The Legacy of Deconstruction

Quasi-Transcendental Philosophy
and Quasi-Private Literature

In Part I, I tried to show that a textualist version of pragmatism provides a powerful antidote to formalism and the basis for what I have called an informalist conception of the institution of literary studies. But in spite of the fact that almost all literary scholars today instinctively disavow formalism, most probably would not describe their work as contributions to the “Ministry of Disturbance” as I have described it. That is because the historical impetus for the antiformalist sensibility in literary studies today came not from pragmatism but from deconstruction, which was clearly the most influential of the new literary approaches that have emerged within the institution since the advent of the theory explosion in the 1960s. In his invaluable 2009 history American Literary Criticism since the 1930s, Vincent B. Leitch remarks on deconstruction’s influence on virtually every other approach that came to prominence in the decade following its emergence: “It was not uncommon by the late seventies to find strands of deconstructive thinking interwoven into the projects of certain formalists, phenomenologists, hermeneuticists, Marxists, structuralists, feminists, ethnic critics, postcolonial theorists, and cultural critics” (230). According to Leitch, “by the mid-1980s there were more books, articles, reviews, and conference papers dedicated to explaining, assessing, applying, and/or criticizing deconstructive criticism than any other school or movement of the time” (257–58). His other works testify to the ongoing importance of “deconstructive thinking” since that period. In Theory Matters (2003), he says that by the early 1980s, deconstruction, along with the related approaches known as “poststructuralism,” “mutated from its French roots in response to more local problems and challenges . . . brought to the surface . . . by feminists, ethnic autonomy groups, and postcolonial thinkers” (3). In the 1990s, this mutation gave way to a new approach called “cultural studies,” and although Leitch describes this movement as supplanting poststructuralism as the dominant force in the discipline, he notes that cultural critique “entails the explicit turn of poststructuralist styles of criticism to ethics and politics” (5). It is fair to conclude, then, that
deconstruction and associated styles of criticism have profoundly influenced the self-image of literary studies in ways that pragmatism has not, and this fact has had important consequences for the practices currently in favor within the profession.

In another book, *Cultural Criticism, Literary Theory, Poststructuralism* (1992), Leitch also provides a helpful list of the antiessentialist and antifoundationalist views that make poststructuralism a version of antiformalism:

> However multifaceted and heterogeneous it is, poststructuralism in most of its guises exhibits certain distinctive traits, including rejection of reason as universal and foundational; problematization of linguistic reference and textual interpretation; decentering of the subject; suspicion of totalizing narratives; affirmation of the nexus of knowledge/interest/power; criticism of modernity and the legacy of the Enlightenment; stress on history and culture as discursive constructions and sites of struggle; interrogation of established disciplinary and intellectual boundaries; and sensitivity to differences, exclusions, anomalies, and margins. (xxiii)

As we have seen, all these views are shared by pragmatism, so were it not for certain historical contingencies, many of which are described in Leitch's books, pragmatism could have served equally well as the source of the antiformalist intuitions that displaced the New Criticism as the dominant paradigm for literary study in the United States during the 1960s. Among those contingencies was the fact that by the middle of the twentieth century, pragmatism was largely out of favor in American universities, having lost its struggle for the soul of the philosophy department to logical positivism. At the same time, a new approach to literature known as structuralism was emerging in France, and its arrival on the American scene coincided not only with a growing weariness with the New Criticism but also with the sensational appearance of structuralism's own apparent successor, deconstruction. During the first major interdisciplinary conference on structuralism, held in 1966 at Johns Hopkins University, Jacques Derrida delivered his notorious paper, “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” which prompted Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato to begin their preface to the collected papers from the conference with the statement “today, we may question the very existence of structuralism as a meaningful concept” (ix). These circumstances made deconstruction, the idea Derrida introduced in his paper, a natural source of inspiration for a new generation of literary scholars who wanted very badly to escape the grip of formalism.

But from the point of view of informalism, the problem with deconstruction is that it preserved too many of the intuitions of the structuralism it purported to displace. Indeed, Jonathan Culler, whose book *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (1982) is still the most lucid introduction to the mode of criticism Derrida inspired in his American followers, has taken great pains to argue that the “post” in “poststructuralism” is not the same as an “anti-” and that deconstruction should be regarded as an extension of structuralism rather than a critique of it. In a later book, *Framing the Sign: Criticism and its Institutions* (1988), Culler defines structuralism as an approach that “studies signification as the product of underlying rules or norms, like the grammar of language” (17).