Structuralism

Signs: Signifier

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Signified

signifier->signified - referential function of language

Deconstruction: structuralism does not examine the consequences of the gap between language and world.

1. language cannot but conjure up a reality – reality is absent – we are in a world of absences – our shared “linguistic predicament”
2. There is no point of view, which is outside language. We are born into a world of language that determines us

Earth has not anything to show more fair:

Dull would be of soul who could pass by

A sight so touching in its majesty:

This City now doth, like a garment wear

The beauty of the morning: silent, bare,

Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie

Open unto the fields, and to the sky;

All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.

Never did sun more beautifully steep

In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill;

Ne’er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!

This river glideth at his own sweet will:

Dear God! The very houses seem asleep;

And all that mighty heart is lying still!

“I crossed the Square (an empty Area then!)

Of the Carousel, where so late had lain

The Dead, upon the Dying heaped; and gazed

On this and other Spots, as doth a Man

Upon a Volume whose contents he knows

Are memorable, but from him locked up,

Being written in a tongue he cannot read

[…]

High was my Room and lonely ….

…………………………. I kept watch,

Reading at intervals; the fear gone by

Pressed on me almost like a fear to come.

I thought of those September massacres,

Divided from me by one little month.

[…]

And in this way I wrought upon myself

Until I seemed to hear a voice that cried

To the whole City, “Sleep no more.”

[…]

The place, all hushed and silent as it was,

Appeared unfit for the repose of the Night,

Defenceless as a wood where Tygers roam.”

Jacques Derrida (1930- 2004):

The language that determines the world and us is a system of differences -> meanings are products of differences, each sign gets its meaning because of its difference from every other sign -> *there is nothing outside the text* -> we cannot have access to any kind of “reality” behind language that could give us the “true” meaning (all our knowledge is mediated through texts).

1. writing is orphaned – absence of the author
2. *Différance*: meaning emerges from its special and temporal difference from other signs -> meaning is always *deferred*: it is *contaminated* by *traces* of what it is not, and of traces of its context (past, present, future) -> meaning is never there, it is never “present” (it is overdetermined, saturated) -> there is no “true” meaning. Language immediately destroys the meaning it seems to create.
3. deconstruction of the hierarchical binary opposition between speech and writing (i.e. showing that the non-privileged term, i.e. writing, is, in fact, the more important, and that everything is, in fact, “writing”):
4. writing (marked by absence) seems to be a supplement to speech (presence). However: if speech has to be supplemented, it is already marked by an absence to be supplemented (cf: D’s analysis of Rousseau’s *Confessions*) -> there is an absence, a lack, within speech -> -> there is *always already* a trace of absence in presence, and there is *always already* a trace of writing in speech

-> presence is not privileged over absence + speech is not privileged over writing

1. speech seems to be there, seems to be present, whereas writing is marked by absence -> what makes writing understandable in the absence of both the speaker and the addressee is the iterability (repeatability) of each sign, i.e. even if we do not know the speaker’s intention, we understand his or her meaning in one way or another (even if this meaning is ambiguous), because each sign is the repetition of already existing signs whose meaning has already been determined by convention, the context, etc.

However: speech is also understandable because its signs are the repetition of already existing signs (i.e. there is no sign system that would be “private”, private language would not be understandable, it would not be a sign system at all) -> speech could also be understood in the potential absence of the speaker -> speech is not predicated upon presence either -> no essential difference between speech and writing, speech is *always already* writing, i.e. its understandability is predicated upon the iteraiblity of its signs (see also: SEC)

1. If speech is presence, and writing is a mere supplement to/representation of speech, then writing is a parasite that threatens the purity of speech -> it makes speech (“presence”, “truth”) ambiguous.

However (via an analysis of Plato): writing both destroys “truth”/memory (aletheia, anamnesis) and serves it -> writing is a *“pharmakon*”: both remedy and poison <-

1. poison: a.) writing is ambiguous, can be interpreted in many different ways, as opposed to speech. b.) we need writing, if we cannot remember, but true remembrance is always based on interiorisation, and on our capacity to remember -> writing (as an exterior supplement) destroys “true” memory.
2. remedy: writing helps memory, we were not able to remember without writing + speech can be just as ambiguous as writing, because both are based on the iterability of the sign

->emphasis on ambiguity, on undecidability:

e.g. a.). In an analysis of Keats’s *The Fall of Hyperion,* which was written after the poem entitled *Hyperion* - Paul de Man (cf. later) asks the question: is *Hyperion* in Keats’s title, *The Fall of Hyperion,* refers back to the previous poem (in which case the title means that the previous poem has fallen, and the new one is triumphant), or it refers to the figure/character of Hyperion in the poem itself? According to de Man, this question is *undecidable.*

e.g. b.). In an analysis of Yeats’s poem “Among School Children”, de Man asks the question: is the last line of the poem a rhetorical question, or a true question?

O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,

Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?

O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,

How can we know the dancer from the dance?

According to de Man, this question is *undecidable*. Language subverts all fixed meanings that it creates.

3.deconstruction of all kinds of hierarchical binary oppositions that constitute our (Western) Logocentric thinking (i.e. not only the opposition of speech and writing):

a.) between literal and metaphorical -> the literal is *always already* metaphorical (see: Derrida’s and de Man’s analysis of John Locke earlier).

b.) between successful and unsuccessful performatives – the possibility conditions of a successful performative coincinde with the characteristics of the non-successful ones (i.e. citationability, iterability/repeatability) -> what makes a performative successful are, in fact, the caharcteristics of the non-successful ones. (see: Derrida’s analysis of J.L. Austin in SEC)

c.) etc, etc.

->no Author, no authority, no presence, no centre, no origin, no essence, no fixed meaning, because the working of language subverts all fixities and definites -> this becomes a metaphysical and ontological position -> critique of Logocentrism (Logos: order, origin, the spoken word) -> Nihilism?

No!: deconstruction has strong political and ethical stakes

e.g. language is a political force: the referential function of language does not touch the real world, but affects it, it constitutes an imposition upon reality -> deconstruction of the opposition between constative and performative: what camouflages itself as constative is always already performative -> the preformative power/the performative *violence* of all utterances -> language is a political force that shapes reality, e.g. it is the imposition of the general upon the particular and the singular. (e.g. a.) The Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen” during the French. Rev: “all men *are* equal” – seems to be constative, but is, in fact, performative – men *become* equal bc. of the declaration.. b.) “Blacks *are* inferior to whites” – seems to be constative, but is, in fact, performative – blacks *become* inferior bc. of the declaration)

ethics: emphasis upon *singularity*.

Undecidability of all writing – reading is an ethical act: attentiveness to the “singularity” of the text, without any reassuring “meaning”, or totalising synthesis -> Politics/ethics: attentiveness to the singularity of a given situation, no recipe, no certain ground to fall back on, no method, no rule (in undecidable situations, you have to make a choice, after all, but this choice cannot be governed by any pre-given rule or authority). -> Praxis must be invented and reinvented again and again according the singular context. Key words: responsibility (i.e. to faithfully respond to a given situation). Justice (as against blind authority). – but all in all: see later.

Paul de Man: (1919-1983) – first and foremost a Romanticist

some key ideas:

gap between reality and language -> language creates reality

e.g. autobiography: writing *creates* a (coherent, meaningful) life, rather than being created by one’s (chaotic) life

-> “Literature is fiction not because it somehow refuses to acknowledge ‘reality’, but because it is not *a priori* certain that language functions according to principles which are those, or which are *like* those, of the phenomenal world. It is therefore not *a priori* certain that literature is a reliable source of information about anything but its own language.” (“Resistance to Theory”, 1986. 11.) -> take literature as a synonym for language in general!

-> “What we call ideology is precisely the confusion of linguistic with natural reality, of reference with phenomenalism.” (Ibid.): there is a difference between referent (natural reality) and the referential function of language (linguistic reality) -> ideology is when we think that the meaning constituted by language is the same as natural reality, when we apply linguistically constructed meanings to the real world (and act accordingly)

Posits “Truth” as an effect of language (cf: Nietzsche), whic is *constantly undermined by language itself ->*

“I would hold to the statement that the text deconstructs itself is self-deconstructive rather than being deconstructed by a philosophical intervention” - E.g. Locke: ”all the art of rhetoric, besides order and clearness; all the artificial and figurative application of words eloquence hath invented, are for nothing else but to insinuate wrong ideas, move the passions, and thereby mislead the judgment; and so indeed are perfect cheats [...] Eloquence, like the fair sex, has too prevailing beauties in it to suffer itself ever to be spoken against. And it is in vain to find fault with those arts of deceiving, wherein men find pleasure to be deceived.” – Locke’s language *deconstructs itself*: it *says* that rhetoric insinuates wrong ideas, that it mislead judgement, and yet, Locke’s language is plenty of metaphors. -> there is a *difference between what the text says and what it does*. (this is a focal point for deconstructionist analyses!)

-> there is no “closure” (definitive, fixed meaning), all attempts at “totalisation” (at establishing a total, all encompassing, definitive structure) are vain.

-> there is a persistent threat of misreading -> no definitive or absolutely true reading is possible (cf. above)

+ “*materiality of the letter*”: can subvert all established meaning, can make all statement ambiguous (cf. “lying” in Westminster Bridge).