

Reining in Deconstruction: A Critical Commentary on Susan Ritchie's "The Promise of Postmodernism for Unitarian Universalist Theology"

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Susan Ritchie's essay, after deflecting with commendable counter-arguments, standard attacks (anomie, relativism) on the moral climate of postmodernism (Part One), offers an accurate, if not altogether thorough, account of Derrida's critical practice, known as deconstruction (Part Two). It is not until Part Three, in which Ritchie attempts to deconstruct deconstruction itself, that her arguments prove unconvincing. I do not wish to say she lacks the courage of her convictions; however, as is the case with many writers who want to apply deconstructive method but apparently have not confronted its radically 'political' implications for praxis, Ritchie seems unable or unwilling to follow Derrida's thought sufficiently far to make clear that—although I do not pretend to speak for the Unitarian faith—the sense in which deconstructive philosophy might impact Unitarian Universalist goals must involve—for deconstruction always does—a radical rethinking of principles and practices.

To begin, not at the beginning, but with the most egregious inference she seems to draw from what she respectfully terms deconstruction's "messianic prophecy of difference:" that the ineluctable reduction of culture/nature to textuality encapsulated within the well-known disclaimer, "there is nothing outside the text," might, by any stretch of the imagination, be construed as amounting to an assertion of "the scripturalization of the world" (cf. "What is new in postmodernism is that while interpretation reigns as the primary technology of (modern) liberation, the scope of texts from which the divine law might be teased have expanded well beyond literal scripture."). Such an equivocation is about as far from the spirit of Derrida as one may get. Of course, Ritchie never claims that Derrida characterizes this textual condition—in Ritchie's view, a putative inheritance from modernity significantly underpinning the postmodern era—in quite this fashion; she simply proceeds in Part Three of her essay—after lodging Derrida, due to repressive effects of Protestantism, between, one may say, a rock and a hard place within what she calls "modernity's constitutive dualism" (where the only choice is Hobson's choice)—to attempt a deconstruction of deconstruction on the basis that it too is text and therefore not exempt from examination via its own critical method. Speaking as a Unitarian theologian, she goes on to offer a brief historic account of the emergence of this textual state of affairs, citing first the Protestant Reformation's emphasis on interpretive reading, then noting the preeminence of generalized interpretation within the postmodern era.

If one really understands what Derrida intends by "tout autre" or radical alterity—the necessity of getting beyond or behind the foundational concept Being undergirding all of Western metaphysics from Plato through Heidegger—i.e. Being as fully present, self-identical Truth, transparent through the word (Logos) and underwritten by the Transcendental Signified (God)—it might become obvious what dangers lie in the glib, invidious characterization of the textualized world as "sacralized." In any event, Derrida would not speak that way for the very reason made emphatically clear in footnote 34 of

Ritchie's essay with regard to misgivings about deconstruction's assimilation to negative theology—viz. because of the danger that the notion of God conceived as Being (ontotheologically, within metaphysics of presence) might be reclaimed. Unless Ritchie at least puts these terms ("scripturalization," sacralization) 'sous rature' ('under erasure'—as indicated in the use of the slash through Being and its copulatives), these words run the risk of just such re-appropriation. Hence, the most urgent question concerns the sense in which these words are to be taken—for it is one thing to say, on the historic account, that, through the interpretive act of reading, the text is "Biblicized"—indeed, this praxis is perfectly compatible with ontotheology; however, a little further on, when, following Lambropoulos, she cites his definition of postmodernism as "interpretation in its last historical phase, . . . the scripturalization of the world," presumably she is calling upon the reader to be willing to follow Derrida and embrace the far-reaching implications of such non-concepts as 'différance' and 'archi-writing.' This move requires, of course, that words such as "divine" and "sacred" be thought not as they had been at a time when reading became an institution for the formation of the autonomous bourgeois individual and came to serve as the appropriate instrument of "interpretive faith," i.e. in terms comprehended by the metaphysical tradition and its religious heritage—but instead be radically rethought outside that tradition and the ontology of presence that circumscribes it. Even though she may be clear, on her historic account, that more spirituality could be mined from secular literature than from any religious text, including the Bible, may one really assume that anyone unacquainted with the philosophic projects of Heidegger and Derrida would have, within his own habits of thought, come to terms with such necessary consequences of deconstructive theory as, for instance, that God is a concept of which existence may not be predicated? The portmanteau 'différance,' which, quoting Ritchie quoting Derrida, is "older than either being or God," proves as slippery a formulation as imaginable. It has no essence or identity (not even with itself)—'being' ('sous rature') only an irreducible difference from everything it is not and an endless deferral to every meaning not its own circulating within a limitless abyss of signification.

Now, to begin again with what ought to have been the start of this critique, in Ritchie's generally well elucidated account of deconstructive principles and procedure, let me call attention to a significant omission, pertaining to the second of two moments of a deconstructive operation. Ritchie rightly notes that Derrida deals with modernism's troublesome dualisms by prioritizing the excluded term through an hierarchical inversion; nonetheless, although she hints at awareness of the second phase, she never really explains that the first step is only preliminary to an ultimate concern with dismantling the dualism altogether. Thus her ploy of catching Derrida within the "constitutive" modernist dualism Hebraic/Hellenic fails. Derrida has always conceded the necessity of a double movement (of language) when articulating even his own views—since one cannot really step outside the orbit of Western metaphysics and has no conceptual vocabulary available to him other than its own (as metaphysical system, the interrelation of concepts generating around Being as ground and the dialectical interplay of oppositions are designed to be all-accommodating). That is why Derrida adopted from Heidegger the technique of putting terms that must be rethought 'under erasure.' Therefore, if Ritchie wishes to situate Derrida within a modernist dualism, having him privilege the prior denigrated term—a dualism which, it should be noted, had been invidiously characterized

by the Enlightenment as "ascetic, superstitious enemies of the flesh" versus those who exalt knowledge (with whose reductionist tendencies Derrida clearly has a problem), it seems to me he might consent to speak from within such an opposition only if permitted first to put the entire pair 'sous rature' (indicating that each term of the opposition and the relation must be rethought), and with the express intent of then undoing the opposition as constituted. Even if Derrida were to concede there is something vindicating in the "diversity of meaning" and "role of human interrelation relative to meaning" associated with the Hebraic, to read his account of omnipresent text through Protestantism and a "radicalized Reformation" founded on an equation of "scriptural coherence" and "natural reason" is as patently un-Derridean as those followers of Jung who hegemonically seek to universalize religious belief.

Since Ritchie clearly recognizes the incompatibility between "deontologized theology" and "Trinitarian soteriology," and likewise acknowledges the inadequacy of many attempts to place "God beyond Being" (Marion), or to read a "radical Christology" through deconstructive praxis (Taylor)—all such projects failing precisely because they are unable to free themselves from the need for transparent, unimpeded passage from sign to referent (or signifier to signified), I suspect she is not unaware of the exigencies of the philosophic context in which this condition of Derridean textuality gradually came to emerge in philosophic awareness as an ever-increasing recognition of the failure of representation beginning at least as early as Kant (significantly, the 18th century Enlightenment). In the final analysis, Ritchie's Reformation driven scenario depicting the emergence of textuality as a "scripturalization" of secular reading now generalized via the postmodern emancipated signifier elides the deeper philosophic causes for this textual preeminence—while the deconstructive notion of text endorsed here and seen to underpin postmodernity is integral to Derrida's formulation of issues central to current philosophic debate. When, at last speaking as a Unitarian theologian, Ritchie distances her own views from Derrida's, indeed, attempts to launch this historical trajectory against him—envisioning Derrida caught within the subliminal thrall of Protestantism, reading "divine law" in "the spiritual happening of matter"—it should be unnecessary to point out that if she, as I believe true, fails to trap Derrida in this particular modernist complicity (but complicit we all are—"resistance is impossible"), she cannot deconstruct deconstruction, for (as in a typically careful deconstructive reading that solicits the text for internal contradictions) it is only by turning Derrida against Derrida that such an effort might prove successful. Finally, in addition to the above-mentioned suggestion that the condition of postmodern textuality has other roots within philosophy itself apart from any concerns relating to the evolution of Protestant reading habits, I submit that the particular formulation of the Hebraic/Hellenic dualism that Ritchie has in mind is really not modernist at all, but rather both much older and more recent than modernism. This opposition, taken as a whole, however, might be said to share a great deal in common with the first Enlightenment or modernist movement which Ritchie admires for its "healthy skepticism" and celebration of "the virtues of singularity and difference," in addition to laying claim to an eminently postmodern "diversity of meaning" and "human interrelation relative to meaning" seen to align with its Hebraic polarity—and on the other side, perhaps, if one is willing to rethink the virtues of the Hellenic polarity outside

ontotheology and metaphysics of presence, an unanticipated, while doubtlessly redemptive—Nietzschean affirmation of life, generosity, and the body.