of thought which effectively brought them into being:

Like all political technologies, the Gulag institution has its history, its transformations and transpositions, its functions and effects. The internment practiced in the Classical age forms in all likelihood a part of its archaeology. The Gulag question, on the other hand, involves a political choice. There are those who pose it and those who don't. (cited in Gordon 135-136)

Foucault poses it, and for him doing so means, among other things:

Refusing to question the Gulag on the basis of the texts of Marx or Lenin or to ask oneself how, through what error, deviation, misunderstanding or distortion of speculation or practice, their theory could have been betrayed to such a degree. On the contrary, it means questioning all these theoretical texts, however old, from the standpoint of the reality of the Gulag. (Gordon 135-136)

Thus the Gulag question seems to undermine Marxist political theory by allegedly exposing its totalitarian tendencies. Marx and Lenin themselves would have approved of Foucault's logic, since they considered colonialism to be the most obvious starting-point for a critique of capitalism on the grounds that it was at the so-called periphery of the system of capitalist production that the contradictions inherent therein were most apparent. The pattern of revolutions in the twentieth century and the accompanying shifts in the balance of global power bears witness to the accuracy of this theory of marginal perturbations unsettling an entire social system.

Foucault, far from undermining Marxist theories of the state and revolution, is endorsing them when he calls for the Gulag to be taken as a barometer of the political climate in order to suggest the inclemency of Marxism-Leninism. In a similar fashion, the proscription of the little girl from what for Foucault is essentially Jouy's story, reveals the extent to which his own system of thought is susceptible to a total eclipse of the Other. His panoptic focus upon Jouy as the sole victim of historical circumstances in the episode recorded above –and even on this question of history, Foucault's supposed forte, there are, as I have indicated, key omissions– suggests that the archaeology of knowledge can become an archaeology of ignorance.

Foucault's history is gendered, and this fact must place a question mark against those male critics who have eagerly adopted his insights without pausing to consider his oversights. A materialist "history of bodies", such as Foucault intends in *The History of Sexuality*, is an incomplete project if it concerns itself exclusively with male bodies at the expense of female ones, and if its focus on the individual is at the expense of sensitivity to social class and context. Gayatri Spivak has questioned Foucault's conception of subjectivity: "Foucault often seems to conflate 'individual' and 'subject'" (Spivak 274).⁷ We may see in Foucault's discursive practice a fetishism of the individual, and, alongside the theoretical retention of such a seemingly constant human category, a recapitulation of bourgeois individualism.

It is ironic that Foucault's history of sexuality, unlike his archaeology of madness, questions the repressive hypothesis traditionally mooted by radical philosophers, preferring instead to suggest that sexuality is forced to speak its own name rather than being buried in some archaic silence. If in that earlier work Foucault was preoccupied with the representation of repression, he is turning in his later work towards expression as a mode of repression. This new approach has more in common with psychoanalysis than with history, and brings Foucault –and it is precisely here that the irony resides– in line with Derrida, contrary to his previous antipathy. Again, Spivak contends that "Foucault's work, early and late, is supported by too simple a notion of repression" (Spivak 309, n. 11).

From the fabulous opening of Foucault's 'history', with its retention of the juvenile expression 'curdled milk,' to the bad taste of the pun on the proper name of the paedophile at its climax, we are at one and the same time subjected to an

elegant denouncement of the French municipal authorities in the early nineteenth century and a petty-bourgeois, male chauvinist vindication of child-molesting. In the English edition a superfluous translator's note informs the reader of the phonological resemblance between Jouy and the past participle of *jouir*, the French verb meaning, among other things, to come in the sexual sense. It is when Foucault indulges, through his authoritative discourse of order, in the dubious politics of naming and gaming –a pursuit many Foucauldians prefer to impute wholly to Derrida and deconstruction– that he lays himself open to the punishing discipline of a deconstructive Marxist reading.

I would like to conclude by offering some ways of thinking about deconstruction that open up, and upset, or at least reorient, the notion of text and context. Deconstruction is a general theory of text, not a 'textualization' of politics but a politicization of text, of text as a system rather than as a book bound by covers. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines text as "the original words of author especially as opposed to paraphrase of or commentary on them (*there is nothing about this in the text; the text is hopelessly corrupt*); passage of Scripture quoted as authority or especially chosen as subject of sermon etc.; subject, theme; main body of book as opposed to notes, pictures, etc.; textbook, book prescribed for study, standard book in branch of study, instructively typical." In *Of Grammatology* (1967), Derrida first formulated the phrase that has haunted him ever since: "There is no extra-text", or there is no frame, often interpreted as: "There is nothing outside –or beyond– the text" (158). This is the impression of deconstruction that sees it as a form of close reading blind to larger questions of history and politics, a sort of ultra-formalism. But when Derrida used the phrase he had something else in mind, specifically a desire to undo the opposition between close readings and contextual ones. Thus in a recent essay in *Critical Inquiry* he writes:

... "there is no outside-the-text" signifies that one never accedes to a text without some relation to its contextual opening and that a context is not made up only of what is so trivially called a text, that is, the words of a book or the more or less biodegradable paper document in a library. If one does not understand this initial transformation of the concepts of text ...[and] ... context, one understands nothing about nothing of deconstruction ("Biodegradables" 841)

Earlier, in another essay, Derrida reminds his readers that when he says that "there is nothing outside the text" he has in mind a new, expanded and revised notion of textuality:

... all those boundaries that form the running border of what used to be called a text, of what we once thought this word could identify, i.e. the supposed end and beginning of a work, the unity of a corpus, the title, the margins, the signatures, the referential realm outside the frame, and so forth. What has happened ... is a sort of

overrun that spoils all these boundaries and divisions and forces us to extend the accredited concept, the dominant notion of a 'text' ... that is no longer a finished corpus of writing, some content enclosed in a book or its margins, but a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces. ("Living On: Border Lines" 81)⁸

In fact, there is nothing outside the text, far from implying that there is only the *text*, can be taken to mean that there is only *con-text*, which is why, as Derrida insists:

An 'internal' reading will always be insufficient. And moreover impossible. Question of context, as everyone knows, there is nothing but context, and therefore: there is no outside-the-text. ("Biodegradables" 873).⁹

Derrida's enlarged notion of text has been seen, curiously in an academic context, as a reduction of politics. Derrida denies the equation of textualization with trivialization. He maintains that:

It was never our wish to extend the reassuring notion of the text to a whole extra-textual realm and to transform the world into a library by doing away with all boundaries ... but ... we sought rather to work out the theoretical and practical system of these margins, these borders, once more, from the ground up. ("Living On: Border Lines" 84)

Derrida is out to circumvent both the 'text as world' and the 'world as text', the book/reality dichotomy.

He is also out to subvert the opposition between close reading (all the formalisms) and contextual reading (all the sociologies of literature). Derrida likens reading to dunking for apples, head submerged, then up gasping for air. Into the text again, and up for air. In *The Truth in Painting* Derrida writes:

Everything comes down to one of those reading exercises with magnifying glass which calmly claim to lay down the law, in police fashion indeed.

-['close reading'] can always ... become police-like ... [But] It can also arm you against that other (secret) police which, on the pretext of delivering you from the chains of writing and reading ... hastily lock you up in a supposed outside of the text: the pre-text of perception, of living speech, of bare hands, of living creation, of real history, etc. Pretext indeed to bash on with the most hackneyed, crude, and tired of discourses. And it's also with supposed nontext, naked pre-text, the immediate, that they try to intimidate you, to subject you to the oldest, most dogmatic, most sinisterly

authoritarian of programs, to the most massive mediatizing machines. ("The Truth in Painting" 326-27)

So, for deconstruction the distinction between text and context is bogus. A con-text, because this text is not impervious to politics, culture, history and so on, and this context is not something non-textual. Derrida again:

Either the contextual difference changes everything, because it determines *from within*: in this case, it can hardly be bracketed, even provisionally. *Or* it leaves certain aspects intact, and this signifies that these aspects can always separate themselves from the allegedly 'original' context in order to export or to graft themselves elsewhere while continuing to function in one way or another ... In order that this either/or not be an alternative or an insurmountable logical contradiction, the value of context must be reelaborated according to a new logic ... Every sign ... can ... break with every given context, is absolutely illimitable. This does not imply that the mark is valid outside of a context, but on the contrary that there are only contexts without any centre or absolute anchoring. ("Limited Inc" 220)

This last point relates to the deconstructive idea of iterability. Iterability, according to Derrida, "both puts down roots in the unity of a context and immediately opens this non-saturable context onto a recontextualization" ("This Strange Institution Called Literature" 63).

Deconstruction is in one sense deliberately eccentric, working in the margins. As Terry Eagleton puts it in *Literary Theory*:

Derrida's ... typical habit of reading is to settle on some apparently peripheral fragment in the work –a footnote, a recurrent minor term or image, a casual allusion– and work it tenaciously through to the point where it threatens to dismantle the oppositions which govern the text as a whole. (133-34)

As Derrida himself says:

I do not 'concentrate' in my reading ... either exclusively or primarily on those points that appear to be the most 'important', 'central', 'crucial'. Rather, I deconcentrate, and it is the secondary, eccentric, lateral, marginal, parasitic, borderline cases which are 'important' to me and are the source of many things, such as pleasure, but also insight into the general functioning of a textual system. ("Limited Inc" 209)

The margins, then, represent examples and exemplary instances of something apparently much larger and more important:

... 'marginal, fringe' cases ... always constitute the most certain and most decisive indices wherever essential conditions are to be grasped. ("Limited Inc" 209)

Of course, there is a sense in which whenever we quote from any text, whenever we write criticism, we are writing on the margins. Every example, or quotation, or excerpt is doing the work of metonymy, the part standing for the (imagined) whole. I have focused on a fringe case in Foucault in order to suggest that the textualism of deconstruction may be more productive than the grand claims of discourse theory.

*Department of English Literature
University of Glasgow*

Notes

1. In this essay my chief aim is to insist upon the plurality of history, to think of histories rather than history, and to envisage these histories as having no simple, unmediated relation to 'the past' or 'society', for these terms have no meaning outside of the constructions, representations, signs, and so on, through which we realise them. It is not a question, then, of language and society, but of the language of society and of the society of language. This is why Foucault's theory of discourse, anchored as it is in language *per se*, spawns precisely the sort of theoretical division between history as text and history as context upheld by Eagleton. Cf. Poster 113.
2. See for example Foucault, 'My body, this paper, this fire,' pp. 9-29; Derrida, 'Cogito and the history of madness,' pp. 31-68; and the articles by Deborah Cook, Bernard Flynn, John Frow, Suzanne Gearhart, Elie Georges Noujain, Edward W. Said, Alan D. Schrift, Michael Sprinker, and Ann Wordsworth.
3. Ernesto Laclau, cited by A. Belden Fields, pp. 149-50. The quotation which follows is Fields's own comment on Laclau's extended definition of text (p. 150).
4. See J. Hillis Miller (1987) and Christopher Norris (1988).
5. This part of my essay develops an argument first rehearsed in my paper "Undermining Archaeology: From Reconstruction to Deconstruction" (1990).
6. For a Foucaultian account of 'transgression' see Dollimore 1986.
7. See also Derrida's indifference to the much-vaunted post-structuralist question of the subject in "Biodegradables", p. 826: 'just so many words that have no meaning for me'.
8. See also Derrida, "Form and Meaning: A Note on the Phenomenology of Language" (1973).
9. In a recent essay on *The Tempest*, Francis Barker and Peter Hulme use the word 'con-text' in order to highlight this problem: 'Con-texts with a hyphen, to signify a break from the inequality of the usual text/context relationship. Con-texts are themselves *texts* and must be *read with*: they do not simply make up a background' (Barker and Hulme 236, n. 7).

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Willy Maley

Doing History: Deconstructing Text and Context

Για πολλούς Άγγλους 'Αριστερούς' θεωρητικούς της λογοτεχνίας, η 'ιστορία' συσχετίζεται πιο άμεσα με το 'αρχαιολογικό' έργο του Michel Foucault, που διερευνά τους θεωρητικούς σχηματισμούς γύρω από ιδρύματα, επαγγέλματα και επιστήμες, παρά με τα έργα του Jacques Derrida. Αυτό που συνήθως μένει έξω από αυτές τις συμπληρωματικές θεωρήσεις της ιστορίας είναι η ιστορικότητα των κειμένων και η κειμενικότητα της ιστορίας, δηλαδή, οι τρόποι με τους οποίους ένας πολιτισμός αναπαριστά το παρελθόν του σε είδη που δεν καλύπτονται από την περιορισμένη έννοια της λέξης 'κείμενο'. Μια υλιστική σύλληψη της ιστορίας θα ερχόταν σε αντιδιαστολή με το αυταπόδεικτο της ιστορίας ως πλαίσιο. Αυτό το άρθρο τονίζει περισσότερο την πολλαπλότητα των ιστοριών παρά την ιστορία και οραματίζεται αυτές τις ιστορίες σε μία σχέση με 'το παρελθόν' και 'την κοινωνία' που δεν είναι απλή και άμεση, γιατί αυτοί οι όροι δεν έχουν νόημα έξω από τις δομές, τις αναπαραστάσεις, τα σημεία και ούτω καθ' εξής, μέσα από τα οποία τις αντιλαμβανόμαστε. Δεν είναι, λοιπόν, θέμα ιστορίας και κοινωνίας, αλλά γλώσσας της κοινωνίας και κοινωνίας της γλώσσας.