A Derrida Dictionary

Niall Lucy

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In memory of One Tree Hill

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Terms

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COO	'Coming into One's Own'
D	*Dissemination*
DE	*Deconstruction Engaged*
EoT	*Echographies of Television*
FoL	'Force of Law'
GoD	*The Gift of Death*
GT	*Given Time*
LI	*Limited Inc*
LJF	'Letter to a Japanese Friend'
MC	'My Chances'
MoP	*Margins of Philosophy*
OG	*Of Grammatology*
OH	*The Other Heading*
ON	*On the Name*
OS	*Of Spirit*
P	*Positions*
PC	*The Post-Card*
PoF	*Politics of Friendship*
SoM	*Specters of Marx*
SP	*Speech and Phenomena*
TOJ	'The Time is Out of Joint'
TP	*The Truth in Painting*
UG	'Ulysses Gramophone'
VR	'The Villanova Roundtable'
WD	*Writing and Difference*

Stay, illusion!

Hamlet

Preface

No doubt one could begin by saying all kinds of clever, 'deconstructive' things about why *A Derrida Dictionary* could never be a book of definitions. No doubt, too, one could say some very unclever, undeconstructive kinds of things to begin with, given that many have accused Derrida's 'philosophy' of standing for the impossibility of making positive statements about anything at all. Somewhat ironically, though, both of those beginnings would amount to saying the same thing, which could be summarized as a variation on the opening sentence from Derrida's *Dissemination*:

This (therefore) will not have been a dictionary.

Hence my aim here has been to provide a series of outlines and interpretations of some of Derrida's key ideas and arguments, rather than a set of fixed definitions. I discuss these (along with the project of deconstruction associated with his name) within the widest context of Continental thought.

aporia   A Greek term denoting a logical contradiction, 'aporia' is used by Derrida to refer to what he often calls the 'blind spots' of any **metaphysical** argument. The **speech–writing opposition**, for example, could be said to be sustained by an aporia within the opposition 'itself': on the one hand speech can be seen as having to come before writing on the basis only of avoiding that aporia altogether, while on the other the aporia can be shown as necessary to the very constitution of speech and writing as opposites. According to Derrida's deconstruction of the opposition, however, it is writing which comes first. Hence the aporia – or the 'aporetic' moment – takes the form of something that cannot be explained within standard rules of logic: writing can be understood as coming after speech only because in fact it comes before speech. In its most general form, this may be put as follows: **differance** always comes before difference(s).

We should be careful not to see this simply as wilful or 'playful' ingeniousness on Derrida's part. For deconstruction, 'if it is of any consequence', is not reducible to 'a specialized set of discursive procedures' (cited in Culler, *Deconstruction*, 156). While certainly deconstruction is not 'anti-methodological', neither could it be called a 'discourse on method' as such. 'It is also, at the very least', Derrida writes, 'a way of taking a position, in its work of analysis, concerning the political and institutional **structures** that make possible and govern our practices, our competencies, our performances' (ibid.). Note the reference here to the analysis of structures that enable and constrain ('make possible and govern'), which is perhaps a key to understanding deconstruction. What distinguishes a deconstructive analysis, in other words, is that it always begins from an encounter with the aporias that must be overlooked in order to make

presence seem undeconstructible. But if such an encounter is 'deconstructive', this does not preclude it from being philosophical or political at the same time. Indeed, because not only philosophy but also politics depends on the necessity of undeconstructible presence (or presence-without-difference), then any deconstructive analysis of that dependence – and that logic – could never be anything less than a philosophical and a political analysis as well. (See also DISSEMINATION, GIFT, HYMEN, INSIDE–OUTSIDE, *KHORA*, *PHARMAKON*, SPECTRALITY, WRITING.)

artifactuality   Time does not stand still. What we mean by 'time' today – what it means to be 'in the present' or 'in the here and now' – should not be mistaken for what these might have meant at other times, in other places. Our time today – even what 'today' means today – is made up of features that produce a new concept, or certainly a new experience, of time, albeit one that isn't 'new' in the sense of having come from nowhere, outside of history altogether. In so far as that concept or experience is explicable in terms of the 'made-upness' of time, we can say that time is an artefact. This goes to the heart of what Derrida means by the *artifactuality* of time in the present day.

The point is not that time is artificial, if this defines a pure fiction bearing no relation to actuality or fact. Yet clearly the concept of artifactuality does allude to the *artificiality* of time, but in the sense of 'artifice' understood as **text**. So it is not the absolute fictionality but rather the ineradicable *textuality* of time today that Derrida refers to here. This is to think of the present experience of time – our experience of the present – as something that is produced (made, made up) by what can be called a textual apparatus. Without suggesting that time used to be 'real' before it was made over into 'text', Derrida's argument is that present-day time needs to be understood in terms of modern (or 'postmodern') processes and practices of textualization. It's not possible, in other words, to think of text today without thinking of technology, especially in regards to information and communication. From this it follows that the artifactuality of time and the present refers to the textual production of these concepts by means of contemporary apparatus – what we call 'the media' or, as Derrida often puts it, the whole apparatus of **teletechnology** in general.

To understand what actuality means today we need to look at the ways in which it is *made* in the present, from which we get our sense of 'the present' as such. This necessitates a **responsibility** to analyse the media. 'Hegel was right', Derrida points out, 'to remind the philosopher of his

time to read the papers daily. Today, the same responsibility obliges him to learn how the dailies, the weeklies, the television news programs are *made*, and *by whom*' (EoT, 4). But the question of who makes the news isn't reducible to the fact of who owns the means of production. It involves an apparatus of teletechnological processes (which are not simply 'industrial' processes) that no one can 'own'. Take for instance the everyday **event** of a 'live' report on television: 'when a journalist or politician seems to be speaking to us, in our homes, while looking us straight in the eye, he (or she) is in the process of reading, on screen, at the dictation of a "prompter," a text composed somewhere else, at some other time, some-times by others, or even by a whole network of anonymous authors' (ibid.). Such a description of the *making* of actuality on television calls into question the idea that a 'live' bulletin happens only within a moment of **presence** understood as a unique instance of time. Clearly there is a moment at which a live telecast does go out 'live', but the telecast is never reducible to that moment. It is always inscribed in an apparatus of production, making the actual something other than the opposite of the artificial.

It could be said that actuality belongs to the electronic news media today, whose job is to bring the actual into our homes. Every night on our TV screens we are shown footage of things that actually happened some-where in the world that day. In this way actuality on television is inseparable from its teletechnological representation and production, which does not mean the media tell us what to think. The claim instead is that 'the actual' on TV is always an effect of artifactuality, and the target here is not the media but **metaphysics**. To think of actuality in terms of teletechnological production, in other words, is to try to think against an idea of presence, or against the idea that there must be something that guarantees actual events an absolute self-sufficiency, an essence or a meaning all their own, which it is possible to experience in itself or to re-present neutrally. Conceived of in terms of presence, the actual must be opposed to the artificial.

Now of course it would be silly to think that Derrida doesn't believe in actuality, because he thinks that actuality is always made up and so every-thing we regard as actual is in fact a complete artifice. The point rather of insisting on the non-opposition of the actual and the artificial has to do with the necessity of opening oneself to the coming of the other, to the radically unforeseeable coming of an event. If we were to see things in terms only of the actual versus the artificial, the factual versus the factitious, we would be closed off to the future. Whenever something was happening, for instance, we would presume to know *that* it was happening and to

know *what* it was. In this way actuality would always be given to us in advance – it would always be decided for us in advance – by a sort of programme or **structure**; and this would mean we could never take responsibility for the future. So to oppose the actual to the made is to be closed off to the possibility of what might happen next as something that does not conform to the definition of actuality as given by its opposition to the artificial. That opposition, of course, is the basis of knowledge; what we understand by knowledge requires us to maintain a sharp distinction between the actual and the artificial, the real and the unreal, the living and the dead and so on. It would not count as knowledge, but only as belief, superstition, a form of mysticism, perhaps, to claim there is no difference between those things. Yet our knowledge of the difference between the actual and the artificial is what allows us to construct a 'horizon of expectation', a way of knowing the future in advance. This delimits the status of an event to what actually happens. 'The event cannot be reduced to the fact that something happens. It may rain tonight, it may not rain. This will not be an absolute event, because I know what rain is' (EoT, 13). The meaning of an event, in other words, must be allowed to exceed our *knowledge* of it, based on our acceptance of the opposition of the actual and the artificial.

But there's a danger in this: to call the actual into question is to risk accusations of relativism or revisionism. So any talk of 'artifactuality' could be seen to play into the hands of those who claim the Holocaust didn't happen. By the same token, an uncritical acceptance of the actual as whatever 'is' in its own right, 'outside the text', may lead to all manner of speculative claims about events, about others, about history and so on, ranging from dubious to false. 'What a victory for dogmatisms everywhere', as Derrida puts it, 'if anyone who tries to ask new questions, to upset good consciences or stereotypes, to complicate or reelaborate, in a new situation, the discourse of the left or the analysis of racism and anti-Semitism, stands immediately accused of complicity with the adversary!' (EoT, 16). One thing can always be forced into alignment with another, but clearly there is no necessary connection between artifactuality and Holocaust revisionism. On the contrary, one might say it is all the more necessary to question the concept of actuality in order to oppose revisionism, racism, violence and injustice everywhere. To see the actual only as the undeconstructible opposite of artifice and the artefact is to constrain the 'happening' of the other and of every event; it is to regard others and events as always determinable in advance. This is why it's possible to claim, for instance,

that '9/11' (see event) actually means this or that (without question, without fear of contradiction); or to say the threat posed by 'Islam' today is actual. And it makes it possible to say that anyone who would speak out against the actuality of that Islamic threat is a victim of artifice, or is guilty of using artifice to try to deceive 'us'.

Not to question the status of 'fact', or to think one knows with utter certainty what the actual looks like – such conviction underpins all politics. Hence today 'there is a neoprotectionism on the left and a neoprotectionism on the right, in economics as in matters of demographic flux, a free-trade-ism on the right and a free-trade-ism on the left, a neonationalism on the right and a neonationalism on the left' (EoT, 19). What conjoins these opposites – constituting without quite constituting an alliance that is all the more terrifying for being unofficial, unintentional, unconscious – has to do precisely with what Derrida calls the 'permeability' of such concepts as fact and actuality. 'To acknowledge this permeability, this combinatory and its complicities, is not to take an apolitical position' – and it does not mean there is no such thing as 'ideology' or any difference between 'right' and 'left' (ibid.). Instead the purpose is to maintain the radical openness of the future, which is what deconstruction is all about. 'It's better to let the future open – this is the axiom of deconstruction' (ibid.). But as there is no absolute or transcendental warrant that this way is 'better', then to uphold it is to argue for it, to engage in debate over it, to embrace what Derrida calls 'the limitless risk of active interpretation' (EoT, 26). This risk involves the necessity of having to press against the limits of what it means to argue, to debate and to interpret, such that one may stand accused of being relativist, revisionist, apolitical – of having either 'dangerous' arguments or no 'arguments' at all.

Again, the point of insisting on the artifactuality of teletechnological experience today is not to claim that public opinion and political consciousness are controlled by the media. The point is 'to let the future open'. It is to show that what counts as actuality in the present can no longer be confined to the ontological opposition of the actual and the virtual, despite the ongoing necessity of this opposition to every form of politics. Only by pressing at the limits of that opposition is it possible to open a way for thinking differently about others and events. This is to think of them arriving unexpectedly. It is to think of them not in terms of being 'actualized' or becoming 'actual', but as the *arrivant* or **spectre** arrives – at or beyond the limits of arrival, in a time and place which confounds the opposition of the actual and the virtual, life and death and