

COMMENT

Words are for communicating, are they not? If we begin with this commonplace assumption, it becomes obvious that words today have fallen upon difficult times. On every hand we see them ignored, devalued, betrayed, demeaned, emasculated, and otherwise abused and victimized. Consider, for example, the outrages perpetrated upon language in the areas of advertising, bureaucratic obfuscating, hack work in the social sciences, partisan politics, and international relations. And future prospects are not encouraging. Increasing evidence indicates that, on the whole, high school and college students do not speak, read, or write very well.

These forms of mistreatment and neglect of language are disquieting to the respecter of words, but familiarity with them has slightly diminished their urgency. At least for the optimist, they seem in some measure correctable by increased language awareness and better schooling. Recently, a more alarming challenge to words has emerged. It is more alarming for two reasons: first, it originates among the scholars, critics, and theorists of language and literature, the traditional keepers of the flame, the devoted stewards of language; second, it transcends issues concerning the misuse of language and questions all that we take for granted about language, experience, and the possibilities of human communication.

This challenge is becoming apparent in a variety of literary and cultural manifestations but finds its most explicit formulation in recent literary theory, specifically in deconstruction, a movement spawned by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida and a group of American Derrideans at Yale. Although a minority voice in relation to teaching and criticism as a whole, deconstruction has been highly influential, particularly in graduate schools.

It starts out by rigorously questioning the assumed correspondence between mind, meaning, and the concept of method that claims to unite them. It focuses upon the impossibility of making expression coincide with what has to be expressed, of making the sign coincide with what it signifies. In short, the deconstructive effort is to show that truth and word never coincide. Language is viewed as an autonomous system parallel with but not pointing to the world of things. Literature, likewise, is an autonomous system contingent with but not directly pointing to life. As Derrida insists, the "literal" meaning of writing is "metaphoricity itself."

The tenuous relationship between word and reality has long been appreciated, of course, but what deconstruction claims is that the possibility of gaining a clear understanding of the written word is an illusion. The imprecision of the written word, formerly regarded as an intellectual challenge to writer and reader, is now considered an insurmountable barrier to any degree of certainty. The meaning of any written material (all of which is called "text") is indeterminate, susceptible to endless deconstruction or reinterpretation. All interpretation

is misinterpretation. Deconstruction seeks, in Geoffrey Hartman's phrase, "the eclipse of voice by text." By "text" he means language at play among its internal possibilities, released from all the old claims of meaning as voice, personal presence, and dialogue.

Derrida, in *Spurs*, for example, devotes pages to discussing a marginal jotting in Nietzsche's notebooks: "I have forgotten my umbrella." Ingeniously he plays with the possible "meanings" of this sentence and concludes that its context is irretrievable and its meaning a total enigma. It is no more "significant" than any other passage in Nietzsche's writing because it, like any text, is liberated from the author's intentions. It has no decidable meaning, and "the hermeneut cannot but be provoked and disconcerted by its play." In a similar display of deconstructionist ingenuity, J. Hillis Miller answers essays by Wayne Booth and M. H. Abrams by devoting an entire essay to deconstructing a sentence containing a phrase from each of those critics: "The deconstructionist reading of a given work 'is plainly and simply parasitical' (Booth's phrase) on 'the obvious and univocal reading' (Abrams' phrase)." The process involves elaborately tracing the etymology of the words, analyzing the stories related to the etymology, exploring connotations, and otherwise demonstrating the indeterminacy of the sentence's meaning.

In *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* (1982), Christopher Norris argues that "Deconstruction neither denies nor really affects the commonsense view that language exists to communicate meaning. It *suspends* that view for its own specific purpose of seeing what happens when the writs of convention no longer run." The distinction between "denies" and "suspends" in this statement is more apparent than real, and Norris later admits that the zeal for deconstruction has not always produced Derrida's argumentative rigor. For many, its appeal "rests very largely on the promise of an open-ended free play of style and speculative thoughts, untrammelled by 'rules' of any kind." This is a natural tendency, for if interpretation is inevitably involved in a chain of proliferating sense that it can neither arrest nor fully comprehend, then the critic is effectively absolved of all responsibility for limiting the play of his own imagination or trying to ascertain the author's intentions.

The essential error of deconstruction lies in its being the latest version of rationalism divorced from experiential knowledge of reality. One is reminded of Zeno's paradox. An arrow loosed at a target will never reach it because it must first traverse half the distance, and in turn half that distance, and so on infinitely. Compare the deconstructionist contemplating the sign near a blasting area: "Danger—run for your life!" What a delicious sentence for interpretive play. Think of the dozens of meanings of "run," and imagine what the resourceful decon-

structionist could do with "life." The conclusion, of course, would be that the text has no decidable meaning. But common sense would dictate neither standing in front of the target nor dallying near the warning sign.

The programmatic uncertainty of deconstruction is actually a form of rationalistic terrorism, a style of accusation. Its central thrust is a denial of the primary assumptions of Western metaphysics: that the universe has a center of meaning and purpose, that man has an essence which by virtue of the logos is vitally linked with that center and that truth is a desirable and obtainable object of human quest. Indeed, deconstruction denies not only the correspondence between words and reality, but also between the Word and reality.

Ultimately, more important than the challenge of deconstruction in itself is the fact that it is an extreme manifestation—a symptom—of a larger contemporary condition or tendency. The retreat from certainty and descent into solipsism resulting from a skepticism concerning words is reflected widely in our culture—in literature, films, journalism, and academia. Particularly in the humanities, evaluation—which requires standards based on some sense of certainty, some confidence that words communicate reality—is a diminishing practice. Once the beloved twin sister of Interpretation, Evaluation has been banished. But the question "What are words for?" inevitably requires an evaluative answer. It is essentially a moral question. This is the reason deconstruction and related attitudes and approaches have made such surprising inroads in the humanities despite the alarm of so many traditional humanists. Those humanists, having abandoned moral evaluation and succumbed to skepticism regarding the grounds for certainty in value judgments, are, on the whole, ineffectual in countering the arguments of radical interpretive theory. They are infected by the very disease they wish to cure, and consequently are reticent and embarrassed to meet the challenge on moral terms.

It is important, of course, to recognize fully what words can *not* do. In this respect, the best of these radical theorists have done us a favor. One cannot read them without gaining a deeper appreciation of the limitations of language as a system signifying reality. But the danger inherent in such sophisticated arguments is that of losing respect for and confidence in what words *can* do. This danger is reflected in contemporary fiction that tends to equate fiction and reality. Carried to its ultimate extreme, this belief in the interchangeability of fiction and reality can lead to an arrogant disrespect for the integrity of both. If the nature of language precludes certainty, then things tend to become equally credible, generating a paradoxical situation in which skepticism coexists with appalling forms of credulity. Such confusion has its ultimate source in the Derridean error of viewing the decentered text of indeterminate meaning as analogous to a decentered universe of in-

Social Register

With a sense of sweet justice muted only by the most basic human considerations, we read of one event in New York's end-of-summer season: the mugging of two prominent socialites, big stars on the



Manhattan lib jet-set firmament, both shining lights of *Vogue* and *WWD*. The deliciously exciting romp took place in the East End-Carl Schurz Park area, one of the most exquisite preserves of Gotham's high life. Actually, the innocent victims were strolling leisurely toward Gracie Mansion, NY Mayor Ed Koch's residence, to attend a reception.

Innocent victims? Legally and formally—of course. But in the abstruse layers of existence where metaphysics reigns, no one knows for sure what is bringing about misery, violence, evil. The pair, robbed at gunpoint on the same block where the city's Police Commissioner lives, consisted of Senator Christopher Dodd from Connecticut, one of the most liberal members of the U.S. Senate, and one Amanda Burden, a darling of the grape-pickers-benefit cocktail parties set whose support for the "needy" has never interfered with her millionaire lifestyle. Each is representative of the kind of liberal who has rarely stepped away from private schools and limousines into the real world, and has nothing but venomous contempt for the Iowa farmer and Georgia grocer who demur at paying taxes to support welfare programs and who have serious reservations about the abolition of the death penalty for murderers, or the idea of giving up their guns. Both Sen. Dodd and Ms. Burden, judging by their past and current opinions expressed in the press, are gearing up for the fall season of parties, galas, \$1000-a-plate dinners, and Tavern on the Green festivities to aid the El Salvador gangster guerrillas they see as noble freedom fighters entitled by dint of Cuban arms to "share" power with duly elected authorities. We are certain that the latest incident in NYC won't impair their social élan, but we also suspect that social justice has somehow been served. To our mind, a mugged "progressive," even if he doesn't turn conservative overnight, somehow makes today's America a bit more equitable. Thus, mugging Sen. Dodd's hairdo and grabbing at Ms. Burden's jewelry evokes only a smidgen of compassion among those who still believe in fairness. □

determinate meaning.

As mysterious and tenuous as the relation between words and reality is, and as imperfect as human communication has proved to be, there is still ample room for human certainty as long as man employs the full range of his human faculties. In the beginning was the word—and so it will be in the end.

—Stephen Tanner

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