

اللغة الأدبية والتفكيك: دراسة تقلبات المعنى وتناقضاته

اثر عبد العباس شاطي الحار

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اثر عبد العباس شاطي الحار

مدرس مساعد - المديرية العامة للتربية في محافظة النجف الأشرف

yasermaryam10@gmail.com

المستخلص

تجادل هذه الورقة بأن فكرة التفكيك قد تم النظر فيها بشكل مفرط، ومع ذلك، فإن ممارسة التفكيك كانت مفقودة بشكل ملحوظ في الدراسات الأدبية المعاصرة. بدلاً من فهم فكرة التفكيك كنوع من البنية الفلسفية، تسعى هذه الورقة إلى استعادة الممارسة كأداة لقراءة النصوص الدقيقة التي تظهر عدم الاستقرار الأساسي للمحتوى الدلالي للغة الأدب نفسها. من خلال مفاهيم الديفرانس، الأثر، والمعارضة الثنائية كما عُرِّفت، على سبيل المثال، في أعمال جاك دريدا، تسعى هذه الورقة إلى توضيح الطرق التي يكون بها المحتوى الدلالي للنص دائماً مؤجلاً ومتناقضاً على ذاته، وهيكلته كما هو الحال حول المعارضات الثنائية التي هي بدورها غير مستقرة. تدافع هذه الورقة ضد النماذج التفسيرية التي ترى ممارسة التفكيك كنوع من التمرين الوصفي الذي يُعرّف في النهاية بتراكم الأطروحات التي يمكن التعبير عنها كسلسلة من التعريفات النهائية، داعية إلى نهج تحليلي أكثر تركيزاً يسعى إلى زعزعة استقرار معارضة ثنائية واحدة داخل النص نفسه. تعيد هذه الورقة التفاعل مع الأزمات الأخلاقية لقراءة التفكيك كطريقة تبرز عدم الاستقرار الأساسي للمحتوى الدلالي للنص، حتى مع مقاومة هذا المحتوى لأي نوع من الصيغ المرجعية المستقرة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التفكيك؛ ديفرانس؛ عدم الاستقرار اللغوي؛ المعارضة الثنائية؛ المعنى الأدبي

Literary Language and Deconstruction: A Study of Meaning's Fluctuations and Contradictions

Aathar Abdulabbas Shatti Alhar

Assistant Lecturer \ General Directorate of Education in Najaf Governorate

yasermaryam10@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper argues that the idea of deconstruction has been too thoroughly theorized, however, and that the practice of deconstruction has been demonstrably lacking in contemporary studies of literature. Instead of understanding the idea of deconstruction as some kind of philosophical construct, this paper seeks to restore the practice as a tool of close textual reading that demonstrates the fundamental instability of the semantic content of literary language itself. Through the concepts of *différance*, trace, and binary opposition as defined, for example, by the work of Jacques Derrida, this paper seeks to outline the ways in which the semantic content of the text is always already deferred and contradictory upon itself, structured as it is around binary oppositions that are themselves unstable. This paper argues against explanatory models that see the practice of deconstruction as some kind of descriptive exercise defined ultimately by the accumulation of theses that can be expressed as a series of terminal definitions, advocating for a more concentratedly analytical approach that seeks to destabilize a single binary opposition within the text itself. This paper reengages the ethical dilemmas of deconstructive reading as a method that highlights the fundamental instability of the semantic content of the text, even as this content resists any kind of stable referential formulations.

Keywords: Deconstruction; *Différance*; Linguistic Instability; Binary Opposition; Literary Meaning

1. Introduction

Literary language has traditionally been considered a vehicle reaching toward coherence, unity, and semantic constancy, even in cases where ambiguity and contradiction are prominent. Conventional literary criticism, be it formalist, structuralist, or thematic, often rested on the assumption that meaning, far from being simple, finally consolidates into significant patterns determined by authorial intent, culture, and linguistic structures. The arrival of deconstruction constitutes a profound rejection of this assumption, not in negating meaning but in exposing the mechanisms whereby meaning seems to consolidate even as it uninstalls. Paradoxically, in view of its revolutionary potential, deconstruction has gradually been domesticated by literary criticism as a particular intellectual attitude rather than a direct analytical practice, resulting in a contradictory situation in which an analytic practice keyed toward instability has, in fact, achieved conceptual closure.

However, the intervention of Derridean theory in the realms of philosophy and literary criticism does not propose a new system of interpretation but rather problematizes the very idea itself, especially those systems that are based upon binary oppositions, binary logic, or concepts of metaphysical presence. After all, as Derrida has famously argued, “there is no outside-text”.¹ Too readily, this position has been conflated with linguistic solipsism, but what this really reflects is the constant constitution of difference as a way to preclude semantic closure. The problem arises when this position is asserted as an ideological prescription rather than being worked out in the intricacies of language itself, where the problems of destabilization are not theoretically, but rather linguistically, manifest.

Indeed, contemporary literary studies often refer to deconstruction through a limited vocabulary that includes terms such as *différance*, *trace*, or *aporia*, while maintaining the very practices that deconstruction itself was supposed to subvert. As literary critic Christopher Norris reminds us, “deconstruction ‘is not a set of ready-made concepts but a mode of reading that resists conceptual closure’”.² When literary critics merely comment on it, they run the risk of turning deconstruction into a kind of meta-discourse that explains away textual instabilities without, however, illuminating how such instabilities function at the level of language. The effect is to consecrate critical talk about instability in ways that, wittingly or not, restore interpretive authority.

¹ Derrida, Jacques. *Dissemination*. Translated by Barbara Johnson, U of Chicago P, 1981, p.158.

² Norris, Christopher. *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice*. 3rd ed., Routledge, 2002, p.19

This paper begins with the assumption that deconstruction must be recuperated as a kind of close reading that takes place from within a text and not from above it, and that reveals its instability in terms of a scrupulous attention to how a dominant binary undoes its hierarchy. All this resonates with Derrida's concern that deconstruction "is not a method and cannot be reduced to one"³, although this anti-methodological stance does not imply a responsibility in methodology on its own behalf. In fact, it demands a concern with language that goes beyond any kind of thematic or philosophical generalizing.

Meaning, as this article will argue, is always already in motion, not because words lack specific meanings but because it is always structured on the basis of difference and temporal postponement. Différance, as a concept proposed by Derrida, "produces what it differs"⁴, which specifies a process rather than a structure, overturning the understanding of meaning as a recoverable presence. The literary text does not avoid this process but rather reinforces this process of figural multiplicity, narrative enclosure, and rhetorical indeterminacy. Thus, Paul de Man: "The literary voice, like all voice, is a linguistic structure that undoes the claims it seems to make"⁵, and meaning comes into being on the basis of self-interruption rather than self-assertion.

Nonetheless, a lack of stability in meaning does not lead to interpretive chaos. One common objection to deconstruction has been that it undermines interpretive responsibility in favor of a relativistic thesis. This objection can be found in the arguments of a critic such as E. D. Hirsch regarding the dangers of indeterminacy in meaning when he writes: "the very possibility of valid interpretation" is endangered by indeterminacy. Such a view assumes that a lack of stability in meaning is a problem because meaning has to be stable in order for the critic to be responsible. This thesis will challenge that assumption.

Through a focus on a single pre-eminent binary within a literary text, rather than spread throughout a series of oppositions, the current research proposes a cautious form of deconstructive criticism capable of showing how, through internal contradictions, hierarchical systems undermine themselves. These binary oppositions—presence/absence, speech/writing, reason/emotion, self/other, to name a few—serve not merely to structure

³ Derrida, Jacques. *Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundation of Authority"*. Translated by Mary Quaintance, Routledge, 1992, p.41.

⁴ Derrida, Jacques. *Margins of Philosophy*. Translated by Alan Bass, U of Chicago P, 1982, p.11.

⁵ de Man, Paul. *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*, p.9.

meanings, but also to produce contradictions in those meanings, placing them in a position of dependency on the very thing they suppress. The theory for such an analysis is provided in Derrida's assertion, "the secondary term is never simply passive".⁶

The value of this article lies in its resistant critical practice to "the tendency to see deconstruction either in terms of outdated theory or as nothing other than interpretive license without limit or measure." Instead, it attempts to see deconstruction "as always a critical labor that demands precision, delicacy, and critical awareness." This critical practice tries to regain deconstruction's critical efficacy by emphasizing again "the movement of meaning over its consummation, returning to the sorts of meanings that are immanently literary."

As the article tackles this problem, it connects with the wider concern expressed in the discipline about the future of theory as a whole in the study of literature. Instead of dismissing the idea of deconstruction or simply adopting its vocabulary, the current study clearly finds that deconstructive reading remains able to come up with original insights when done carefully. The meaning, as revealed in these readings, is not destroyed or random but is always re-negotiated in the unstable linguistic economy.

2. Deconstruction Reframed as Critical Method

Rather than being viewed as an attitude towards philosophy in general, deconstruction has been all too readily seen as a lack of method in particular, an interpretation that has contributed to its own exhaustion in literary studies. However, Derrida's suspiciousness towards methodological codification has all too readily been construed as an abandonment of method in favor of something less disciplined; such an interpretation ignores the levels of close attention that deconstructive reading involves. Derrida's own account makes this point apt: "deconstruction is not a method, but it has a style"⁷, that style involving itself in close attention to linguistic particulars, in contradictions, and in concept instabilities.

The redefinition of deconstruction as a critical approach, therefore, does not involve imposing a fixed procedure on it, but consists rather in recognizing that deconstruction as a reading procedure obeys a recognizable logic of inquiry. This logic involves first recognizing

⁶ Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Johns Hopkins UP, 1976, p.56.

⁷ Derrida, Jacques. *Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundation of Authority"*, p.41.

a dominant conceptual opposition in the text, moving on to uncovering tensions between them, and ending with showing how the underlying hierarchy of these oppositions tends to be subverted by the text's own rhetorical and semantic dynamics. This is not an arbitrary procedure, not simply a procedure of interpretive invention, because it is based on the text's language rather than on a procedure imported from theory.

The hesitance to acknowledge this methodological element has led to the general perception that deconstruction enables the excesses of interpretation. Critics such as J. Hillis Miller have noted that deconstruction typically reduces to an activity of making texts "say what the critic wants them to say"⁸, an equation of indeterminacy with lack of responsibility. Deconstruction as an act of reading, however, also demands an increased awareness on the part of the deconstructionist of textual constraint, since deconstructionist interpretations must issue from specifiable linguistic procedures rather than thematic explication.

The key to this paradigm shift is the differentiation made between the ideologies of explanatory deconstruction and analytical deconstruction. Explanatory strategies focus on summarizing Derridian notions in order to illustrate how texts are manifestations of *différance*, trace, or undecidability. Although not unhelpful in understanding theoretical tenets, these strategies also effectively avoid the destabilizing effect of deconstruction by encoding those notions which resist the closure of understanding. Analytical deconstructions, by contrast, do not begin with theory as a tenet but allow theoretically insightful moments in close reading.

This difference mirrors Paul de Man's assertion that "deconstruction is not something we do to texts but something texts do to themselves".⁹ Such a statement does not relieve the critic from his or her responsibility but instead changes the meaning of that responsibility from mastery to attentiveness. The critic's function is merely to detect how rhetorical elements weaken semantic assertions.

A reframing of deconstruction as an approach also requires consideration of its relationship to close reading, which is seen to be the opposite of poststructuralist ideology and associated with the New Criticism. However, this is a historically and theoretically false dichotomy. Where the New Criticism aimed to transform ambiguity into organic unity, close reading in a deconstructive vein focuses on minute detail in order to show the impossibility of this transformation. As Derrida writes, "reading must be both faithful and violent" (292) in its

⁸ Miller, J. Hillis. *Fiction and Repetition: Seven English Novels*. Harvard UP, 1982, p.278.

⁹ de Man, Paul. *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*, p.17.

substratum relationship to the text's language and its rejection of any notion of interpretive comfort.

Such fidelity to methodology can be seen especially in the analysis of binary oppositions. The structuralist critique might well argue that meaning is a product of difference via binaries, but deconstruction will demonstrate that the binaries rely on the instabilities of exclusion. The textual analysis in Derrida's study on speech and writing indicates that the secondary term is necessarily constitutive for the meaningfulness of the primary term in order to establish what he calls a reversal and a displacement. Methodologically speaking, the analysis will call for a consideration beyond the mere presence of binaries.

In addition, structuring deconstruction along the lines of a more positive approach to criticism also prepares for the charge that deconstruction has no standards of validity for interpretation. Just like the rejection of meaning, deconstruction does not negate the responsibility associated with textuality. For instance, Geoffrey Bennington summarizes deconstruction: "Deconstruction does not free interpretation from responsibility but multiplies its obligations".¹⁰ Every act of interpretation requires its validation on the basis of linguistic proof.

In this respect, it differs with thematic criticism in that it tends to abstract meaning out of language. Additionally, it differs with ideological criticism in that it can prioritize meaning over ideological objectives. In this case, the methodological technique does not ignore the historical and ethical aspects but insists that they can be realized only by going through the language. In this respect, meaning can be achieved in terms of negotiated effects.

Through the redescription of the nature of deconstruction from a repository of concepts to a reading strategy, the importance of deconstruction is restored. This is because, through restraint instead of proliferation, the strategy emphasizes precision instead of generalization. Deconstruction, hence, is not exhaustive but opens texts up to a potential beyond the control of reading, thereby reinstating the critical importance of literary language.

3. Différance and the Logic of Linguistic Slippage

However, *différance* remains one of the most cited and least operationalized concepts of deconstruction. "Différance" in Derrida's own attempt would point towards the operational status of the notion in deconstruction inasmuch as *différance* "is not a concept" but "the

¹⁰ Bennington, Geoffrey. *Interrupting Derrida*. Routledge, 2000, p.83.

systematic play of differences”.¹¹ Moreover, the operation of *différance* as a semantically descriptive term leads to a reduction of its dynamic status as subversion in the semantic field. This chapter will argue that the best way in which *différance* can function in literary discourse is through the device of slippage in which the meanings are deferred and displaced by the structures that are supposed to carry those meanings in literary discourse.

The play of "différance" is thus founded on the impossibility of separating difference and deferral, two moments which together prevent meaning from ever manifesting itself as a present, identical entity. This emphasis on temporal delay as fundamental to signification is crucial to Derrida, who writes that "the signified concept is never present in itself".¹² The play of signification is even more radicalized on the level of literary discourse, which emphasizes figural representation, ambivalence, and narrative mediation as such, each of which lays bare the temporariness of signification. On the level of literary discourse, for instance, words function not as referents, but as echoes, corrections, and reversals of previous uses.

Linguistic slippage is the moment when “the word seems to cover the meaning” but simultaneously facilitates displacement. Slippage is not random; rather, it is embedded in syntax, metaphor, and semantic iteration. As Jakobson points out, “the poetic function emphasizes the ‘equivocation inherent in language’”¹³, but linguistic equivocation is radicalized by the way that *différance* destabilizes hierarchy in meaning. *Différance* operates in linguistic equivocation when it guarantees that every sign carries traces of another sign.

The trace introduces further instability to semantic stability, because the trace signifies the existence of the absence within meaning. This is how Derrida formulates the trace as “the mark of the absence of presence”.¹⁴ This definition indicates how meaning is always in relationship to what it does not mean. In literary texts, traces occur through allusion, repetition, and metaphors, where words are references to meanings beyond what words can mean. This introduces interpretation in action, not interpretation in conclusion, to the reader.

¹¹ Derrida, Jacques. *The Gift of Death*. Translated by David Wills, U of Chicago P, 1995, p.11.

¹² Derrida, Jacques. *Writing and Difference*. Translated by Alan Bass, U of Chicago P, 1978, p.62.

¹³ Jakobson, Roman. “Linguistics and Poetics.” *Style in Language*, edited by Thomas A. Sebeok, MIT Press, 1960, p.356.

¹⁴ Derrida, Jacques. *Force of Law: The “Mystical Foundation of Authority”*, p.47.

This becomes apparent, indeed, in moments of apparent clarity, when a text seems to assure a certain meaning just as it undercuts it through linguistic extravagance. Paul de Man describes this as a rhetorical undoing of semantic assertions when he says, "Meaning engenders the very structures that undo it".¹⁵ This process of *différance*, then, occurs not at the margin but at the very core of language, and it causes coherence to become a site of internal contradiction.

Notoriously, linguistic slippage is not the same as semantic blankness. Instead, it eventuates in a surfeit of semantic value that positively exceeds closure. Derrida argues that *différance* "has effects"¹⁶; he insists on the generative, rather than negative, force of semantic indeterminacy. Literary narratives mobilize this potential by setting up a series of contradictions between literal and nonliteral language, and between story and description.

The logic of linguistic slippage also contests authorial intention because meaning is produced in processes that are beyond intentional control. According to Roland Barthes's arguments, the text is a "tissue of quotations"¹⁷ that corresponds conceptually with Derrida's idea that signification is necessarily *intertextual*. *Différance* guarantees that there is no authorial deed capable of controlling meaning because language has historical traces that are beyond intentional control.

Significantly, this instability occurs at the level of micro-linguistic particularity, and not at the thematic abstract level of meaning. The presence of a single metaphor or syntactic ambiguity is often sufficient to generate an effect of meaning that disturbs throughout the text as a whole. The way that a text is subject to a Deconstructive reading is to examine the particular spot where meaning is deferred: not postponed to some future moment of resolution, but dispersed throughout the text. As J. Hillis Miller writes, "reading becomes tracing the wanderings of meaning"¹⁸.

In highlighting the linguistic process of *différance*, this section argues against approaches to indeterminacy that impose the theory from the outside. Rather, this section shows how the

¹⁵ de Man, Paul. *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*. Yale UP, 1979, p.8.

¹⁶ Derrida, Jacques. *Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundation of Authority"*. P.13.

¹⁷ Barthes, Roland. *Image–Music–Text*. Translated by Stephen Heath, Hill and Wang, 146.

¹⁸ Miller, J. Hillis. *Fiction and Repetition: Seven English Novels*. P.284.

language of literature itself is a deconstruction, with meaning in play, not due to the failure of interpretation but to the nature of language as a play of differences that can only ever displace.

This knowledge facilitates the shift in methodology which will occur in the next section, as a deconstructive close reading will be defined as a disciplined response to linguistic instability, showing how difference can be traced rather than merely posited.

4. Methodology: Deconstructive Close Reading

However, the Deconstructionist close-reading approach promotes a paradoxical methodological position that is simultaneously very attentive to textual details and resistant to the interpretive closure of meaning. Instead of viewing the text as a vessel of meaning to be uncovered, this approach treats the text as a place of meaning production, deferment, and subversion by language itself. The textual analysis is not about resolving the ambiguities but is instead focused on uncovering the structural workings of the ambiguities.

Technically speaking, the method of close reading as a deconstructive act consists in the recognition of the underlying conceptual or linguistic pairing that seems to be at work in structuring meaning in the text. Such oppositions are not simply chosen at random but are instead located through lexical patterns, metaphors of narrative structures and evaluative oppositions. It is essential to note that Derrida has argued that “deconstruction must always take place within the structures to be deconstructed”.¹⁹

The examination will focus on the moments when a particular binary opposition’s hierarchical structure becomes precarious after a central binary has been determined. Such moments are often realized in linguistic excesses, contradictions in figures, ambiguities in syntax, or semantic slide. Special emphasis will be put on such devices as metaphor, irony, repetition, and negation because they are capable of laying bare the dependence of the empowering term on the term it excludes. As Paul de Man has astutely noted: “Rhetoric radically suspends logic and opens up vertiginous possibilities of referential aberration”.²⁰

¹⁹ Derrida, Jacques. *Writing and Difference*. P.24.

²⁰ de Man, Paul. *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*, p.10.

One of the primary methodological tenets of deconstructive reading is that of self-restraint. Instead of formulating a series of oppositions or a series of readings, this reading insists on merely exploring a single subversive tension and seeing where it leads. It is this that prevents deconstruction from collapsing into its own series of readings while still managing to preserve its ability to subvert hierarchical meanings. As J. Hillis Miller terms this mode of reading: “reading not against the text but with it, according to its own aberrant logic.”

Close reading along deconstructive lines cannot be paraphrased or summarized into themes. Instead, meaning is construed at the linguistic, grammatical, and rhetorical level rather than abstracted out of words. Small linguistic variations, a change of tense, use of the personal versus the impersonal pronoun, or rhetorical level of metaphor, are what get counted on analytically rather than linguistically. Such attention is Derrida’s way of underscoring the claim “what is at stake is always a difference of articulation”.²¹

Crucially, this approach seeks not to undermine meaning but to uncover the basis of its possibility. The interpretation of meanings is supported by the accurate citation and quotation of text, thereby keeping interpretation grounded in the text. The lack of closure becomes not an issue of methodology but an effect of interpretation, reflective of the text. As Geoffrey Bennington argues, deconstruction “does not abolish reading, it makes reading more demanding”²², since all interpretation becomes subject to revision.

In formulating the deconstructive close reading approach as a disciplined and flexible method, this section lays the foundation of the analytical structure to follow in the text-based analysis. The approach favors language-based evidence over theoretical pronouncements and focuses on instability as a product of text, and not as an underlying critical attitude. Thus, this section lays the foundation to apply this approach to a specific example of a binary opposition, to demonstrate the manner in which deconstruction becomes an active and ethical form of literary critique.

Among the many binary patterns that frame the meaning of literary texts, the opposition between presence and absence occupies a privileged status as an implicit measure of coherence, authority, and clarity. Literary narratives regularly valorize presence through its association with immediacy, authenticity, and truth while consigning absence to lack, loss, and inferiority. This valorizing strategy is revealed to be internally self-undermining because

²¹ Derrida, Jacques. *Writing and Difference*. P.278.

²² Bennington, Geoffrey. *Interrupting Derrida*, p.85.

presence derives its authorizing edge solely through its opposing relation to absence and is consequently rendered dependent on the very term it attempts to valorize. Deconstructive reading specializes in finding this self-undermining quality in a literary text by showing how its language undermines its own assumptions in the opposition.

Derrida locates the metaphysics of presence as an underlying desire in Western philosophy when he writes that “presence is the privilege granted to the logos”.²³ However, the language of literature destabilizes this privilege in that it mediates the experience of presence through narrative voice, temporally, or figuratively. Where there seems to be the experience of the “present,” it is always already deferred by linguistic structures that refuse self-coincidence. As such, the opposition between presence and absence breaks down from the inside out in that presence is made possible by absence.

This collapse appears as a function of the text’s reliance upon signification itself. A signification that purports to signify a presence does so only through recourse to other significations, terms, and meanings that are, in turn, not entirely present. The paradox at the heart of signification, as Jacques Derrida has so well described it, is made apparent through his assertion that “the sign represents the present in its absence”.²⁴ The paradox that attends all literary signification appears at those moments when its relationship to language becomes explicitly articulated, as when narrativity thematizes its own immediacy.

The hierarchy of presence over absence is rendered unstable by the use of figurative language, which replaces the need for presence with representation. Metaphor, considered in most instances as an aesthetic addition to meaning, becomes an essential structural concept that lays bare “the incompatibility of meaning with presence”²⁵, as metaphor replaces the impossibility of presenting by resorting to figural displacement. As a result, the lack that characterizes literary texts becomes not something to lack or lack to but rather something that productively brings about meaning through absence.

This instability is exacerbated by the presence of narrative temporality, where delay, retrospection, and anticipation become prominent features. The narrative instant is never coextensive with its own presence, and its significance is made possible by this relationship

²³ Derrida, Jacques. *Force of Law: The “Mystical Foundation of Authority”*, p.12.

²⁴ Derrida, Jacques. *Dissemination*, p.9.

²⁵ de Man, Paul. *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*. 2nd ed., U of Minnesota P, 1983, p.34.

to temporality. The relationship of presence to delay is foregrounded by Derrida: "the present is not simple".²⁶ The presence that is threatened or approximated through various narrative techniques is also revealed to be an effect of temporality through deconstructive readings.

The presence and absence binary is similarly informing the exercise of interpretation, and of the intention of the author in particular. The presence of the author as a warrant for interpretation was common to the traditional approaches, while the deconstruction of a text argues that the presence of the author is itself a product of textual strategy. This is to indicate that the view of Roland Barthes that "writing is the destruction of every voice"²⁷ is in agreement with Derrida's thesis that the meaning of a text lies beyond the control of the intention of the author, as the trace of the language resists the control of the author.

This displacement of the presence of the author does not cancel out meaning but instead distributes meaning over the linguistic field of the text. Absence is made productive rather than privative, allowing for multiple paths of reading without undermining the coherence of the text. In this regard, J. Hillis Miller states that the lack of a final center means that reading must map out "a chain of substitutions without origin".²⁸

The logic of trace thus further undermines the opposition between presence and absence by showing that "absence is already written within presence" in such a way that "the opposition is not simply an opposition".²⁹ Thus, in texts, traces occur in allusions, in repetitions, in semantic echoes where "the word or image is 'full' of previously signified values" that haunt the text. Meanwhile, closely reading texts in terms of their deconstructive tradition focuses on traces as points where signification becomes fissured to disclose the solidarity between presence and absence.

Crucially, however, this destabilization does not result in interpretive paralysis. The destruction of the binary does not erase difference, but rather makes apparent that difference is relationally, not hierarchically, constituted. As Derrida notes, "there is in deconstruction, not destruction, but a displacement that does not destroy but reinscribes"³⁰, a definition which

²⁶ Derrida, Jacques. *Writing and Difference*. P.278.

²⁷ Barthes, Roland. *Image-Music-Text*, p.142.

²⁸ Miller, J. Hillis. *Fiction and Repetition: Seven English Novels*. P.282.

²⁹ Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. P.47.

³⁰ Derrida, Jacques. *Writing and Difference*. P.56.

clarifies the positive, or constructive, aspect of deconstructive critique. The binary is not erased by the introduction of absence, but rather inscribed in terms of tension.

In drawing attention to a single central opposition, this critique demonstrates that force is added to deconstruction through economy and restraint. Rather than spreading attention throughout a series of oppositions, the focus on presence and absence serves to bring forth the text's internal contradictions with clarity. Deconstruction thus resists accusations of interpretive extravagance by locating its findings within specific textual operations, demonstrating that meaning undermines itself through its own commitments.

Ultimately, the deconstruction of the presence/absence dichotomy shows that the meaning of literature cannot be found within the referential structure but rather within the dynamic process of revelation and withdrawal. The meaning of literature remains intelligible, then, not in spite of its instabilities but through them. Thus, deconstructive reading can show that literature consists of a linguistic arena where meaning is constantly at issue, and deconstruction again proves its usefulness as a tool for literary analysis.

6. Ethical and Interpretive Limits of Deconstruction

The destabilization of meaning that results from deconstruction has long been seen as an ethical problem, as a source of problems concerning irresponsible readings, relativism, and loss of critical judgment. Such problems arise from a premise that says that ethical readings necessitate a fixed meaning and an authoritative method of interpretation, a premise that is entirely challenged by deconstruction. It is not that deconstruction rejects ethical responsibility but relocates it as a function of a process of reading.

However, Derrida never wavers in dismissing the claim that deconstruction implies license in interpretation, because it instead insists that deconstruction requires increased responsibility. He insists that "responsibility is infinite"³¹, and this implies that ethics, contrary to traditional conceptions, lies not in final meaning but in the acknowledgment that one must never close off the possibilities of interpretation. Reading in this way, instead, will never lead in final interpretation but instead remains open to correction, since every interpretation implies closing off the possibility of another reading and hence involves an ethical dimension.

One of the key ethical limitations of deconstruction is that it resists mastery as interpretation. Traditional notions of interpretation can attempt to fix meaning through some form of

³¹ Derrida, Jacques. *Writing and Difference*. P.51.

control. Deconstruction resists that position by showing that control over interpretation is based on the repression of linguistic instability. As Derrida writes, “to dominate a discourse is to impose silence”³², suggesting that to read ethically is to let the contradictions speak rather than to decide them through coherence.

However, such an ethical mandate does not equate to being passive in one’s interpretations. On the contrary, a deconstructive reading is active, in the sense that the reader or interpreter must decide which tensions to highlight, which binary oppositions to destabilize, or which moments in language to follow. Each of these acts is fraught with ethical implications, since it is through these decisions that one invests, or fails to invest, meaning in a given text. Geoffrey Bennington describes how deconstruction “forces us to decide without guarantees”³³, thus pointing to where ethical responsibility enters.

The limitations of interpretation also protect against repetitions at the theoretical level. While deconstruction might be approached as a totalizing theory, this could threaten its subversive edge by rendering textual analysis overly determinative, following a predictable pattern of conclusions. As Derrida advises against this closure: “deconstruction should remain vigilant against its own institutionalization”³⁴. In this regard, good practice would be to avoid the impulse to generalize deconstructive findings.

In addition, the accusation of relativism misunderstands the nature of deconstructive indeterminacy. This is because, in areas of interpretation, relativism contends that interpretations are equivalent and equally meaningful, whereas deconstruction centers on the interpretations in accordance with their respective engagements with language. As cited in J. Hillis Miller, “not all readings are the same, because texts resist some interpretations more than others”³⁵. This implies that ethical interpretation occurs on the basis of the resistance encountered in text interpretation, thereby placing deconstruction in an analytical framework.

The deconstructionist practice is further subject to ethical regulation by its recognition of the violence inherent within the act of interpretation. All reading is necessarily one of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, and therefore constitutes a practice of meaning-constitution that occurs through acts of critical intervention. Derrida has posited interpretation as “a necessary

³² Derrida, Jacques. *Writing and Difference*. P.246.

³³ Bennington, Geoffrey. *Interrupting Derrida*, p.89.

³⁴ Derrida, Jacques. *Positions*, P.74.

³⁵ Miller, J. Hillis. *The Ethics of Reading*. Columbia UP, 1987. P.285.

violence”,³⁶ a move which draws attention to the ethical involved within all acts of critical practice.

Deconstruction, in other words, does not undermine historic or political engagements but positively reshapes them in the context of language mediation. When dealing with texts containing messages about violence, marginalization, or injustice from an ethical perspective, one has to keep in mind the role of language in mediating power relations, rather than naively taking representation for granted. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s position in emphasizing “the limits of representation”³⁷ in ethical readings corresponds to the deconstructive concern for language mediation.

Therefore, the ethical horizon of deconstruction is not determined by its inability to articulate certain statements, but by its refusal to make certain claims. Deconstruction refuses demands for final meaning, interpretative authority, and conceptual closure, in recognition of its own limitation on the text’s capability for generating new understanding. The significance of this position is explained by Jacques Derrida’s declaration that "justice is what cannot be deconstructed".³⁸

Through the lens of responsibility, self-control, or attentiveness, the section goes on to show how deconstruction not only does not weaken ethical criticism but how it actually re-describes the terms for ethical criticism. Limits for interpretation are seen not as restrictive frameworks for meanings but rather as enabling conditions for ethical reading, ensuring in turn that reading remains a responsive act instead of being a constitutive one.

7. Conclusion

This project moves forward in offering a fresh reading of deconstruction, one that sees deconstruction not in terms of an inherited theoretical vocabulary but in the form of an active practice of criticism. Through its approach of shifting the locus of concentration from the explanatory to the methodological, this project seeks to illustrate that deconstruction, through its practice as a focused engagement in linguistic instability, maintains its analytical potency—not as an overarching declaration of the impossibility of meaning, but as an on-going traversing through the structures of text.

³⁶ Derrida, Jacques. *Positions*, p.112.

³⁷ Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*. Harvard UP, 1999, p.75

³⁸ Derrida, Jacques. *Positions*. Translated by Alan Bass, U of Chicago P, 1981, p.15.

Thus, as this study illustrates, the construction of deconstruction as a mode of reading rather than as a philosophical position, *différance*, trace, or binary opposition work best when conceived as analytical procedures rather than theoretical conclusions. *Différance*, for example, is defined not as a principle of definition but as a process that can be identified as linguistic slipperiness, temporal postponement, or semantic contradictions. Again, this places the focus of deconstruction firmly upon the concern with the nature of language itself, as Derrida argued that meaning can be produced only through the "play of differences".³⁹

"The focused attention on a single binary form shows, by extension, the manner in which deconstruction reaches analytic understanding as a matter of holding back. It is, as will be demonstrated, the manner in which the presence and absence relation subverts itself through textual maneuvers that shows how meaning in literature is neither immediate nor indefinite. Instead, meaning is a matter of relation, which is to say that the indefinite, or the unstable, is a condition of understanding, rather than a negation of understanding. As Paul de Man says, the language of literature 'asserts and denies at the same time'."⁴⁰

"The inquiry into the ethical and interpretative constraints takes on the challenge posed by deconstruction by demonstrating that the lack of closure heightens rather than reduces the intensity of the task demanded by interpretation. So too, the practice described in this account finds its ethical roots in an awareness of linguistic resistance itself and in the acknowledgment of violence implicit in interpretation. Derrida's statement that justice must exceed deconstruction⁴¹ underlines the ethic at work in that practice that insists on its own vigilance with respect to its own claims in order to resist translating its openness into relativism."

This research contributes to contemporary literary studies by reintroducing deconstruction as an important and viable method of analysis in an academic environment that is becoming increasingly defined by repetitive discourse or binary methodology by making close reading a model of literary analysis that is rigorous and self-critical. It does not abandon meaning or seek to dominate it but involves it in an ongoing process determined by language and difference.

³⁹ Derrida, Jacques. *Dissemination*, p.11.

⁴⁰ de Man, Paul. *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, p.9.

⁴¹ Derrida, Jacques. *Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundation of Authority"*, p.15.

Indeed, meaning remains dynamic, not because interpretation fails but because language itself resists final stabilization. Deconstruction performed with care and sensitivity continues to lay bear this dynamic, in effect continuing to prove the importance of literary language and the need for reading with care.

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