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DECONSTRUCTION AS EXPERIENCE AND ETHICO-EDUCATIONAL POSSIBILITIES

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I

Introduction

It is hardly possible if not impossible at all to derive clear ethical or political instructions out of Derridean deconstruction. This is so not only because Derrida is one of the most obscure thinkers of our time, but because the very idea of deconstruction does not lend itself to any kind of moral-ethical guidelines or principles that we are partially familiar from Utilitarian and Kantian schools. This does not rule out, however, other ways of conceiving deconstruction in which many indirect ethico-political and educational implications can reveal. One of these possible understandings, I will argue, is to conceive deconstruction as a special type of engaging in texts, which leads one to create a temporary background on which dominant voice(s) in the text weakens. This, what I call, "power diminishing effect of deconstruction" comes with the experience of deconstructive reading or deconstructive reading as an experience. Conceived in this way, ethical promises of deconstruction become apparent. Because, according to Derrida "...writing cannot be thought outside of the horizon of inter subjective violence..." Deconstruction in this sense is both self-protecting and ethical way of reading as it is helping reader see how violence is constituted in the text, while allowing one at the same time to communicate with the "other(s)" of the text.

Thus, my essay will try to show three things: First, I will argue that deconstruction in ethical context can best be understood as an "experience", rather than a method or technique. Second, this experience, when achieved adequately, may bear on a power diminishing effect. And finally, deconstruction, by succeeding an ethical deal with texts where violent acts are always at work, has significant implications for education..

II

Deconstruction and experience

There is no point in recalling once more that deconstruction, if there is such a thing, is not a critique and even less so a methodologically run, theoretical or speculative operation, but that if there is such a thing, it takes place – as I have

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said too often, and yet once again in psyche, to dare repeat it again – as the experience of the impossible.¹

Though Derrida himself always seems to object to such labeling attempts as “deconstruction is a method”, or “... is a technique” or etc. there is an obvious inclination in philosophical literature to read deconstruction as a skill-generating activity designed specifically to apply in philosophical works. Understood in this way, deconstruction turns to be a specific set of skills one can practice and master over time. Although deconstruction might also inspire such uses to certain extent, reducing deconstruction simply to skill learning would be to ignore “ethico-experiential” aspects of it. Derrida writes:

What I consider as deconstruction, can produce rules, procedures, techniques, but finally it is no method and no scientific critique, because a method is a technique of questioning or of interpretation, which should be repeatable in other contexts also, without consideration of the idiomatical characters. The deconstruction is not a technique. It deals with texts, with special situations, with signatures and with the whole history of philosophy where the concept of method would be constituted.²

Despite all this difficulty in conceiving what deconstruction is, one's experience of deconstructive engagement in text(s) can be thought, and thinking of this can bring further possibilities. As Derrida points out, when asked in an interview whether there is anything normative in deconstruction, we, like him, “should prefer to speak of *experience*” too. This word (experience), he says, “... means all at once crossing, journey, ordeal, at the same time *mediatized* (culture, reading, interpretation, work, generalities, rules, and concepts) and *singular*--I do not say immediate.” Derridean dictum “there is nothing outside text” becomes more powerful when it is understood as a call for awareness of what has always already been *there* in the text.

However, this sense of awareness does not happen to one just because one is reading a text. It is true, as Johnson writes in her introduction to *Dissemination*, that Derrida is, first and foremost, a reader, a reader who constantly reflects on and transforms the very nature of the act of reading.³ And it is also true that “deconstruction as experience” presupposes a deliberate reading. All this, yet, does not mean that reading, whether deliberate or not, is sufficient condition of “experience”, even if it has always been necessary condition of “deconstruction as experience”.

¹ Jacques Derrida, “A Certain ‘Madness’ Must Watch Over Thinking”, *Educational Theory* / Summer 1995 / Volume 45 / Number 3. p. 96

² *Ibid*, 70

³ Johnson, B. in Derrida (1981) *Dissemination*, The University of Chicago Press: Chicago 1981 p. x

No doubt, "reading", as a necessary condition, must take place if "experience" is to be experienced. In Derridean sense –or better to say after a Derridean insight- reading is first of all a "juxtaposition" of different texts in different contexts and for different purposes. This type of reading begins where so-called philosophical analysis ends. Pre-Derridean philosophy and its methods expected "reading" to bring clarification, disclosure of essential meaning and dissolution of ambiguities in the text. With Derrida, on the other hand, reading can in no sense be unifying. It rather disrupts the assumed thesis, arguments or messages text is supposed to convey. This is not something that requires particularly an educated reader. Perhaps it is not related to reader at all. It refers to a general problem (or promise) of signs and writing that Derrida calls "non-concept" or "différance". Before referring Derrida, it is worth quoting Moran on difference:

All signs, by pointing away from themselves, involve a deferral of meaning, while at the same time creating the illusion that the meaning is present. The sign stands for the absent and represents the presence in its absence.⁴

Derrida's insistence on "retrospective" nature and, at the same time, "provisional" function of "preface" can be linked to his reflection on difference. This is important, as Spivak writes in his preface to *Of Grammatology*, because how "difference" is created and what is "dislocated" in text and the very act of *différance* become visible by this way. "Preface" is the name of something that is "pre" or "before" than something *else*, but at the same time it is constituted in this *something else*, or out of it in the end. Derrida's treatment of prefaces is, according to Spivak, akin to Hegel's discussion of "familiar": "What is 'familiarily known' is not properly known, just for the reason that it is 'familiar.'⁵

According to Spivak, "... a certain view of the world, of consciousness, and of language has been accepted as the correct one, and, if the minute particulars of that view are examined, a rather different picture (that is also a non-picture) emerges."⁶ This passage summarizes, in a sense, what Derrida reminds us: different moments of speech are accessible only in "writing", though they are still never stable and inert even as graphic structures. Derrida relates his understanding of language of this kind to that of Saussure, who pointed out, language, is a system of differences rather than a collection of independently meaningful units.⁷ (Johnson, ix) Language never constitutes itself by

⁴ Moran, D, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, London 2000, p. 466

⁵ Jacques Derrida, "*Of Grammatology*", Trans. G. Spivak, Baltimore 1976, xiii içinde Hegel, 1976, p. Xiii.

⁶ *Ibid.* p. xiii

⁷ Johnson, B. in Derrida (1981) *Dissemination*, The University of Chicago Press: Chicago 1981

aggregating numerous labels for things. It rather operates based on the "distances" and "differences", and is shaped by "is not" rather than "is". Louis Althusser was undoubtedly right to describe Spinoza's philosophy

as so "terrifying to its own time" that it could only provoke philosophical repression. But is the fear this philosophy provokes today the same fear that it provoked then? Are the passages whose literal existence could be experienced as dangerous the same? The answer is probably no:

Understanding of language as such brings awareness of "différance" in both senses as "to differ" and "to defer". Derrida's attempt to read entire tradition of Western metaphysics as an unfolding of numerous "différance" situations lies in this account of language. Such "familiar" and therefore dominant conceptions as "preface", "speech" or "immediacy" are reconciled with their "others" in such a way in which "others" are no longer oppositions. Preface, for instance, from the standpoint of "différance" is both 'different' and -in a disguised form- geographically distant from it. Yet, preface is neither identical to itself nor perfectly different from book (text). Preface and text become, by virtue of différance, "thing" and "thing", i.e. two things that are never separate but not "one" either.

The pre of the preface makes the future present, represents it, draws it closer, breathes it in, and in going ahead of it puts it ahead. The pre reduces the future to the form of manifest presence. ... But does a preface exist?⁸

Likewise, the "movement of différance" creates an "order" in which we are asked to become aware that "speech" and "writing" are in no sense in relation with each other as either "essence" or "supplement". According to Derrida, différance blurs any so-called relationship of privilege between speech and writing in which the former is favored.

Here, ... we must let ourselves refer to an order that resists the opposition, one of the founding oppositions of philosophy, between the sensible and the intelligible. The order which resists this opposition, and resists it because it transports it, is announced in a movement of différance between two differences or two letters, a différance which belongs neither to the voice nor to writing in the usual sense, and which is located, as the strange space ... between speech and writing, and beyond the tranquil familiarity which links us to one and the other, occasionally reassuring us in our illusion that they are two.⁹

⁸Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, Chicago 1981, p. 7-9

⁹Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, Brighton 1982

Deconstructive reading¹⁰, which refers to and is constantly informed by “différance”, turns particularly in ethical context into an “experience”. This turn is apparent especially in recent writings of Derrida. In *Before the Law, Force of Law* and *Specters of Marx* one can trace, in order, a possibility of hope for and suspension of justice, deconstruction as and on behalf of justice, and finally responsibility as never ending opportunity to be just (less unjust) under the conditions of “spectrality”.

Before the Law is first and foremost a prologue for possibility of hope for future in the darkness of present. Derrida argues in this paper, in the form of an interplay-reading at the margins of philosophy and literature, that “... it (justice) is possible but not now”¹¹. According to Beardsworth, in *Before the Law* three aspects need to be emphasized concerning relationship between Law and literature. He writes: “The first aspect of their relation is to be located, for Derrida, in the fact that law and literature share the same conditions of possibility: the origin of law (in the phenomenal sense of a positive law) is also that of literature.”¹² The second aspect is related to general failure of Law, a failure that arises from “undecidable relation between the general and the singular”.¹³ Beardsworth’s point is helpful: “No law can be general enough not to be violent, not to engender exceptions or instances of counter-violence which... are appropriately thought of as ‘singular’.”¹⁴ And the third aspect is about possibility of literary influence on undecidability situation in Law. I will deal with this aspect later, while arguing for possibility of making “less violent” decision out of undecidability. Now, I want to elaborate on “undecidability” notion.

Undecidability plays a very key role in Derrida’s philosophizing on justice. As one of the several aporias that Derrida employ throughout his treatment of law, justice and decision, “undecidable” marks perhaps the most difficult aporetic relationship between “necessity” and “necessary failure” of judgment.

¹⁰ In writing “deconstructive reading” I do not mean to take side in the ongoing debate that if deconstruction has a telos. My conviction is that every deconstructive reading might be purposefull in its own way. This is to say that “plurality of telos” is possible, though “deconstruction” as a non-concept might not have one ultimate purpose.

¹¹ In *Before the Law* Derrida does not make any mention of justice, nor he makes a distinction between “Law” and “justice”. Law as prohibition is constituted here as an original source of violence. Considered later uses, it might be thought that Derrida want to bring in focus not justice but ‘right to ask for judgement’ and how this right is always delayed, delayed in the sense of différance and impossibility of decision. Nevertheless, here I want to keep it as ‘justice’ as it makes better sense in a wider context.

Jacques Derrida, “Before the Law” in *Acts of Literature*, ed. Attridge, D., New York-London 1985, p. 196

¹² Beardsworth, R, *Derrida and the Political*, London 1996, p. 25

¹³ Ibid. p.25

¹⁴ Ibid. P. 25

Remember the tale: "No one else could ever be admitted here, since this gate was made only for you. I am now going to shut it". Beardsworth's question denotes the aporetic situation: "How can a law to which a particular individual has no access be a law only for this individual above?"¹⁵ Derrida leaves us without answer in *Before the Law*, yet with a sense of "hope" for possibility of "decision" through undecidability. Relatively clearer answer (say 'no answer') comes in *Force of Law*, the answer in which the term "experience" appears first time:

The undecidable is not merely the oscillation or the tension between two decisions; it is the *experience* of that which, though heterogeneous, foreign to the order of the calculable and the rule, is still obliged – it is this obligation that we must speak – to give itself to the impossible decision, while taking account of laws and rules. *A decision that did not go through the ordeal of the undecidable would not be a free decision...*¹⁶

Suspension of rules and re-accordability of law (iterability) under the general law of *différance* makes the task of decision making "an ordeal-like experience". Besides this very experience of ordeal of undecidability, Derrida cites the third aporia: "But justice, however unrepresentable it may be, doesn't wait."¹⁷ Then how is justice to be achieved, if ever possible? What is justice after all?

Derrida's answer is that "Deconstruction is justice".¹⁸ Going through the experience of deconstruction is the only condition for "fresh judgment". Derrida's conception of fresh judgment requires what I call "deconstruction as experience" as he writes:

This 'fresh judgment' can very well –must very well– conform to a preexisting law, but the reinstituting, reinventive and freely decisive interpretation, the responsible interpretation of the judge requires that his 'justice' not just consist in conformity, in the conservative and reproductive activity of judgment.¹⁹

III

Deconstruction versus Power

I have discussed so far that it is possible to read "deconstruction" as experience and reading of Derrida's deconstruction as such can shed light on

¹⁵ Beardsworth, R, *Derrida and the Political*, London 1996, p. 41

¹⁶ Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'mystical foundation of authority'", in Cornell, D, Rosenfeld, M & Carlson, G. D. (eds) *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, London 1992b, p. 24. (italics are mine)

¹⁷ *Ibid.* p. 26

¹⁸ *Ibis.* P. 15

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 23

what ethico-educational and political promises can possibly follow from it. In this part I will argue that one of these promises is that of "power diminishing effect" in the sense of constituting a multi-associating way of reading under the terms of *différance*

Aichele argues in *Reading Beyond Meaning* that "Reading is an endless and violent playing with the text, and the reader is in a perpetual struggle with the law of the text."²⁰ His reference to Italo Calvino's postmodern novel, *If On a Winter's Night a Traveler*, presents an ironic picture that how madly one would want to avoid from violence of text. Aichele summarizes what the tale tells:

... there is a character named Irnerio. Irnerio is a "non-reader"--a person who has taught himself how not to read. He is not illiterate, not even "functionally illiterate." Irnerio refuses to read. Yet Irnerio does not refuse to look at written words. Rather, he has learned how to see strange and meaningless ink marks on pages where others see words. Irnerio is beyond reading; for him the books, pages, and words are no longer the transparent vehicles for immaterial ideas, but they are solid, opaque objects.²¹

Irnerio's caution to violence of text (reading) is no doubt thought stimulating. However, it is not realistic at all. As Aichele points out "... no one can actually learn not to read ... for the unconscious habits of reading cannot be entirely unlearned".²² Yet, a question arises: What is there in text that one is supposed to face with caution? Force of Law presents some of the answers. According to Baker, "Force of Law" offers some fundamental ways of understanding the question of violence in its social context. In Force of Law, Baker argues, Derrida's reflection on the relationship between "violence" and "force as legitimate power" led him to offer that violence is necessarily social in character, and violence and law never come apart.²³ Derrida reads "force as legitimate power" as the force that derives its "enforceability" from very nature of *différance*. He writes:

For me, it is always a question of differential character of force, of force as *différance* (*différance* is a force *différée-différente*), of the relation between force of form, between force and signification, performative force, illocutionary or perlocutionary force, of persuasive and rhetorical force, of affirmation by signature, but also and especially of all the paradoxical situations in which the

²⁰ Aichele, G, "Reading Beyond Meaning", *Postmodern Culture*, vol.3, no.3, 1993, p. 11

²¹ *Ibid.* p. 12

²² *Ibid.* P. 17

²³ Baker, P. "Deconstruction ad the Question of Violence", Available: <http://www.towson.edu/~baker/pulpqv.html> (Accessed: 2002, August 20)

greatest force and the greatest weakness strangely enough exchange places. And that is the whole history.²⁴

As it is obvious from the above passage, "force as *différance*" means here the textual possibilities of contradictory "actions". Because, the Wittgenstenian question of "how do we play language games?" changed to Austin's popular phrase "how to do things with words?", and finally transformed by Derrida to "how to do things (*just* or *unjust*) with (con)texts? This is *différance* (in the negative sense, in the sense of iterability) and this gives law (power) the possibility of 'force'.

Fortunately, possibility of deconstruction as justice shows up at the same point where deconstructive analysis leaves us pessimistic with iterability of law and force of law against singularity of the individual. Because, as Derrida argues in "The Violence of Letter", in *Of Grammatology*, the structure of violence is matched with the very structure of the trace or writing. Then, if a non-violent deal with violence is to be experienced, one must search it in writing (text). This is to say that deconstruction must subject "writing" to deconstructive reading, in the end of which constitution of violence that is in the form of "dominance" (dominant voice, judgment or value) is to be deconstituted. But, deconstruction as such neither requires nor allows one to step outside the power struggle. Deconstruction, quite the opposite, asks one to stay inside and experience a juxtaposition of different texts and contexts to let binary oppositions reveal and to make the spectral movement of signs (in the sense of *différance*) possible. This point is elaborated very well by Grosz:

... Derrida suggests that this question of violence and its relation to the law inheres in, is, the very project of deconstruction. It is not a peripheral concern, something that deconstruction could choose to interrogate or not, but is the heart of a deconstructive endeavor: the violence of writing, ..., of judging or knowing is a violence that both manifests and dissimulates itself, a space of necessary equivocation. The spaces between this manifestation and dissimulation are the very spaces that make deconstruction both possible and necessary and impossible and fraught; the spaces that deconstruction must utilize, not to move outside the law or outside violence, but to locate its own investments in both law and violence.²⁵

²⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, Brighton 1982, p. 7

²⁵ Grosz, E. "The Time of Violence: Deconstruction and Value, *College Literature*, Winter 1999, Vol. 26, Issue 1. p. 8-11

This space is the space for experience. Through experience one may become aware of what is inside text. And, in a similar way, through experience one may become aware of the possibility of displacement almost in any text, of binary constructs and possibility of différance.

IV

Educational Significance

Taking deconstruction as something which is more than a skill or method to be grasped, as I tried to do in the first part, makes our task in this part perhaps more difficult, as educators will always need to hear about some sort of practical bearings. But this difficulty must be tackled if we are to appreciate that both educational theory and practice are inevitably about decisions and judgments, and, both decision and judgment demand in Derridean sense no less than going through the 'ordeal of undecidability'.

As pointed out by Wringle, the view that there is unity between morality and self-interest gave ancient moral educators important advantages.²⁶ These advantages are no longer available for modern (or postmodern) educators. In the considerable amount of written works on criticality and morality in education, what we generally see is that it is said in the former "Do not let others deceive you." and in the latter "Have concern for others." The former is obviously compatible with one's self-interest, and therefore provided that one is well informed about the value of critical thinking she will need no further justification to foster it. The latter, on the other hand, is more vulnerable to skeptical questions that are inevitable particularly in liberal democratic societies, where traditional beliefs and convictions are constantly challenged by diverse point of views. Feeling responsibility for others, for this reason, needs to be made palatable especially for those who are living in a self-centric western culture.

More important is that the imperative "Have concern for others", in traditional moral sense, isolates and freezes "other" in its otherness, and describes "presence" in the total absence of "other". For Derrida, however, the notion of différance reminds us that language does never function as a naming process, but rather in language there is an infinite interplay of differences. Biesta, in his extremely useful account of deconstruction, argues for ethical implications of the idea that 'In language there are only differences without positive terms':

²⁶ Wringle, C. (1999) "Being Good and Living Well: Three Attempts to Resolve an Ambiguity", *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 33 (2):287-293. p.287.

First of all, the idea of differences without positive terms entails that the 'movement of signification' is only possible if each element 'appearing on the scene of presence, is related to something other than itself'. What is called 'the present' is therefore constituted 'by means of this very relation to what it is not'.²⁷

According to Biesta, this view of 'constitutive outside' suggests that deconstruction cannot be understood merely in terms of its attack against metaphysics of presence. "Deconstruction is first and foremost an affirmation of what is excluded and forgotten. An *affirmation*, in short, of what is *other*."²⁸

I think one can already get an idea, in what I have discussed so far, of ethico-educational echo of "deconstruction as experience". Deconstruction might very well be read as a new approach to literacy, an approach in which one finds not only deconstructive possibilities of self-protection and criticality, but also ethical effects of the feeling of "double bind" that helps policymakers of education, philosophers, teachers, textbook writers and students become aware of the place and the necessity of *hesitation* and *undecidability* in the very urgency of their decisions.

V

Conclusion

I have discussed so far that deconstruction is not indifferent to ethical, educational and political concerns. I have argued that ethics of deconstruction lies in the very experience of deconstructive reading. I have also turned repeatedly to some key concepts of deconstruction in trying to clarify how this experience can be achieved.

One may still argue, however, that deconstruction can disclose what is de-emphasized, or suppressed in the text, or it can associate all the key words with their unexpected relatives does not mean that all what is done will be "ethical". One might perform all this just to get what he/she does not deserve. Then how can one differentiate between ethical deconstruction and unethical one? This essay has in fact tried to clarify what is misrepresented in all these questions about deconstruction. In suggesting "deconstruction as experience" rather than "deconstruction as a strategy or method" it was intended to show that deconstruction cannot be understood "instrumental" in ethical realm. Derrida writes in *Force of Law* that "nothing is more just than what I today call

²⁷ Biesta, G. (1998) "The Right to Philosophy of Education: From Critique to Deconstruction", Available: <http://www.ed.uiuc.edu/EPS/PES-Yearbook/1998/biesta.html> (Accessed: 2002, November 12)

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 5

deconstruction.²⁹ This is to say that deconstruction is the only possibility through which one can establish an ethical relationship with "other" through textual embodiment. Derrida suggests:

For me, there is always, and I believe that there *must be more than one* language, mine and the other (I am greatly simplifying) and I must try to write in such a way that the language of the other does not suffer [*souffrir*] because of mine, that it puts up with me [*me souffre*] without suffering from it [*sans en souffrir*], receives the hospitality of my language without getting lost or integrated in it.³⁰

It is always possible, of course, to move here to some sort of 'transcendental' realm and define ethical relationship in terms of these transcendental assumptions. Another route is also possible in deconstructive experience. In this route one experiences deconstruction as an intrinsically valuable endeavor, through which self-protection from violence and others-concerning way of dealing with contexts become possible at the same time.

²⁹ Derrida, J. (1992b) "Force of Law: The 'mystical foundation of authority'", in Cornell, D, Rosenfeld, M & Carlson, G. D. (eds) *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, London: Routledge. P.21

³⁰ Derrida, J. "A Certain 'Madness' Must Watch Over Thinking", *Educational Theory* / Summer 1995 / Volume 45 / Number 3.

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ABSTRACT

It is hardly possible if not impossible at all to derive clear ethical or political instructions out of Derridean deconstruction. This is so not only because Derrida is one of the most obscure thinkers of our time, but because the very idea of deconstruction does not lend itself to any kind of moral-ethical guidelines or principles that we are partially familiar from Utilitarian and Kantian schools. This does not rule out, however, other ways of conceiving deconstruction in which many indirect ethico-political and educational implications can reveal. One of these possible understandings, I will argue, is to conceive deconstruction as a special type of engaging in texts, which leads one to create a temporary background on which dominant voice(s) in the text weakens.

Key words: Derrida, deconstruction, ethics, politics, education.

ÖZET

Derrida'cı yapısökümden açık-seçik bir etik ya da politik yönlendirme türetmek olanaksız değilse de güçtür. Bu yalnızca Derrida'nın çağımızın en karmaşık düşünürlerinden biri olmasından ötürü değil, yapısöküm düşüncesi fikrinin bizzatihi kendisinin, Faydacı ya da Kant'çı okullardan bir ölçüde alışık olduğumuz türden bir etik-ahlaki ilkeselliğe elverişli olmayışından ötürüdür. Buna karşın, bu durum yapısöküm düşüncesinin etik-politik ve pedagojik pek çok etkisinin açığa çıkarılabileceği farklı tür bir okuma olanağını ortadan kaldırmaz. Bu türden olanaklı okumalardan biri, bu yazıda tartışmayı amaçladığım gibi, yapısökümün, metinlerle özel bir ilişki kurma biçiminde deneyimlenebileceği ve böylece metindeki baskın seslerin etkisini azaltmayı başarabileceği yönündedir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Derrida, yapısöküm, etik, politik, eğitim.

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