A Review on *Deconstruction and Criticism*

Xiaoli Fang

College of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Sichuan University, Chengdu, China

**ABSTRACT**

This essay is a review on *Deconstruction and Criticism*. In this book, Bloom explores how strong poets, through misreading, conquer the influence of anxiety from the precursors so as to achieve their uniqueness; Paul de Man discusses how the rhetoric of language governed by trope subverts its fulfillment of a unified meaning; Derrida discusses the problems of the boundary of text, describing the way the text overruns the limits assigned to it. In this way, he redefines the text and extends the boundary of the text; Hartman mainly focuses on the reading experience. He advocates that the writer is also a reader and we should not only talk of reader intrinsically but also historically; Miller’s essay is on the parasitical relationship between deconstructionist reading and “obvious” reading, nihilism and metaphysics, as well as poem and earlier poems. Those critics have their different views on deconstruction and literary criticism; they, however, share some common ideas on the issues of text interpretation, intertextuality as well as the boundary of text.

**KEYWORDS**

Deconstruction; literary criticism; language; bloom; de Man; Derrida; Hartman; Miller

**CONTACT**

Xiaoli Fang  
XLfang@scu.edu.cn  
College of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Sichuan University

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*Deconstruction and Criticism* consists of five essays by scholars who are usually regarded as deconstructionists, Harold Bloom, Paul de Man, Geoffrey Hartman, Hillis Miller, and Jacques Derrida. It is not possible for the readers to decode the deconstructionism through this book, and Geoffrey Hartman even claims in the preface that the critics held together by the covers of this book differ considerably in their approach to literature and literary theory. Derrida, de Man, and Miller are certainly boa-deconstructors. But Bloom and Hartman are barely deconstructionists. They even write against it on occasion. (ix)
This book, however, sheds some light on deconstructionism, through different theoretical explorations and literary texts analysis.

The first essay is Harold Bloom’s “The Breaking of form.” It begins with a discussion on “how poems brings about meaning by breaking form, so as to utter a complaint, a moaning intended to be all their own” (1). Apparently, Harold Bloom identifies the tension within poems, which indicates the competition between the poet and the great tradition constructed by his precursors. Only through breaking apart of form, the poet can utter his own “moaning” and construct “the individuation of forms.” Such ideas are closely related with Bloom’s literary theories, especially ideas on misprision, revisionary ratios as well as the anxiety of influence.

According to Bloom, “the truest sources are in the powers of poems already written, or rather, already read” (3). Faced with the strong precursor, the strong poet, as a reader, can only achieve his authority of discourse by overcoming the anxiety of influence through misreading and the revisionary ratios. The strong precursors and poems have exerted great influence on the ephebe, giving so much offense; in return, the strong poet of belatedness has to start his psychological defense mechanism to fight for his individuation, making use of or abusing the precursor’s text to bring about his own meaning. In this way, we see that “Bloom develops a theory of literature that is geared towards the individual subject that aspires to a synthesis of psychological and rhetorical elements” (Zima, 2002, p. 157), which places the Oedipal love-hate relationship between the strong poet and his precursor at the core, as the driving force of literary development. Only through the ephebe revisionism of clinamen, tessera, kenosis, daemonization, askesis, apophrades, the strong poet achieves his greatness, creativity, and uniqueness by a literary patricide.

The second part is a commentary on Ashbery’s Self-Portrait in a Conex Mirror. Bloom attempts to sketch all six stages of revisionism and misreading. The poem begins with a clinamen, the poet’s creative correction, ruled by irony, moves to the tessera dominated by synecdoche, then shifts toward kenosis, an isolating defense governed by metonymy, and to the stage of demonization, reigned by repression and hyperbole. The fifth stage, askesis, achieves a great sublimation through ascetic renunciation, which is followed by the last stage of giant metalapse or ratio of apophrades, in which the precursor is robbed of his identity and the strong poet constructs his own identity, incorporating the greatness of precursor to achieve his uniqueness and conquering the influence of anxiety.

What’s worth our attention is Bloom emphasizes that there are no texts but interpretation, and a strong reading is the only text, which attaches great importance to the role of interpretation and the reader. In fact, in Bloom’s theory, the poet is, at the same time, a reader and the reader’s alerting reading also follows the rules of misreading and revisionism so that the reader also starts the psychological defense mechanism while reading and goes on a competition with the writer. According to Zima, “Bloom’s ephebe might not even know the ‘central poem’ of his precursor and rival” (p. 153). It seems to indicate that the reader plays a very important role to identify the precursor to bring about the meaning when the poet unconsciously writes under the influence of the precursor. What’s more, different from the deconstructionist’s negating and dispelling the subjectivity, the purpose of Bloom’s misreading and revisionism is to construct a new and strong subject, who will serve as the new precursor for the coming strong poet.

Through an analysis of “The Triumph of Life,” Paul De Man discusses in “Shelly Disfigured” how the text produces the figure and at the same time destructs the figure. When Paul de Man talks about disfiguration, he means “the repetitive erasures by which
language performs the erasure of its own positions” (p. 65). This idea concerns with the characteristics of language.

For one thing, “figuration is the element in language that allows for the reiteration of meaning by substitution” (de Man, p. 61). The language of the text presents a figure, which indicates that the text creates in a way the meaning of the text, and the figurative feature of the language governed by tropes, however, deviating from the articulation so that it effaces meaning of the text at the same time. That is to say, the rhetorical elements of language subvert and resist its formation of meaning, or the unity and fulfillment of meaning. So, more accurately the figure just creates an illusion of meaning because of the figurative language. Meanwhile, the various devices of articulation are made to convey meaning, but the gliding signifier, or its free play in relation to its signifying function, makes it impossible to convey single or obvious meaning of the text. It shows de Man emphasizes the opaque character of the word and the separation of the level of expression from that of content (Zima, 2002, p. 107).

For another thing, de Man believes words not only articulate but also perform actions. “The words have acquired the power of actions as well as of the will, not only because they represent or reflect on actions but because they themselves, literally, are actions” (de Man, p. 49). It seems the figure in the text is posited by an arbitrary act of language, which produces the meaning of the text. So to de Man, “language posits and language means (since it articulate) but language cannot posit meaning. Considered performatively, figuration performs the erasure of the positing power of language” (p. 64).

To de Man, the text, or the poet as well, gains shape or figure only to lose it as he acquires it, which indicates that the text constructs and at the same time deconstructs itself. And the major reason is due to the rhetorical elements in language. On one hand, the language articulates to convey meaning, but the rhetoric of language governed by trope subverts its fulfillment of a unified meaning; on the other hand, the language is performative, but its positing power is also erased by the rhetoric of language.

Derrida’s “Living On” mainly discusses the problems of boundaries of text, describing the way the text overruns the limits assigned to it. Traditionally, “if we are to approach a text, it must have a bord, an edge” (Deridda, p. 81). Derrida believes that there’s nothing outside of text. So, “no meaning can be determined out of text, but no context permits saturation.” The discussion of the meaning, text, and context leads to a discussion of the borderline of a text, which is the premise of the meaning production in the traditional idea. Through a discussion on the possible meanings of the title “Living On,” Derrida points out it is easy to lose sight of the line of demarcation between a text and what is outside it, which indicates the text does not have a clear borderline from the outside, the context. It goes a step further to show the indeterminacy of the meaning of text with a running borderline.

Derrida claims

a text is not 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. Thus the text overruns all the limits assigned to it. (p. 84)

Derrida to some extent totally changes the traditional idea of text, breaking the illusion of the totality and homogeneity of text. It doesn’t mean Derrida negates the idea of text itself, he in fact makes this concept more complex and broad. Different from the
idea of closed text, Derrida’s text is a differential network, a fabric of traces, always opening to outside context, other traces. The iterability within different context dissolves the coherence of signs so as to prevent the presence of meaning.

For Derrida, the borderline of text is not fixed and clear because it is within and without the text at the same time. He adopts “double invagination” to describe the characteristic feature of borderline.

The invagination of the upper edge on its outer face is folded back “inside” to form a pocket and an inner edge, comes to extend beyond the invagination of the lower edge, on its inner face, which is folded back inside to form a pocket and an outer edge. (p. 98).

To make it simple, this invagination, for one thing, indicates the ambiguity of border and meaning of text; for another thing, it also indicates there is no clear inside or outside, the inside is outside and the outside is inside, which proves his idea of text as a complex network. This reminds the reader of the idea of intertextuality. Since there’s no clear demarcation of inside and outside, the text is within and without the context and the context is within and without the text. As a fabric of traces referring endlessly to other different traces, each text is part of the other text and makes the other a part of itself. In this way, the meaning of text always opens to the context and other texts.

In “Words, Wish, Worth: Wordsworth,” Geoffrey Hartman focuses on the reading experience. He believes “the relation” of “text” and “soul” is the province of the theory of reading. The traditional attempts to understand reading experience are usually in divorce from the history of interpretation. To Hartman, we should not only talk of reader intrinsically but also historically. In this essay, Hartman’s reading of Wordsworth’s poems is heavily biographical and literary-historical through a discussion of the intertextuality, especially Wordsworth’s allusion to Milton.

In the preface of Deconstruction and Criticism, Hartman points out “each text is shown to imbed other texts by a most cunning assimilation whose form is the subject both of psychoanalytic and of purely rhetorical criticism” (viii). Through reading Wordsworth, Hartman claims that

we must read the writer as a reader. The writer is a reader not only in the sense that he must have read to write, and so is ‘mediated’, however original his work. He is a reader because of his radically responsive position vis-à-vis (1) texts, and (2) an inner light – or inner darkness – that enables his counter-word, the very act of interpretation itself.

That is to say, the writer must be influenced by the former literary works, no matter how original his work is. He not only reads to write but also writes to respond to the past literary works. So writing is reading or interpretation. That’s why “the poet becomes a reader, and the reader an extended author” (Zima, 2002, p. 137). Then, we can understand Hartman’s idea of symbiosis between literature and literary criticism. He advocates criticism is a form of literature and Hillis Miller shares this idea too.

The major purpose of Hillis Miller’s “The Critic as Host” seems to correct people’s misreading of deconstructionism. Beginning with a discussion on the host–parasite relationship, Miller points out the wrong idea of regarding the deconstructionist reading of a given work as the parasite while the obvious or univocal reading as the host. From this, Miller goes a step further to correct the misunderstanding of the relationship between the host–metaphysics and parasite–nihilism. Then, Miller shifts toward a
discussion on the intertextuality between the poem, which also contains a parasitical relationship between any poem and earlier poems.

From an etymological study, Miller remodifies the relationship between the host and parasite in a parasitical relationship. “The host and the somewhat sinister or subversive parasite are fellow guests beside the food, sharing it,” which indicates for one thing, the host is both eater and eaten, and for another thing, both host and parasite are guests beside the food-text. In this way, Miller believes that there’s no so-called obvious or univocal reading, and in fact neither the “obvious” reading nor the “deconstructionist” reading is ‘univocal’ (p. 226). That is to say, “the obvious or univocal reading always contains the destructive reading as a parasite encrypted within itself’s part of itself; and meanwhile the deconstructive reading cannot free itself from the metaphysical reading it means to contest” (pp. 224–225). And the same is true of the relationship between metaphysics and nihilism. Based on the above analysis, Miller advocates that it is not deconstructionism that brings nihilism. “Nihilism is the latent ghost encrypted within any expression of a logocentric system” (p. 228). Nihilism is an inalienable alien presence within logocentric metaphysics, both in literary criticism and literary works, which shows logocentrism and nihilism are closely related to one another. As for the poems, Miller believes “any poem, is parasitical in its turn on earlier poems, or it contains earlier poems within itself as enclosed parasites” (p. 225). In fact, the previous text plays a foundation for the new one, but the new poem must annihilate by incorporating it in order to achieve his uniqueness. The new one both needs the old one and must destroy them, so the new poem can be sinister in either way, being a host or a parasite.

Based on the above analysis, Miller proposes that deconstruction does not “reduce the text back to detached fragments, but constructs again in a different form what it deconstructs” (p. 251), which indicates that a deconstructive reading is at the same time constructive and affirmative.

Both Miller and Bloom concern with intertextuality. However, it seems as if Bloom emphasizes more on the competitive relationship between the strong poet and his precursor, while Miller pays more attention on how present poem incorporates previous text to achieve its greatness. Different from Miller’s idea on poem as a parasite and a host to the previous text, Bloom’s strong poet is more like a parricide instead of a parasite. Anyway in their opinion, deconstructionism is both deconstructive and constructive.

Just as Hartman points out, “deconstruction refuses to identify the force of literature with any concept of embodied meaning and shows how deeply such logocentric incarnationist perspectives have influenced the way we think about art” (vii). Those critics in Deconstruction and Criticism have their own different approaches on literary criticism; they, however, share some common ideas and address the same issues within the deconstructionist context. They cast doubts on the traditional relation between language and meaning, paying great attention to the rhetorical dimension of language, so as to foreground the indeterminacy of meaning in text and open the texts to interpretation. They do not agree with any attempt to reduce the plural text to one meaning. In this way, those critics in fact try to deconstruct the traditional logocentrism. Intertextuality is another key issue discussed by those critics from different perspectives. Harold Bloom advocates the strong poets’ anxiety of influence from the
precursors; Hillis Miller emphasizes the parasitical relationship between the texts, poets, and critics; de Man Derrida claims the text’s overrun of the boundaries, and Hartman defends that the borders between a creative criticism and poetry are permeable.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

**Notes on contributor**

*Xiaoli Fang,* Ph.D. of English language and literature, is currently an associate professor at School of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Sichuan University. From 2012 to 2013, she was doing a Fulbright program in Georgia Tech, USA. She is a member of CLAS by US-China Educational Trust. And her academic interest covers British and American literature and narratology.

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