

35 Years of *On Deconstruction*

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Abstract: Jonathan Culler's *On Deconstruction* was published in 1982 when "theory" prevailed, followed by continuous renewal of works of Jacques Derrida and deconstruction. As a typical academic work on deconstructive criticism, *On Deconstruction* features great clarity and depth. In 2007, Culler added a new preface to the book's 25th anniversary edition reviewing the American journey deconstructive criticism after 1982, which may indicate why deconstruction has been widely accepted as a method of criticism despite the resistance from Western philosophy.

Key Words: deconstruction; Culler; deconstructive criticism; ethics

1. Golden Age of Theory

Jonathan Culler's *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* was published in 1982 when the mysterious theory of avant-garde prevailed. China has immediately fulfilled the enlightenment of transitional transformation from modernity to post-modernity as flooded by various western rebellious trends of thought, from Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Freud to structuralism and post-structuralism thanks to the policy of reform and opening up in 1980s when China's academic circle was craving for theories. Considering that it has taken place in the field of literary criticism and aesthetics, Culler's words in *On Deconstruction* have made a vivid description:

Whatever their effects *on interpretation*, works of literary theory are closely and vitally related to other writings within a domain as yet unnamed but often called "theory" for short. This domain is not "literary theory", since many of its most in-

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teresting works do not explicitly address literature. It is not “philosophy” in the current sense of the term, since it includes Saussure, Marx, Freud, Erving Goffman, and Jacques Lacan, as well as Hegel, Nietzsche, and Hans-Georg Gadamer. It might be called “textual theory,” if text is understood as “whatever is articulated by language,” but the most convenient designation is simply the nickname “theory.”

Culler is right that *On Deconstruction*, a classic of Derrida’s deconstruction, basically tells the story of “theory”. Deconstruction has become popular among colleges and aroused heated discussion after *De La Grammatologia* was translated and prefaced by Gayatri Spivak in 1976. Even Derrida himself would rather say that his theory was still under overall arrangement before 1982, but after that, Culler’s *On Deconstruction* has remained the top among following literary criticism on deconstruction. Comment made by David Lodge, senior British novelist and critic who is 11 years older than Culler, was printed on the back cover of the 25th edition of *On Deconstruction* published in 2007, “ With the dispute between the methods of deconstruction and humanism in reading career, academism literary criticism is still dominated by ‘theory’. Jonathan Culler’s *On Deconstruction* is a detailed, thought-provoking work which has set an example to elucidate Derrida’s view and its application in literary research. ”

The spread of *On Deconstruction* and deconstruction’s entrance to literary criticism are almost simultaneous. Photocopy of the book was widely spread in college libraries and academic circle in the mid 1980s when scholars were trying to translate it into Chinese. However, it was during this period that the copyright awareness of Chinese publishing industry has becoming distinct, therefore, it took some time to realize the communication between authors, translators and publishing houses of both sides. As a result, even if I was the Chinese translator of the book and already received Culler’s reply that he would be glad to see Chinese version of his book circulated around China, I could have no alternatives given that Culler himself had no copyright. It was in 1998 that the Chinese translation of *On Deconstruction* was published by China Social Science Press by being incorporated in the “intellectuals library” designed by Wang Fengzhen and Wang Min’an after being issued in Hongkong for various reasons, which was 10 years later than the time it should have been issued. Even so it was sold out in no time and the second edition came out in 2011. *On Deconstruction* is a classic work among the Chinese translation of western works in the last half century, especially in the field of literary criticism. The book is included in the reprint of classics by China Renmin University Press in 2017, and I made supplement from four aspects, which are the completion of lengthy annotations abridged to some extent, the rearrangement of citing papers ac-

According to the original format of the book, the complete list of reference and the attachment of whole translated terms or names that are not dealt with in name index of the original text. It is hoped that the great classic can provide sufficient clues for those who are interested in it and present a feast of criticism and argument of the past.

Derrida who was deeply in love with literature persistently attempted to overturn the philosophical tradition of western rationalism of Logocentrism with the flexibility and danger of literature. However, Derrida has never hidden his deeply-rooted identity of philosophy. He participated in the boycott of the reform of canceling philosophical courses in public high school drafted by government in the middle of 1970s. Similarly, with the general marginalization of humanities in college, how can higher education be furthered after the deconstruction? Will some powers take advantage of the situation? Derrida made the following answer:

If current French State is afraid of philosophy, it is because extending its teaching contributes to the progress of two types of threatening forces: those wanting to change the State (those, let's say, belonging to an age of left-wing Hegelianism) and to wrest it from the control of those forces currently in power, and those that, on the other hand or simultaneously, allied or not with the former, tend toward the destruction of the State. These two forces cannot be classified according to the prevailing divisions. They seem to me, for example, to cohabit today within that theoretical and practical field commonly known as "Marxism."²

Forces outlying colleges are covetously waiting for the fading of traditional humanities and taking its place, according to Derrida. In one word, who is afraid of philosophy? The key point is that capitalist government is scared of the potential subversive power of Marxist philosophy, which is also the philosophical standpoint of Derrida. Nevertheless, Derrida wasn't thought highly of among French philosophies at the beginning, and besides, his viewpoints were considered unfettered like literature, which deviated from the orthodox European philosophy from Descartes to Edmund Husserl. Derrida whose deconstruction was regarded as a dreadful standpoint for a long time was not even accepted by his Alma Mater, Ecole Normale Super Paris France, which he left in 1982 and began to work in École des hautes études en sciences sociales (EHESS). It turned out that the renowned scholar on deconstruction still hadn't been conferred the title of full professor. There was a time when Derrida self-mocked that he was a luxurious marginal man, which would be a vivid description of his status.

2. The American Journey of Deconstruction

However, deconstruction in America has met with no obstacles. Derrida, together with Roland Barthes, Foucault, Lacan and Deleuze, entered colleges in US and formed the grand “French theory” with the publishing of *De La Grammatologia* translated and prefaced by Gayatri Spivak in 1976. Derrida has constantly travelled both sides since he took up the post of part-time professor of English Department of Yale University in 1975, and formed “Yale School” with professors Paul De Man, Harold Bloom, Hillis Miller and Geoffrey Hartman. *Deconstruction and Criticism* edited by Derrida and above-mentioned four Yale professors in 1979 was considered the declaration of “Yale School”. They even got a nickname as “Gang of Four”, which indicates that the interaction between Chinese and American academic circles was actually beyond our imagination. At least five of Derrida’s books had been translated into English when *Deconstruction and Criticism* was published, namely *Speech and Phenomena And Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs*, *De La Grammatologia*, *Words and Differences and Spurs: Nietzsche’s Style*, after which the English versions of anti-traditional works of the early phase of deconstruction, *The Verge of Philosophy*, *Death Knell* and the *Truth in Painting* have come out. Detailed depiction and analysis in *On Deconstruction* by Culler fully demonstrated why Derrida gained most popularity in the “French Theory” dominating the US. Despite the fact that some claimed that deconstruction has come to an end after 1990s, Derrida’s persistent effort in writing and educating his theory in France and the US have aroused new heated discussion in critic circle, and deconstruction, aiming at anti-tradition in the first place, has become a part of tradition. As Derrida emphasized repeatedly, the core of deconstruction was criticism and sublation rather than blindly obeying authority. Then French president Chirac addressed when Derrida passed away in 2004 that thanks to Derrida, France has transmitted a greatest contemporary philosophical ideology to the whole world, which was quite reasonable.

Jonathon Culler, born in Cleveland in 1944, got his degree in history and literature in Harvard University in 1966, where he gained scholarship and went to study comparative literature in St. John’s College in Oxford University and got bachelor’s degree in 1968 as well as Ph. D of Modern Linguistics in 1972. Culler’s *Structuralist Poetics* was based on his doctoral dissertation, *Structuralism: Development of Linguistic Mode and Its Application in Literary Research*. Working in some colleges and institutions, Culler is a leading character of western literary criticism. His wife, Cynthia Chess, is also a critic of American deconstruction, as is referred to

many times in *On Deconstruction*.

The travel of deconstruction in America mainly focuses on its possible influence on literature, which has been elaborated in *On Deconstruction* in details. Despite the continuous publishing of works in the name of Derrida and deconstruction, *On Deconstruction* remained a classic for its clear and thorough introduction of the basic theories of deconstructionism and its application to literature. We can hardly imagine who else is capable of depicting such a full view of criticism and theory with the following theoretical debate among new criticism, structuralism, feminism and deconstructionism from the 1970s to the early 1980s. As I quote from the beginning of the book, "To write about critical theory at the beginning of the 1980s is no longer to introduce unfamiliar questions, methods, and principles, but to intervene in a lively and confusing debate."³ The result of debate is that Culler labeled binary opposition deconstructionism methodology by Derrida as the most dynamic and significant critic mode of contemporary age and applied it by himself. However, things will develop in the opposite direction when they become extreme. Culler said in *Framework of Signs* published in 1988 that history of criticism used to be part of history of literature, while now history of literature has become part of history of criticism, which shows the popularity of "criticism" and "theory" of that time.

The starting point of deconstructionism in America can undoubtedly date back to the seminar named the Science of Critical Language and Human held in October when two professors of Johns Hopkins University invited ten scholars on French structuralism after they applied for a fund in 1966. Despite the fact that the famous speech addressed by Derrida showed the critical mode of questioning center from margin and demonstrated how nobody can challenge renowned senior scholars such as Levi Strauss and aroused heated discussion, his standpoint was by no means unreasonable. The Derrida effect was summarized as the following after 30 years:

The question is very clear: universities in America has always be acquainted with the narrative mode of the lofty structuralism and its diluted share, such as Genette and Tzvetan Todorov. Now we should forget about them and come to meet postmodernism. Despite the fact that the term appeared in the early 1970s, all American present at the seminar of Johns Hopkins University in 1966 realized that they have just attended the live show of its public birth.⁴

Post-structuralism seems to be transient and Foucault, Lacan Derrida and Deleuze who were considered to be scholars in this realm as well as Roland Barthes known as shifting from structuralism to post-structuralism have never admitted that they were post-structuralism. Or put into another way, it is almost equivalent to postmodernism in the literary dimension in the broad sense, while it is a decon-

structionism in a narrow sense. Beginning with Johns Hopkins University, the spread of deconstructionism in America has finally formed the “golden triangle” constituted of Johns Hopkins University, Cornell University with the representative of Culler and Yale University with the representative of Paul de man.

3. Deconstructive Criticism

Culler applied the most common approaches of deconstructive criticism when he talked about deconstructionism. As a philosophical ideological trend with the representative of Derrida, “Jie gou” has been the one and only Chinese transition, deconstruction has become a literary critical mode similar to critical analysis with its moving from margin to center. This is exactly the reason for that deconstructive criticism has been always on the top status though the transition “jie gou” is a verb which doesn’t perfectly meet Chinese reading custom. Most of the time the deconstructive criticism in this book means criticism of deconstruction, and it also can be understood as a kind of action in some severe moment. I do not mean to advocate the western rationalism of Logocentrism, I just reiterate that the significance comes from context, and the variation of context is the approved principle of expression from Saussure to Derrida. For the convenience of presentation, deconstruction is actually translated to deconstruction and deconstructive criticism or deconstructionism.

Culler quoted many famous cases of deconstructionism of Derrida’s reading about Saussure, Rousseau, Plato, John Austin, Freud, Kant and Lacan. In Rorty’s work, deconstruction regards representation as the symbol of other symbols which refer to another others, hence the significance has no limits. Culler said that deconstruction was different from pragmatic philosophy in terms of the latter’s truth notion of justifiable proposition and the reflection attitude. Therefore, deconstructive reading is actually faced up with a specious situation:

“On the one hand, logocentric positions contain their own undoing and, on the other hand, the denial of logocentrism is carried out in logocentric terms. Insofar as deconstruction maintains these positions, it might seem to be a dialectical synthesis, a superior and complete theory; but these two movements do not, when combined, yield a coherent position or a higher theory. Deconstruction has no better theory of truth. It is a practice of reading and writing attuned to the aporias that arise in attempts to tell us the truth. It does not develop a new philosophical framework or solution but moves back and forth, with a nimbleness it hopes will prove strategic, between nonsynthesizable moments of a general economy. It moves in and out of

philosophic seriousness, in and out of philosophical demonstration.”⁵

This is a philosophical guideline of deconstructive criticism. Deconstructionism has no better view of truth, and deconstruction is a practice of reading and writing corresponding to many confusions in the elucidation of truth, which constitutes a humble depiction of theoretical character.

Similar to his interpretation of Derrida's deconstructive theory, Culler is also good at citing various authorities and other scholars' results in his effort of deconstructive criticism. He selected the intertextuality of Walter Michaels's reading Thoreau, Barbara Johnson's reading Melville de man's reading Proust and John Blackman's reading Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, and set them as the paradigm of “deconstructive criticism”. According to Culler's conclusion, deconstructive criticism can be carried out in six basic steps: first, find out a series of concepts of binary opposition in target text, such as truth/fiction, parole/word, literal meaning/metaphorical meaning and so forth, and then reverse their rank order; second, find a word as breakthrough, such as deconstructing Palto by “medicine”, deconstructing Kant by “accessory” and deconstructing Rousseau by “supplementation”; third, pay close attention to other forms of textual self-contradiction; fourth, rhetorical structure of textual self-deconstruction; fifth, extend internal conflict of text to the conflict among different textual interpretations; sixth, pay attention to marginal elements and march toward center from margin. Strictly sticking to the six basic steps of deconstructive criticism time and time again can be mechanical, as we can sense in our understanding of rereading *On Deconstruction*. Nevertheless, they feature pragmatically operability which sets contrast to the metaphysics of word game in Derrida's early phase theory.

The 25th anniversary version of *On Deconstruction* has been published in 2007, for which Culler wrote a 14-page preface. Culler pointed out that “deconstruction” has become a pet phrase used in both academicism and daily life. It has become a most frequently used term not limited to the realm of literary criticism and philosophy. “Deconstruction” was the highlight of criticism and cultural debate for the last 25 years, which was also abused to some extent. Deconstructionism, derived from deconstruction, has not only influenced theoretical words but also been referred to as a ideological movement in a broader sense. Various hypothesis and deduction of philosophy, literary and critical tradition in the ideological age have become suspicious, while the movement of deconstruction has never been open-and-shut. Derrida pointed out, as quoted by Culler, deconstruction is not a school, a methodology, a philosophy or a practice, and instead, it is what is happening right now. Dé construction is a French word invented by Derrida when who was translating the two

words *Abobau* and *Destruktion* from Martin Heidegger. It has its own fresh live, and can be referred to as a broader knowledge movement or process after escaping from the author's control. Deconstruction has already opened up an independent thinking tradition of its own despite its end at the 20th century with the death of Derrida.

4. Aftermath of Deconstruction outside Criticism

Culler categorized and summarized the influence of deconstruction over outside of literary criticism in the preface to the 25th anniversary version of *On Deconstruction*. There are three aspects which draw attention, generally speaking.

First, feminism/gender research/queer theory. Culler pointed out that despite the fact that feminism has kept suspicious of deconstructionism and thought that it is typical male abstract leisure which denies the authority of female experience on purpose, many feminist ideological trends have always been in favor of the deconstruction of the binary opposition of male/female and the essentialism of critical identity. Though Gayatri Spivak has always appealed to combine deconstruction and feminism with other hot topics, the most outstanding result goes to Judith Butler who incorporated Derrida and Foucault in her theoretical project of identity and gender. As a result, Culler thought highly of her works, such as *Gender Trouble*, and that her demonstrative concept of gender and sexual identity which learnt from J.L.Austin's action clause and his own argument of the repetition of action clause made contribution to the contemporary research of homosexuality and feminism.

Second, religion/theology. Culler pointed out that deconstruction, as a metaphysical criticism, especially the criticism of metaphysics present and logocentrism, was bound to be anti-theology. However, logocentrism which explores the mysterious theological mind of western philosophy also considers deconstruction as a version of anti-theology. Some scholars such as John Kato preached concept of Messiah in Derrida's thought and tried to dig out a Derrida's theological concept and combine the motif of delay with the waiting for preaching Messiah. And then demonstrate a kind of religion which has no religion inside and a kind of Messiah which has no Messiah in its inner. Here what deconstruction displays is not the impossibility of religion, but a negative religion without defects of real religion.

Besides, the discussion of deconstruction and religion seems to be drifted apart. On one hand, religion is introduced into the Derrida and deconstruction, elucidating that deconstruction is a religion boasting its own structure and duty; on the other

hand, deconstruction is introduced into theology, which adds to its philosophical complexity and sense of responsibility. Is it necessary that deconstruction should be labeled as atheism, or it cannot be continued? Or, can it be extended within the context of theology, thus generating a theology capable of escaping from philosophy? The long text included in *Religion* collaborated by Derrida and Vattimo didn't regard theology as religion itself, and instead, a social and spiritual phenomenon, indicating the different interpretation of religious problem from the perspective of deconstruction.

Third, politics, law and ethics. These are likely to be the most eye-catching part of the trend of deconstructionism during recent years. What's the relationship between deconstruction and politics For instance, does deconstruction possess a politics or is it an ideology pushed by all impossibility of politics? *Derrida and Politics* written by Jeff Bennington, American critic, pointed out that , as Culler quoted, the philosophical works of Derrida are so radical that there is an opinion in English world that they can boost a radical politics or deconstructive politics, thus readers can find fault with Derrida and blame him for letting down some people and failing to treat politics and reality equally. 'Culler couldn't help but sighing that even though Derrida held distinct political standpoint in face of many political issues and was dedicated to the leftwing or playing leftwing, he disappointed many people who pursued another type of radical political order. After all, elucidating the world is different from changing the world. Culler pointed out that the Derrida's political writing covering many aspects including some direct political issues, such as racial segregation, immigration law, death sentence and European integration, and political theories in a broadest sense, such as *Friendship Politics* which further research politics and democracy by friend or foe issues, as well as *Specters of Marx* which laid the foundation of Derrida's status in the post-Marxism world.

Culler thought that the conflict research between the internal principle and anti-principle of law doctrine is similar to that of deconstruction. In *Deconstruction and Law* published by Culler in 1988, he pointed out that the series of issues between public and person, essence and chance as well as content and form concerned by critical law movement emerging during recent years were all binary opposition based on law, and that the law doctrine lied in covering conflict, which was similar to the mode of deconstructionism. However, Derrida tended to explore the law and justice issues from philosophical perspective, such as the problem that why violence and justice in the essential term couldn't be solved. *The Force of Law* is such a typical example.

It has become a new symbol of deconstructionism as to how justice in Derri-

da's later works has replaced difference in his earlier ones, which is related to ethics as far as Derrida is concerned. Considering the fact that deconstruction facilitates the association of defying existent traditions and rules, embrace the Nietzsche's track which obscure good and evil, it seems to have nothing in common with ethics. How can deconstruction go without mentioning ethics featuring concepts of law, duty, obligations and decision from metaphysics? Which kind of inevitability, duty and commitment is running here? Is it belong to ethics or not? Culler thought that ethics went directly to the core of the methodology of deconstruction.

Why do we concern about deconstruction? Derrida said, as he quoted from *The Chiasmus: Levinas, Derrida, and the Ethical Demand for Deconstruction* written by Simon Critchley, American deconstruction philosopher, that "Because we cannot do otherwise. The necessity which governs deconstruction derives from the wholly Other, Ananke, before whom I can refuse nothing and where my claims for liberty are sacrificed to the need for justice. In saying this I believe that I follow Derrida."⁷ Therefore, it is apparent that we have no other choice but to face deconstruction, which can be referred to as a necessary trend of ethics.

The influence of "deconstruction" beyond the realm of literature and philosophy mainly featured two aspects, according to Culler. First, it doesn't pay attention to the content of a text, and instead, to how it maintains its relation with the content. Deconstruction highlights the rhetorical structure and behavior effect active in all discourse and discourse application, which can be referred to the relevant statements in the *Order of Things* by Foucault. Second, deconstructive ideology, as basic critical research of binary opposition, tries to intervene and change the value attached to certain terms, which not only influences way to read texts, but also the target goal of a subject. Culler pointed out that deconstruction enjoyed a high status in 1970s and 1980s, and then was widely spread in humanities and social science. It has become a persistent impetus to challenge existent prejudice in a broader sense even if it fails to solve problems but instead, triggers more suspicion.

It can be said that as orthodox philosophy, deconstruction still faces many boycotts even to this day. As a basic approach of literary criticism, deconstruction has perfectly fulfilled the historical duty of marching towards center from margin and further occupying it. That is to say, beginning with anti-tradition, deconstructive criticism has finally become a part of tradition for the last half century.

Notes

- 1 Jonathan Culler. *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007, p. 8.
- 2 Jacques Derrida. *Who's Afraid of Philosophy*. Translated by Jan Plug, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002, p. 149.
- 3 Jonathan Culler. *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007, p. 7.
- 4 Francois Cusset. *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & C. Transformed The Intellectual Life of United States*. Translated by Jeff Fort, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008, p. 31.
- 5 Jonathan Culler. *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007, p. 155.
- 6 Geoffrey Bennington. "Derrida and Politics." *Interrupting Derrida*. London: Routledge, 2000, pp. 18-19.
- 7 Simon Critchley. "The Chiasmus: Levinas, Derrida, and the Ethical Demand for Deconstruction." *Textual Practice* 3, no. 1. 1989.