

## LITERARY CRITICISM

### NARRATIVE AFTER DECONSTRUCTION

*Daniel Punday*

Interrogating stories told about life after deconstruction, and discovering instead a kind of afterlife of deconstruction, Daniel Punday draws on a wide range of theorists to develop a rigorous theory of narrative as an alternative model for literary interpretation. Drawing on an observation made by Jean-François Lyotard, Punday argues that at the heart of narrative are concrete objects that can serve as "lynchpins" through which many different explanations and interpretations can come together. *Narrative after Deconstruction* traces the often grudging emergence of a post-deconstructive interest in narrative throughout contemporary literary theory by examining critics as diverse as Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Elizabeth Grosz, and Edward Said. Experimental novelists like Ronald Sukenick, Raymond Federman, Clarence Major, and Kathy Acker likewise work through many of the same problems of constructing texts in the wake of deconstruction, and so provide a glimpse of this post-deconstructive narrative approach to writing and interpretation at its most accomplished and powerful.

"*Narrative after Deconstruction* offers a lucid, erudite, and persuasive argument for rethinking contemporary narration in light of, and in response to, the deconstructive questionings of the previous decades. This book is engaging, insightful, and accessible, in spite of the difficult theories that it unpacks."  
— Marcel Cornis-Pope, author of *Narrative Innovation and Cultural Rewriting in the Cold War Era and After*

"Punday provides new insights into the field of critical theory by formulating unique spatial/temporal distinctions for understanding narrative in the aftermath of deconstruction."

— M. W. Smith, author of *Reading Simulacra: Fatal Theories for Postmodernity*

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preface

*Narrative after Deconstruction.* How should we understand the word *after* in this title? Narrative as informed by deconstruction? *In the wake* of deconstruction? Or is it rather narrative as an alternative to deconstruction? Narrative *instead* of deconstruction? Or, perhaps, narrative in the style of deconstruction? Narrative *as* deconstruction?

To narrate the movement from deconstruction to narrative is to adopt the very style that this book will analyze. But more than this, such a narration raises the question of temporality that is central to the deconstructive project from the outset. Most American critics were introduced to deconstruction through Jacques Derrida's book *Of Grammatology* (trans. 1976), a work that puzzled novices and confounded critics with the apparently contradictory temporality of "writing before the letter." Derrida's own intellectual roots are firmly embedded in phenomenology and in the interest in time consciousness, a concern that is manifest in his first work on Edmund Husserl. A penchant for perverse temporality is one of the things that the frequently divergent Derridian and de Manian camps of deconstruction always shared.<sup>1</sup>

So to suggest that critics have simply moved "beyond" deconstruction to narrative, or to speak even about narrative as constructed "after" the popularity of deconstruction, seems fundamentally unfair to deconstruction's own rich understanding of time. And yet to examine Derrida's own writing over the last decade is to be struck by precisely some sort of change in style and emphasis. His work has moved away from an early concern with semiotics and language and a later commitment to developing a formally experimental writing style, toward a type of writing that can only be described as narrative in its basic concerns.<sup>2</sup> Derrida's most recent work—books on Marxism, mourning and death, and the archive all come to mind—has circulated around issues of futurity and responsibility to the past. A recent collection of essays by and about Derrida entitled *Futures: Of Jacques Derrida* edited by Richard Rand nicely encapsulates the emphasis of this newer work. This interest in the relation between past, present, and future may have been

implicit within Derrida's earlier writing, but the concern has come to dominate his recent work. Whether Derrida's recent writing is consistent with his earlier work or not, it is difficult to argue that there has not been some kind of shift in emphasis in his style of inquiry and in the types of concerns that provide the occasion for his writing.

And yet, to suggest that Derrida is no longer doing deconstruction, that the movement from deconstruction as it has been conceived in the past toward something that is more narrative means that he has rejected deconstruction is likewise wrong. Indeed, the complex transformation from one thing into another that may have "always already" been implicit within the former is both inherent to the deconstructive project from the outset, and the particular subject of Derrida's recent work. The clearest articulation of Derrida's recent interest in a kind of narrative of change is, I think, his book on the future of Europe, *The Other Heading* (1991). Derrida's discussion is occasioned by a colloquium on "European Cultural Identity" in 1990, but more broadly reflects a concern at the beginning of the 1990s about the breakup of cold-war animosities and alliances, and the ethnic nationalism that seemed to replace them. The question that faces Derrida is the future of European identity: "Must they [Europeans] re-begin? Or must they *depart* from Europe, separate themselves from an old Europe? Or else depart again, set out toward a Europe that does not yet exist? Or else re-embark in order to return to a Europe of origins that would then need to be restored, rediscovered, or reconstituted, during a great celebration of 'reunion'" (8). The question that most strongly confronts Derrida is the question of newness and its relation to the past. To describe the "new Europe" is in part to describe something implicit within European cultural traditions, which was always part of its "heading," the direction of its development. At the same time, however, Derrida is interested in the other potentials that are contained within that tradition, the possibilities of newness and of some "other heading." As Derrida writes, "But history also presupposes that the heading not be *given*, that it not be identifiable in advance and once and for all. The irruption of the new, the unicity of the other *today* should be awaited *as such* . . . it should be anticipated as the unforeseeable, the *unanticipatable*, the non-identifiable, in short, as that of which one does not yet have a memory" (18).

It is easy to see in *The Other Heading* how much Derrida's own recent work anticipates the question of narrative after deconstruction. In asking how the new Europe can be both part of a cultural tradition and "unanticipatable," Derrida invokes the question suspended within the title of this book: how can narrative come out of and also break from deconstruction? The mechanism of this complex temporality is more explicit within another of Derrida's recent books, *Archive Fever* (1995). Like *The Other Heading*, this book examines the relationship

between futurity and a sense of past or tradition. Here this tradition is formulated more explicitly and in greater detail as the archive, the collection of materials and texts that have a special relationship to future scholarship. Derrida writes, "The archive has always been a *pledge* and like every pledge, a token of the future. To put it more trivially: what is no longer archived in the same way is no longer lived in the same way" (18). For Derrida the founding of an archive is both this sort of pledge and at the same time an act of violence necessary to mark off the newness of an "unanticipatable" future. Specifically, this means the death of the individual whose materials furnish the archive: "the archive is made possible by the death, aggression, and destruction drive, that is to say also by originary finitude and expropriation" (94). Death provides the archive, and the founding of the archive in turn involves killing its source. Drawing on the Freudian context of the archive he is discussing, Derrida formulates this violence in terms of patricide discussed in *Totem and Taboo*: "It amounts to a repressed or suppressed parricide, in the name of the father as dead father. The archontic is at best the takeover of the archive by the brothers. The equality and the liberty of brothers. A certain, still vivacious idea of democracy" (95).

As Derrida's discussion of the archive makes clear, defining "another heading," a departure from the past, involves projecting back, into the past, a sense of origin that kills the object that is taken to authorize it. And this is true even when the spirit that results is "democratic" and institutionalized around a shared interest in the archival source. The same may well be said of what I will describe in this book as "post-deconstructive" criticism and its use of narrative. It is a mode of writing that takes its "heading" from deconstruction and that develops naturally out of the traditions and assumptions contained within that mode of thought. At the same time, however, this criticism marks itself off from deconstruction by projecting back into that "earlier" movement qualities that effectively kill it, defining it as past and as an origin from which a new mode of thinking can depart. To understand this "new" writing, this narrative after deconstruction, we need both to appreciate its continuities with deconstruction and to recognize the effort that it exerts to create the discontinuities that constitute it as a mode of thinking in its own right. To ask, ultimately, whether narrative after deconstruction isn't really simply more deconstruction is to miss the point. We must not allow ourselves to essentialize deconstruction into a theory that can never be archived; we must not be blind to the paradoxical working of deconstructive temporality even within the narratives that we construct about deconstruction itself.

*Narrative after Deconstruction* attempts, then, to walk a careful path between wholeheartedly embracing the rhetoric that defines deconstruction as a movement past and rejected, and a critical ap-

praisal that insists that all criticism that follows from, and attempts to be true to, deconstruction must in turn itself be deconstruction. Chapter 1 begins with the voice of the former, as I summarize and discuss claims by critics who turn to narrative as a way of rejecting or moving beyond deconstruction. Chapter 2 turns back to deconstruction in general and to Derrida's writing in particular, as I search for the seeds of post-deconstructive criticism within deconstruction itself. Having established this complex relationship between deconstruction and post-deconstructive narrative, the remainder of the book examines the particular modes of textual construction that result from this "new" form of criticism and writing. Postmodernist fiction, with its commitment to self-reflexivity in the context of storytelling (introduced in chapter 3) provides examples throughout of how the abstract claims about interpretation after deconstruction translate into ways of constructing texts. Discussions of narrative space (chapter 4) and time (chapter 6) are interspersed with reflections on the limits of the textual model that I develop (chapters 5 and 7), and with consideration of the implications of this model for subjectivity and ethics (chapter 8). In the end, I hope to have described criticism and writing poised at a moment between deconstruction and some "other heading," a moment at which we set out for some "unanticipatable" future by doing a certain violence to the deconstruction that is its origin.

I have many people to thank for the development of this project. Kit Hume has been a tireless reader of the manuscript from its earliest version as a dissertation through the final revisions for publication. Jeff Nealon likewise read through many versions of this manuscript, and was essential in helping me to transform what started as a formalist study of postmodern worlds into a more timely engagement with deconstruction and materiality. Other readers have contributed to the project by reading the manuscript and offering suggestions, including Kate Cummings, Raymond Federman, Ann Kibbey, Brian McHale, Jim Phelan, Peter Rabinowitz, Sanford Schwartz, Joe Tabbi, and the late Salim Kemal. My thanks as well to the anonymous reviewers for State University of New York Press. Two of the chapters were developed first as journal articles. Chapter 2 was published in a somewhat earlier form in *Postmodern Culture* 11.1 (September 2000) as "Derrida in the World: Space and Post-deconstructive Textual Analysis"; part of chapter 6 appeared in *Genders* 27 (1998) as "The Local Site and Materiality: Kathy Acker's *Empire of the Senseless*." I would like, finally, to express my gratitude to Carol and Sam, both of whom in different ways supported me during the long process of writing and revising this manuscript. My thanks to them for the other headings and futures that they have given me.

## chapter one

## THE NARRATIVE TURN

## Deconstruction and Narrative

In the last decade literary and cultural critics have increasingly turned toward the language of narrative and storytelling to describe the act of assigning meaning to some object or textual feature. Hayden White's once-controversial claim that historiography is a form of narration that is as much concerned with formal closure and generic expectations (expectations of "cohesion") as it is with its "correspondence" to historical fact (*Tropics* 66) has now been extended to many other fields. It has become commonplace to see the analysis of literature as relying on literary histories that are always constructions with their own tendency to create entities such as "American Literature" for their own strategic purposes (McHale, *Constructing* 1). In contrast to White's early assumption that the hard sciences are the antithesis of narration (*Tropics* 30), Donna J. Haraway has mounted a feminist critique of the biological sciences by revealing the operation of "fictive strategies" and "allowable stories" within primatology (85). Perhaps more thoroughly than any of these, postcolonial criticism has associated "nations" and "narration"—claiming that the "social" is entwined with the narratives that members of a society tell about themselves—in its attempt to reveal imperialism and its alternatives in diverse cultural products (Bhabha, *Nation*). In these instances, narrative is equated with the production of historical, literary, cultural, and even scientific knowledge.

Narrative seems to appeal to critics today as an alternative to deconstructive language of textual deferral, slippage, and indeterminacy. Indeed, to refer to narrative as a "turn" from deconstruction is itself an ironic echo of the revolution that deconstruction brought to historical and literary studies two decades ago. An endless spate of books and articles trumpeted the "linguistic turn" that deconstruction was sup-

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