

One day, perhaps, this century will be called Derridean...*

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Jacques Derrida's terrifying legacy – a legacy is for the future, and the future, as Derrida himself cautioned us, is always an absolute 'monstrosity' (incidentally, the last word of his 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', the paper he delivered at the 1966 Baltimore Conference, a paper widely believed to have launched Deconstruction) hence terrifying – for those in the Social Sciences and Humanities has primarily to do with the development of a critical and conceptual vocabulary that is persistently iconoclastic, destabilizing and self-perpetuating. If we make even a short inventory out of this vocabulary, we come across difference, traces, phallogocentrism, play, desterrance, hospitality, mondialisation, hauntology, supplement, and strange new interpretations of friendship, teletechnology, archive, justice, forgiveness, sovereignty, promise, autoimmunity, among others.

Derrida's and Deconstruction's influence has been felt (gently, but most often as seismic shifts) in anthropology and other social sciences, gender studies, law, architecture, and of course philosophy and literary studies. The effect of inventive and subversive overhauling of stereotypes, discourses and institutions in Deconstruction have helped, one could say with some certainty, in the schools of thought and critical enterprises such as postcolonialism (Edward Said was a young attendee at the Baltimore Conference), New Historicism, cyberculture studies, critical animal studies, Human Rights, among others. The impact of the rigorous, open-ended, layered, destabilizing readings Deconstruction taught us to perform have resulted in politically edged interpretations of texts and discourses across these disciplines, and cannot be summed up in the space of

*Commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Baltimore Conference and Jacques Derrida's 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', the Department of English of the University of Hyderabad organized a one day Symposium, '**Structures and Signs of Play: Derrida/Deconstruction@50**' on 10th November 2016. All the papers but one from the Symposium have been redone for *eSocial Sciences*. Josy Joseph shared the presentation he made in MG University, Kerala, on the same theme, and kindly agreed allowed its publication. As editor of this section for *eSS*, Pramod K Nayar thanks K. Narayana Chandran, P Thirumal, Jibu Matthew, A Raghuramaraju and D Venkat Rao for their presentations at the Symposium, and Josy Joseph, separately, for his paper; Anna Kurian for enabling the Symposium in the first instance; and Padma Prakash of *eSS* for her enthusiastic response to a query regarding publication.

one short essay. Instead, it seizes upon a few elements of this legacy in so far as they are relevant to our present contexts.¹

I

Deconstructive vocabulary's single greatest contribution to critical thinking has been to rediscover the fissures within language, as Derrida set about unpacking the contradictions and violent disavowals that have marked concepts hitherto taken for granted (for instance, Literature, Justice, Enlightenment, Democracy or Human). In arguing a case for arche-violence, supplements, prostheses (of meaning), origins and traces, for instance, Derrida demonstrated how etymology itself might reveal to us the history of the concept, what it concealed in order to naturalize itself. By elaborating the need to unearth the hidden history of the concept, Derrida showed us that knowledge production is violent and as reliant on erasure and obfuscation as revelation and transparency.

In other words, Derrida's careful explication of words (which often drove sane members – there were some – of the Humanities profession demented because of what they saw as his pointless play) and concepts underscored the politics of knowledge production, of the role of institutions and censorship laws, of violence and the masking of violence in legitimizing knowledge. Thus, what Derrida would, in his first major speech in the English-speaking world term 'play', turned out to be a rigorous unravelling of histories of concepts, even of the concept of critique itself. Derrida showed us that concepts are acts of discursive violence, something we in the public university system in India today understand well, when questions of free speech, academic expression, dissent and critique are inextricably bound up with questions of institutional and professional autonomy, of the 'right to deconstruction' as part of the critical enterprise and versions of compulsory nationalism. Discursive violence is embodied, in the sense it enables the inflicting of material and symbolic violence upon persons: hence Deconstruction's insistence on reading textual referents and discourses.

II

Deconstruction's foremost legacy, in at least this reading of Derrida, 'belongs' to/in Literature.

'Deconstruction ... is a coming-to-terms with literature', Derrida proposed ('Deconstruction in America', cited in Attridge 1992: 1). In the interview 'This Strange Institution Called Literature' he would elaborate:

there is no text which is literary in *itself*. Literarity is not a natural essence, an intrinsic property of the text. It is the correlative of an intentional relation to the text, an intentional relation which integrates in itself, as a component or an intentional layer, the more or less implicit consciousness of rules which are conventional or institutional – social, in any case. (Attridge 1992: 44, emphasis in original)

Deconstruction responds to the 'singularity' of literature, of every text, but for an entirely different set of reasons and with an entirely different set of consequences, as Derrida

¹ For detailed studies of Derrida's, and Deconstruction's, legacies see Naas (2003), McQuilan (2007), Fagan (2007) et al.

shows us. Derrida is quick to suggest that a singularity of Literature is possible only through its insertion into a generality (of language, for example, which is repeatable across contexts). “The singularity of a work is what enables it to be repeated over and over in events that are never exactly the same”, writes Jonathan Culler (2005: 871) in a thoughtful essay on Derrida and Literature. This iteration/repetition should happen in the absence of an identifiable speaker, context or hearer.

The task of criticism then is to respond to this singularity, not as imitation or reproduction, but as a unique response (what Derrida calls ‘countersign’), which in turn would produce more such unique responses. Criticism has to be, then, as inventive as the text it explicates. Further, Derrida’s insistence on the repeatability of literature as ‘acts’ (as in staged performance) also suggests that when we read a literary text we not only participate in the event wherein the characters and incidents (lifeworlds) come into being, but also in *the event of the linguistic act* that brings the event into being. Derrida sees this as the performative aspect of literature, a “performativity at least analogous to that of promises, orders, or acts of constitution or legislation which do not only change language or which, in changing language, change more than language” (Attridge 1992b: 55). Such a performative act is inventive in the sense it uses generalities of language (which is the *same* language that has been around for some time), but prepares for the wholly Other to emerge in, say, a novel. That is, literary invention, as Derrida returning to the original sense of ‘inventio’ (which means, both make up and find that which is already there), argues, is an impossible invention: it has been there all along (in language) but also allows the Other to appear. Literature then *repeats* language to discover what has been there all along, and yet *performs* the *singular* event in which the Other can come. In Hillis Miller’s (2001: 70) gloss on this argument, he frames the singularity of Literature thus: ‘I can only let it [the Other] come, though that letting is itself a speech act of a peculiar kind, requiring the greatest genius with words’. This last, respecting the singularity of Literature in our own countersign, or singular reading, is a responsible response because it *invites the Other to appear*. And this is precisely why Literature is so important in Derrida’s legacy. Literature makes this demand on us, to continue with the task of responsible reading and critical discourse *even when the very grounds of discourse are cut away from under us with the Other’s arrival*. Preparing for the arrival of this absolute, irreducible Other of our thought – that is, what is radically dissimilar, foreign or strange to what we have known so far – is the task of Literature and by extension literary criticism. It is for this reason that Geoffrey Galt Harpham (1999) declares that ‘literature as a genre seems especially committed to an exploration of outsiderhood’. It enables us to hold the thought of the Other in our heads. The respect for singularity and generality of literature/language enables us to hold this thought of the singular Other. Derrida’s most significant contribution in terms of literary criticism would then be this: responsible reading that respects the singularity of a text so as to allow the Other, one who is completely different from us, from our present moment, to come. Such a legacy is, of course, a politically relevant one, for, Derrida’s reading tells us that we should always respond to the imminent arrival of the Other, that is: difference. For the purpose of recognizing the discriminatory (and not always discerning, as Derrida

reminded us in an early, controversial essay, 'Racism's Last Word', 1985) social and institutional mechanisms, of the operations of truth regimes and power structures even when they are 'in the name' of the disenfranchised, especially within the university or democratic state, we need Literature. Elsewhere he would explicitly link in a powerful passage, which, strangely for Derrida, sounds prescriptive, the institution of Literature to democracy:

Literature ... inscribed in conventions and institutions which ... secure in principle its *right to say everything*. Literature thus ties its destiny to a certain noncensure, to the space of democratic freedom (freedom of the press, freedom of speech, etc.). No democracy without literature, no literature without democracy ... The possibility of literature, the legitimization that a society gives it, the allaying of suspicion or terror with regard to it, all that goes together – politically – with the unlimited right to ask any question, to suspect all dogmatism, to analyze every presupposition, even those of the ethics or the politics of responsibility. (Derrida 1992a: 'Passions', 23)

Derrida is careful to direct attention to institutional mechanics that establish Literature or Literary Studies as a discipline, but points out that the right to say everything in Literature is possible only when there is a respect for this foundational freedom: which is itself a mark of democracy. He notes – and this is a key component of the legacy – that every presupposition, even of ethics and politics of responsibility (the hallmark of radical, emancipatory movements but also, oddly, of the state itself) can be, indeed, must be, questioned. Democracy, then, like Literature, is a space where nothing can be beyond question, even the question of what kind of democracy we 'inhabit', or seek.

III

Such a project of responsible reading as a response to the Other is Deconstruction. Deconstruction itself as a critical legacy (critical, as in essential for us, today) has a major role in academia even now. If Deconstruction is an unrelenting questioning of orthodoxy, dogma, hegemonic discourses and institutions, then this must take place in the University.

Everything that concerns the question and the history of truth, in its relation to the question of man, of what is proper to man, of human rights, of crimes against humanity, and so forth, all of this must in principle find its space of discussion without condition and without presupposition, its legitimate space of research and reevaluation, *in* the University and, within the University, above all in the Humanities. Not so that it may enclose itself there, but on the contrary so as to find the best access to a new public space transformed by new techniques of communication, information, archivization, and knowledge production. (emphasis in original)

Jacques Derrida in this passage from 'The Future of the Profession or the University without Condition' makes a case for the role of the Humanities and the University itself. The University, in short, must encourage and give place to the 'right to Deconstruction'. The 'right to Deconstruction' itself, as Derrida defined it, is "an unconditional right to ask critical questions not only to the history of the concept of man, but to the history even of the notion of critique, to the form and the authority of the question, to the

interrogative form of thought” (26). This task of deconstruction Derrida situates in the ‘new Humanities’, a task “beginning with the deconstruction of their own history and their own axioms” (26). He, later in this essay, spells it out. It would examine

- (i) ‘Traditional concepts of “what is proper to man”’;
- (ii) The history of democracy and the idea of sovereignty;
- (iii) The history of the profession and the professing professoriat;
- (iv) The history of literature, the history of the concept of literature;
- (v) The history of the distinction between performative and constative acts;
- (vi) The authority of the Humanities in the university. (51-5)

The key feature of the above Derrida list is its set of assumptions and critical agenda. By calling upon the Humanities and the University in general to examine their foundational axioms, he calls upon practitioners (the professoriat) to examine the role the Humanities have played, and continue to play, in exclusionary practices, in ‘fitting in’ with dominant ideologies, in the claims and counter-claims of authority.

This, effectively, is a call to an interrogative self-reflexivity. Derrida is careful to ensure that, while assigning a major role to the Humanities, he alerts us to the incipient dogmatization within the Humanities itself. Derrida cautions us that the Humanities needs to be aware of its own contradictions – such as the fascism of protests/protestors even as they protest against authoritarianism. Derrida’s emphasis in his concluding point on the ‘authority’ of the Humanities is a salutary warning: that the pursuit of heterodoxy cannot itself become a foundational dogma. Truth itself is at once relative and plural because what constitutes truth, whether in law or literature, is made visible when one explores the history of the concept of truth, the institutions that have defined it as such. The Humanities, which often carries the burden of pointing out dodgy essentialisms and hegemonic ideologies (such as, in the current context, nationalism or patriotism), can itself be trapped in its (hegemonizing) emphasis on ‘one critique’, whether that critique is Marxist or Conservative. Thus, when the Humanities pleads for plurality and greater participation in, say, University student elections, it has to be then prepared for Conservative victory at the hustings: it cannot then claim that, even with pluralism, the Conservatives cannot come to power. Such a disavowal in the name of safeguarding plurality would itself be a terrible orthodoxy.

IV

By demonstrating that every element of the binary is constituted by the other, Derrida demonstrated the futility of any emphasis on purity, lineage and singularity. Each is inhabited by its other: human/animal, man/woman, presence/absence, white/dark, modern/primitive, etc. This insistence upon the mutually constitutive state of all elements enables Derrida and his legacy to see contamination, contagion, infection and impurity as the non-deconstructible aspect of all existence, including the existence of thought. This resistance to singularity holds enormous political significance for us today, given the drive towards cultural, racial, national ‘purity’.

The codification of norms of national identity, the reverential hagiographies around particular figures to the exclusion of others reveal, in deconstructive readings,

the 'hauntology' (Derrida's famous neologism about haunting and its ontological significance) and spectropoetics of national identity – and this is a key legacy for us today. 'Between the life and death, nationalism has as its own proper space the experience of haunting. There is no nationalism without some ghost' (Derrida 1992b: 'Onto-Theology'). This legacy should alert us to the process of selection of 'suitable' ghosts which then define a 'pure' national lineage for us.

Deconstruction is marked by a persistent resistance to any idea of untainted lineage (of individuals, families, races or nations) because it demonstrates how the singular sign can only be constructed or understood in its relationality to, its inhabitation by and of, something else. The dominance of any sign or racial-national lineage is not, deconstruction tells us, due to its inherent significance or truth, but to regimes of power that have ascribed truth-values to it, and denied difference or other truth values. Singularity, then, is not a state of discerning truth, it is a state of discriminating truth regimes.

Derrida's work forces us to see academic enterprise, critical theory and interpretative strategies as not only linked to social factors – Marxist criticism does this as well – but as determining the scope and agenda of the very politics of the nation. By linking the right to critique and self-critique to democracy, Derrida proposes that the foundations of democracy lie in rigorous explication, interrogation and inquiry, all conducted with complete freedom and resistant to dogma, orthodoxy and fixity of meaning.

Derrida's numerous writings on response and responsibility, whether in terms of hospitality towards the Other or towards the text, are all, one could argue, directed at the future. The 'work to come' or 'democracy to come' in Derrida is affiliated to the 'promise'. A promise when fulfilled loses its valency and its potentiality as promise. It is a promise only so long as it is never fulfilled, but always *likely* to be fulfilled. But the emphasis in Derrida is that such a democratic promise, precisely because it (can) never arrive, must be worked at, worked towards. Thus, the task, he suggests, is to 'prepare for the democracy to come' (Derrida 1984: *Spectres of Marx*; 1994: *Politics of Friendship*; 2000: *Rogues*). This might entail, as he took pains to point out over these texts, coming to terms with the destructive and transformative potential at the heart of democracy.² There is a larger point to be considered in this connection, in terms of what Derrida claims for the 'work' of democracy and responsibility/response towards it.

When democracy shuts down, closes itself off as a way of (supposedly) ensuring that demos prevails, then it produces and replicates the very thing it hoped to erase. Derrida's work on autoimmunity as a political concept (articulated in *Rogues* and his essay 'Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides', in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*, a volume devoted to Habermas and Derrida responding to 9/11) suggests that in order to preserve sovereign democratic states, these repress further differences, and the

² Derrida argues that democracy and sovereignty are mutually antithetical. Without sovereignty, the 'demos' would be usurped by some other power, ensuring that the rule of the demos (which is what democracy is) would never be achieved. In order to ensure the rule by the people, democracies then close themselves off, seeking to contain the very plurality of the demos that enabled the democracy in the first instance. See Beardsworth (1996), Thomson (2005), among others, for a discussion of Derrida and the political.

mechanism (immune system) designed to ward off external threats then turns inwards, fighting the body's own cohesion. Derrida writes:

[W]hat I call the autoimmune consists not only in harming or ruining oneself, indeed in destroying one's own protections, . . . committing suicide or threatening to do so, but, more seriously still, . . . in compromising the self, the *autos*—and thus ipseity. It consists not only in committing suicide but in compromising sui- or self-referentiality, the self or sui- of suicide itself. (2005: 45, emphasis in original)

Derrida's reading of autoimmunity has attracted considerable attention. Michael Naas writes:

autoimmunity is . . . a threat insofar as it compromises the immune system that protects the organism from external aggression, but as in the case of immunodepressants, a chance for an organism to open itself up to and accept something that is not properly its own, to the transplanted organ, the graft, in a word, to the other. Without certain forces of autoimmunity, we would reject organs and others essential to "our" survival—whether we are talking about an individual body, a community, or a nation-state. Hence there can be no community without autoimmunity, no protection of the safe and sound without a perilous opening of borders (2006: 25).

WJT Mitchell (2007) comments:

the nervous system can accelerate its learning process with self-conscious reflection, critique, the preservation of memory and history. Immunity is a form of cellular memory; the body learns by experience how to fight measles, and it doesn't forget. The most dangerous threat to the immune system, then, is amnesia, the forgetting of what it has learned... (284)

The immune system remembers an earlier attack, the contamination and the virus, and then *recalibrates itself for the future*. Thus, the strengthening of the immune system *demand*s the contamination. The sovereignty of the body, to be protected by the immune system, demands that this system be prepared, guarding the borders, precisely by inviting the foreign in. Sovereignty, even in a democracy, demands a welcoming of the Other or the outsider.

Thus, democracy is characterized by this impossible aporia of retaining sovereignty by closing off borders thereby rendering the community inside notionally homogeneous by denying plurality, and yet seeking plurality and multiplicity. When democracy seeks to protect itself, it fortifies itself against *difference*, in other words. Out of this denial, rejection and suppression emerges the threat. That is, it is the immune system of the democracy that in the process of suppressing difference, engenders the threat *from within*. This reading of the 'democracy to come' is a cautionary tale: when democracy, 'in the name of' defending itself turns against its citizens, or 'in the name of' national identity starts isolating groups who are 'different', or 'in the name of' nationalism begins to erase multiplicity of voices, debates, views and ideas, then democracy heads into an aporia. The threat to the democracy is first mounted by the state, 'in the name of' the very demos it has turned against and seeks to homogenize. Any responses to this

state-sponsored shutting down off plurality will then be read as ‘threats’ from within, i.e., an autoimmune threat. Even a call for greater multiplicity or an insistence on plural traditions, interpretive flexibility or open-ended discourses will, in a democracy that is threatened by the demos it ostensibly defends be seen as a threat. Deconstruction’s scrupulous insistence on open-endedness, multiplicity, the inherent instability of meaning offers us a frame in which to read such a ‘closure’ of debate and meaning in the contemporary.

Is there any *one* legacy of Jacques Derrida that people across the Humanities need to keep alive? If there is such a doxa (or a para-doxa, since Derrida himself would possibly see this singularity as unacceptable) that would be the doxa of constant vigilance. The constant vigilance is directed at processes of thought that seek to restrain, contain and purify, of attributing singular meanings at the cost of others, of presence, of believing in immanence and being rather than becoming, of assumptions of ‘self-evident truths’ without seeking to understand how these came to be instituted as ‘truths’. A refusal to be tied to supposedly self-evident categories or ideologies that then begin to acquire the status of dogma, would be another legacy Derrida’s works (which, as he reminded us, were not always his own, since he was voicing, responding to others, including responding to the future) leaves us. A third would be the responsibility to the Other, a responsibility that begins with careful reading of texts and ideas so as to be able to retain the Other in our heads.

Inheritance, wrote Derrida in *Specters of Marx*, is never a given, it is always a task. Fifty years after his epoch-defining (defying?) ‘Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences’, we continue to debate the task he set us to perform. Like Joyce’s famous challenge to future critics, Derrida’s work continues to keep people of various ideological, disciplinary and political persuasions busy. The title of this essay is a play of course on Foucault’s claim that the century (the 20th) would one day be termed Deleuzean. However, if the continuous production of work around Derrida’s legacies is any index, the century and the future (which lasts forever, as the title of Louis Althusser’s autobiography put it, Althusser being Derrida’s teacher) are both Derridean.

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