

Deconstruction and Consciousness: The Question of Unity

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As a method of oppositional reading, deconstruction argues that a text, and by extension any object of observation including the self, is characterized by disunity rather than unity. The present paper proposes that if we define the self as having a dimension that is not an object of observation, but is a pure witness, or what in Eastern cultures is known as 'pure consciousness,' then deconstruction can be seen to undo in practice what it claims to do in theory. This reversal has implications for the postmodernist self, which is thought to be fragmented by a multiplicity of social voices and the loss of a unifying depth of feeling. Through an analysis of the deconstructive notions of consciousness and language, this paper suggests that fragmentation can in effect take the postmodernist self toward a sense of wholeness. In theory deconstruction undermines the unity of language and consciousness, while in practice it invites a nonconceptual response similar to that of aesthetic experience. The deconstructive 'freeplay' of language empties out the meaning of a text and leads the reader toward a state of being anterior to thought, toward an experience of awareness itself as opposed to its phenomenal content.

I

Deconstruction is a term that has been generalized *ad absurdum*. Although much in deconstruction is systematic and general, it is best understood as a singular, situated response to an individual text — with 'text' referring not only to language or graphic signs but to all possible referents. As a method of oppositional reading or, as Terry Eagleton (1983, p. 132) says, of reading the text against itself, deconstruction attempts to show that a text is characterized by disunity rather than unity, and that the notion of unity is displaced by the notion of fragmentation. Jacques Derrida, the founder of deconstruction, defines fragmentation as a function of the 'freeplay' of language that 'excludes totalization' or the wholeness of meaning and thereby leads to an indeterminacy (Derrida, 1973, p. 239). In response to structuralism and the entire Western tradition of 'the metaphysics of presence,' Derrida deconstructs all theoretical models that would explain the diversity of human experience in terms of the ideals of universality. While modernists such as Virginia Woolf and T.S. Eliot have expressed nostalgia for an age of faith and wholeness, postmodernists such as Derrida and Roland Barthes celebrate fragmentation as liberating and even exhilarating. And yet it is arguable that deconstruction — as a sort of emptying-out of the meaning of a text —

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corroborates a certain kind of unity, namely the conceptual emptiness associated with transcendent aesthetic rapture and the self as pure awareness. In pointing to a realm anterior to the categories and concepts of thought, deconstruction points to a type of unity that is best understood in terms of consciousness.

In his lucid essay ‘“I” = Awareness,’ Arthur Deikman explains how introspection reveals that awareness can be identified as ‘I’; this ‘I’

should be differentiated from the various aspects of the physical person and its mental contents which form the ‘self.’ Most discussions of consciousness confuse the ‘I’ and the ‘self.’ In fact, our experience is fundamentally dualistic — not the dualism of the mind and matter — but that of the ‘I’ and that which is observed. The identity of awareness and the ‘I’ means that we know awareness by being it, thus solving the problem of infinite regress of observers (Deikman, 1996, p. 350).

While usually confused with the mind or body, the ‘I’ of awareness is the observer as distinct from the objects of observation, the constant flux of thoughts, emotions, sensations, memories, moods and images that form our experience of the world. Although awareness varies in intensity, it is usually a constant that continues as our thoughts come and go, or when we close our eyes and the visual world disappears. Because it is not a thing or object, it cannot be observed or taken apart. It is the witness or experiencer that pre-exists all conscious content, and thus underlies the diversity of all thought and experience. As Deikman puts it, ‘[a]wareness cannot be made an object of observation because it is the very means whereby you can observe’ (p. 351). Devoid of intrinsic content, the awareness here comprises a different, more fundamental level of consciousness.

Not only do nearly all modern western philosophical approaches to the mind define awareness in terms of conceptuality or a knowledge of the world, but any notion of the self as a state of awareness beyond content is often considered to be an illusion, or what Robert Solomon labels a ‘transcendental pretence’ (Solomon, 1988, p. 6). In general, modern Western philosophers have defined the self in terms of conceptual objects or mental categories, not in terms of pure awareness itself.¹ Thus William James in his classic *Principles of Psychology* identifies the subjective self, the experience of the ‘I,’ with ‘a feeling of bodily activities’ (James, 1950, p. 150), even though introspection suggests that these feelings are observed by the observing ‘I.’

In contrast, eastern cultures have emphasized the distinction between awareness and conceptual content. Buddhism, Yoga, the Upanishads and Shankara’s school of Vedanta describe the ‘I’ of awareness or the observer, as distinct from the object observed, in various terms: formless self, pure consciousness, *purusa*, *turiya* (or the fourth state of consciousness). As stated in the *Mandukya Upanishad*, ‘(Turiya is) not that which cognizes the internal (objects), not that which cognizes the external (objects), not what cognizes both of them, not a mass of cognition, not cognition, not non-cognition.... [It is] the essence of the knowledge of the one self ... the non-dual, such, they think, is the fourth quarter’ (Radhakrishnan, 1989, p. 698). In his commentary on *turiya* in the

¹ See Solomon (1988) for a useful synopsis of the modern western notion of the self.

Mandukya Upanishad, Radhakrishnan says that ‘the subject–object duality is present in different forms in the states of waking, dream and dreamless sleep. It is transcended altogether in the state of *turiya*, while we have a pure consciousness of Self or Absolute’ (p. 702). He goes on to say that *turiya* is a ‘self-validating, self-authenticating experience.’ In his commentary on *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* (III, 34), Radhakrishnan also uses the term ‘pure consciousness’ to describe knowledge of *purusa*: ‘Widely different from that changing objective existence also in characteristic is the *purusa* who appears as pure consciousness’ (Radhakrishnan & Moore, 1957, p. 475).

The ‘I’ of awareness, or what I will refer to as pure consciousness (following Radhakrishnan and others), is systematically explored through eastern experiential procedures such as yoga, or methodologies popularly known as meditation. Although the various traditions of meditation have their differences, they widely agree, as Jonathan Shear notes,

that the surface phenomena of consciousness emerge from deeper structures of consciousness which can be experienced directly, and that these deeper structures in turn emerge from an underlying ‘ground’ of consciousness which is also experienceable. This ground, moreover, is regularly described as ... consciousness *devoid of all its discrete activities and contents*. Thus, as the *Yoga Sutras*, the central text of Yoga, puts it, it is qualityless ‘pure consciousness,’ ... consciousness alone by itself in a state of ‘objectless *samadhi*’ (Shear, 1996b, p. 64; original emphasis).

Pure consciousness, as the *Yoga Sutras* indicate, can be attained through yoga, defined as ‘the inhibition of the modifications of the mind’ (I, 2; Taimni, 1986, p. 6). Patanjali, moreover, defines *purusa* as the unified observer: ‘The Seer is pure consciousness but though pure, appears to see through the mind’ (II, 20; Taimni, 1986, p. 185). For Vedanta, as Dasgupta notes, the identification of the self (or awareness) with the mind, body and senses ‘is a beginningless illusion’ (Dasgupta, 1988, p. 435). Western mystics have also described the experience of pure consciousness; for Saint John of the Cross, ‘That inward wisdom is so simple, so general and so spiritual that it has not entered into the understanding enwrapped or clad in any form or image subject to sense’ (quoted by Deikman, 1996, p. 354). W.T. Stace, in describing this experience, says that ‘the introverted mystics – thousands of them all over the world – unanimously assert that they have attained to this complete vacuum of particular mental contents ... a state of *pure* consciousness – “pure” in the sense that it is not the consciousness of any empirical content. It has no content except itself’ (Stace, 1960, pp. 85–6; original emphasis). Arguably, the experience of pure consciousness is accessible to everyone, whether through meditation, certain kinds of aesthetic rapture or, in rare cases, spontaneous introspection.

Pure consciousness, then, is not an object of awareness, but a state of being, which precludes the experience of infinite regress. As Deikman puts it, ‘we know the internal observer not by observing it but *by being it*. At the core, we *are* awareness and therefore do not need to imagine, observe, or perceive it’ (Deikman, 1996, p. 355; original emphasis). There is no division here between knower and known, subject and object. Because pure consciousness is not a typical object of awareness, it is described in Vedanta as being ‘self-luminous’ and without form (Dasgupta, 1988, p. 444).

The nonduality of pure consciousness or the 'I' of awareness, therefore, comprises a unity, and the contents of awareness, which are characterized by duality, would share in this unity to a greater or lesser extent. The measure of the unity of conceptualization would be the degree to which pure consciousness infuses the contents of awareness, which would differ of course for each individual. On the one hand, unity in the ordinary experience of conceptual content consists of the information from perception, memory and thought being integrated into a whole. In the ordinary experience of a watermelon, for instance, our sense impressions form the contents of consciousness that 'hang together' as a delectable fruit. In an aesthetic experience, on the other hand, the unity of our conceptual content increases through an integration between observer and observed induced by the aesthetic medium. In the case of literature, figurative language has the effect of opening the mind beyond the familiar objects of consciousness to represent truths incommunicable by other means. The experience of the mind moving past conceptual static toward pure consciousness is associated 'with a uniquely settled metabolic state, characterized by ... reduced pulse ... and complete suspension of respiratory activity' (Shear, 1996b, p. 65).² We find a comparable settled state of mind and body occurring in the well-known lines of Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey': 'Until, the breath of this corporeal frame / And even the motion of our human blood / Almost suspended, we are laid asleep / In body, and become a living soul' (Wordsworth, 1973, p. 147).

The expansion of meaning toward ever larger wholes or 'pictures' can also be said to expand the frame or container of meaning, consciousness itself. That is (as suggested below), the expansion of conceptual meaning toward its infinite possibility can take consciousness to the border between the knower and the object of knowledge. From this junction point, the awareness may momentarily expand not only beyond referential meaning, but all the contents of consciousness, all conceptuality, to a glimpse of pure consciousness itself. Consciousness in this state knows itself as a unity of subject and object, knower and known — beyond space, time and conceptuality as a field of fragmentation. As Colin McGinn says, given the nonlocal or non-spatial nature of consciousness, '[t]o represent consciousness as it is in itself — neat, as it were — we would need to let go of the spatial skeleton of our thought' (McGinn, 1995, p. 229). The difference between thought and consciousness suggests the answer to the question posed by David Chalmers: 'Why doesn't all this information-processing go on "in the dark," free of any inner feel?' (Chalmers, 1995, p. 203) The obvious implication: could it not be due to the inner light of consciousness? McGinn speculates 'that the origin of consciousness somehow draws upon those properties of the universe that antedate and explain the occurrence of the big bang. If we need a pre-spatial level of reality to account for the big bang, then it may be this very level that is exploited in the generation of consciousness' (p. 224).

² Contemporary research on the physiological effects of eastern meditation techniques, such as Yoga, Zen and TM, corroborate these empirical claims, however unlikely they may seem to western culture; see Levine (1976), Dillbeck & Bronson (1981), Farrow & Herbert (1982).

The attempt to deconstruct the unity of consciousness is made problematic by the experience of pure consciousness³ being without any conceptual content to be deconstructed. This discrepancy between the nature of consciousness and its alleged deconstruction may account for the discrepancy between what deconstruction claims in theory and what seems to follow through its critical application.

II

Poststructuralists such as Derrida, Jean Francois Lyotard, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, Richard Rorty, Jean Baudrillard and J. Hillis Miller claim to replace the values of modernity, such as unitary truth, reason and objectivity, with a postmodern multiplicity of relative truths and subjective points of view. The unified self and reason are reduced to the status of myth. Underlying the deconstruction of consciousness is Ferdinand de Saussure's notion of language as a system of 'differences without positive terms' (de Saussure, 1966, p. 120). Derrida wants to decentre consciousness linguistically by exposing difference within the unity of the self, a difficult if not impossible feat if the self is identified with pure consciousness rather than its conceptual content. In spite of dispensing with binary oppositions such as unity and diversity, deconstruction in theory seems to privilege the notion of difference, though in practice it leads toward a coexistence of unity and difference. This unity amidst diversity can be said to underlie the experience of pure consciousness, in which 'we know the internal observer not by observing it *but by being it*' (Deikman, 1996, p. 355; original emphasis). The experience of pure consciousness as a fusion of knower and known seems to fulfil one of the aims of deconstruction: going beyond the notion of binary oppositions, such as that of subject and object, through an alterity that overruns the very idea of oppositions. If poststructuralism can be said to lead toward this experience, then it seems to incorporate two postmodernisms: one deconstructive and the other 'reconstructive' — the latter being introduced by Suzi Gablik as a model for 'an aesthetics of interconnectedness, social responsibility and ecological attunement' (Gablik, 1991, p. 22).

In 'Mysticism, Language and the *Via Negativa*,' Robert Forman (1994) presents a similar opposition in two approaches to the interpretation of mystical experience (or the experience of pure consciousness): constructivism and decontextualism (pp. 38–49). Constructivism resembles a deconstructive postmodernism and decontextualism resembles a reconstructive postmodernism. As an historical approach to mysticism applied by philosophers such as Steven Katz, constructivism claims that mystical experiences, like ordinary experience, 'are subject to the formative and constructive processes of language and culture' (p. 39). Like deconstruction, constructivism holds that 'our language, background, concepts, culture, dreams, and dreads all shape and determine our experiences' (p. 40). Decontextualism, on the other hand, counters by pointing out that no causal connection has ever been shown to exist between linguistic

³ Like Shear, I use the expression 'the experience of pure consciousness' for stylistic naturalness, while acknowledging that some commentators [cp. Robert Forman] find it inaccurate in implying an object of experience. See Shear (1996b), p. 67, footnote 14.

or cultural training and mystical experiences, that in fact these experiences occur even without cultural preconditioning. Forman asserts that 'the key process in mysticism is not like the horse of language pulling the cart of experience, but more like *unhitching* the experience-cart from the language horse.... Mystical experiences ... [result] from the *un-conditioning* of language and belief' (p. 42). Pure awareness as a state of being is distinct from the activity of observing sensations, thoughts, memories, emotions, moods or images. Forman (p. 38) takes his example of the experience of the observer from the *Maitri Upanishad* (6: 19):

Now it has elsewhere been said, Verily when a knower has restrained his mind from the external, and the breathing spirit (*prana*) has put to rest objects of sense, thereupon let him continue void of conceptions. Since the living individual (*jiva*) who is named 'breathing spirit' has arisen here from what is not breathing spirit, therefore, verily, let the breathing spirit restrain his breathing spirit in what is called the fourth condition (*turiya*) (Hume, 1921, p. 436).

In eastern cultures, the experience of the internal observer or pure awareness is identical to the fourth state of consciousness (*turiya*), which is physiologically distinct from the three ordinary waking, sleeping and dream states of consciousness.⁴ The problem confronting deconstruction or any constructivist approach to the self is that it attempts to interpret the experience of the fourth state of (pure) consciousness on the phenomenological basis of ordinary waking consciousness. Not only do these states have different physiological conditions, but as posited by Indian literary theory on the basis of the Upanishads, the structure of language itself is perceived differently in different states of consciousness. As Harold Coward says in *The Sphota Theory of Language*, 'In both the *Upanishads* and the *Rgveda*, speech is seen to have various levels ranging from the manifoldness of the phenomenal words to the absolute oneness of *Brahman* [the absolute] as *Vak* [language]. The implication is that only as we perceive speech at its higher levels do we get a clear revelation of its meaning' (Coward, 1980, p. 20). This oneness of speech in *Brahman* (the absolute) is reached in pure consciousness (*turiya*), which is glimpsed, according to Sanskrit poetics, through aesthetic rapture. As Ramachandran says, aesthetic rapture (*rasa*) takes the awareness toward its own unbounded state of being, thereby giving 'a foretaste of the bliss of *moksa* [liberation],' the ultimate aim of art (Ramachandran, 1979, p. 111).

Bruce Mangan (1994), commenting on Forman's notion of the *via negativa* aspect of decontextualism, argues that it 'gives the linguistic approach, however "negative," far more importance for the study of mysticism than it deserves' (p. 250). Instead of the obsession with language found in poststructuralism, Mangan advocates an emphasis on the direct experience of consciousness. The key attribute of the experience of the self as pure consciousness is the unmediated sense of an all-pervading unity. Deconstruc-

⁴ The Indian philosopher Shankara (1988) defines the fourth state of consciousness (*turiya*) as a unity or coexistence of the 'triple distinction' of 'knower, known, and knowledge' (p. 336). Whereas the ordinary waking state of consciousness is characterized by difference, such as that between knower and known, the fourth state is characterized by oneness or a unity amidst diversity.

tion as an act of reading in certain ways parallels in its deconceptualization the effect of introspection and the experience described in the *Maitri Upanishad*. Both involve direct experience, a withdrawal from the familiar world of sense experience and a move toward a world of self-referral. For Derrida, a deconstructive reading of a literary text is always a unique experience that seeks to defamiliarize or make the text strange rather than to gain permanent access to conceptual truth. The emphasis on individual response as opposed to systematic and programmable meaning indicates that for deconstruction the text has no conceptual essence; reading as a direct experience resists philosophical conceptuality. As Derek Attridge observes, 'what deconstruction is concerned to show is that a verbal artifact can never close upon itself, and the other that summons us from literature is not confined within language in the narrow sense' (Attridge, 1992, p. 20). But however obvious the parallel between deconstruction and the experience of pure consciousness may seem, its full implications for the postmodern self have yet to be fully appreciated.

Even though the deconstructive notion of the self hinges on the subversion of unity in language and consciousness, the postmodern self arguably comes closer than either the romantic or the modernist self to the experience of unity. In *The Saturated Self*, Kenneth Gergen distinguishes between the romantic, modernist, and postmodernist conceptions of the self according to their degree of wholeness. While the romantic self centers on 'the deep interior of the person's being,' and the modernist self depends on reason and observation, the postmodernist self is decentred by 'social saturation brought about by the technologies of the twentieth century, and the accompanying immersion in multiple perspectives' (Gergen, 1991, pp. 227-8). This move is from the creative, passionate and intuitively unified romantic self, through the rational, externally knowable and predictable modern self, to a postmodern self increasingly fragmented by external voices and the loss of a unifying depth of feeling. But just how fragmentary is the postmodern self? Can the effects of a reconstructive postmodernism take the postmodern self toward an experience of unity comparable to that of the romantic or modern self?

III

In deconstructing western philosophy, Derrida critiques the notion of 'presence,' such as the self-presence of language and consciousness. He argues that the metaphysical notions of truth, being and reality are intended to repress difference and absence for the sake of stability, whether ontological or political. Difference and absence are associated with the secondary representation of writing, and unity and presence are associated with the immediacy of speech. The historical repression of writing and difference, which Derrida calls the philosophy of 'logocentrism' or 'phonocentrism' (Derrida, 1978b, pp. 278-82), is linked to a belief in a *logos* or self-present word constituted by the presence of the human voice. Derrida undermines presence by dispensing with the covert hierarchy of binary oppositions, such as presence/absence, inside/outside, nature/culture, speech/writing, in which the left side is privileged over the right. He argues that the boundaries between these (metaphysical) oppositions are unstable, that the order and values implied are questionable, and that meaning in

language is ultimately indeterminate. Speech loses its priority over writing, and both writing and speech are characterized by disunity rather than unity.

Nonetheless, it would be an overgeneralization to say, as the tendency is in 'American deconstruction,' that all meaning is indeterminate, all presence illusory, all theme or intention irrelevant, all reference a fiction, etc. (see Attridge, 1992, p. 12). That a text for Derrida, especially a literary text, is always situated, read and re-read in a specific place and time makes it 'iterable' or repeatable, the same but always different, and therefore never reducible to an abstraction by theoretical contemplation (Derrida, 1988b, pp. 172–97). A text is unique and repeatable, concrete and abstract simultaneously. This coexistence lies at the heart of deconstruction and reflects the connectedness of the subject and object in the experience of the self as pure consciousness.

Elaborating on Saussure's notion of linguistic difference, which holds that the sign consists of an opposition between a signifier (sound) and a signified (concept), and that the sign bears an arbitrary rather than a natural bond to the external world (de Saussure, 1966, pp. 67–8), Derrida creates what he calls the movement of *différance* (Derrida, 1973, pp. 129–60), a pun on the meaning of two French words, 'to differ' (in space) and 'to defer' (in time). Whereas Saussurean semiology divides the sign from its referent (word and object), Derrida extends this difference to divide the sign within itself between the signifier (sound) and signified (meaning). Every signified becomes a signifier in an infinite chain of signifiers through the play of *différance*. The sign, which exists for Derrida under 'erasure,' derives and confers meanings through its 'trace' in relation to other signs and not through its relation to the world itself (Derrida, 1973, pp. 154–8; 1978b, p. 292). In deconstruction, 'pure difference, which constitutes the self-presence of the living present, introduces into self-presence from the beginning all the impurity putatively excluded from it' (1973, p. 85). Derrida claims that the 'privilege accorded to consciousness thus means a privilege accorded to the present; and even if the transcendental temporality of consciousness is described in depth, as Husserl described it, the power of synthesis and the incessant gathering-up of traces is always accorded to the "living present"' (1973, p. 147). For Derrida, then, presence is always divided from within itself by difference. But as this paper proposes, the virtual difference of pure consciousness, where the self is identified with awareness through a unity of subject and object, knower and known, is a different kind of presence.

The movement of *différance*, with its temporal and spatial gap between sound and meaning, no doubt applies to the surface structures of language and consciousness. We apprehend the written or spoken word first as a sound and then as a concept. In the spatio-temporal gap between sound and concept, different people attach different meanings to the same sound, with any ultimate meaning being forever deferred. Yet in spite of the heavy presence of difference in deconstruction, the temporal and spatial gap between sound and meaning is distinctly more pronounced in outward speech than it is in inward speech or thought, since obviously the inward mind is quicker than the outward senses.

Because inward speech or thought is associated more closely with the human voice than with the written word, Indian aesthetics argues that at a certain level the voice does have a connection with *logos*, that a kind of unity does exist between sound and meaning, name and form. This unity is evoked through the expanded possibility of meaning in aesthetic rapture, which has pure consciousness at its basis. Although the connection between *logos* and inward speech may not lend itself to measurable observation in the waking state, this connection is posited by Sanskrit poetics and the Upanishads (Prabhavananda, 1979, pp. 60–7). As T. Chakrabarti says, there are different levels of speech or language, and the ‘subtlest form of speech is supposed to reside in the seat of consciousness... The subtlest form of speech shines in its own glory and at that state it is regarded as the Absolute Reality’ (Chakrabarti, 1971, p. 125). Even writing as a representation of speech would embody the potential for a suggested unity within its expressive form, which a receptive reader would be able to grasp through inward speech. This experience can be glimpsed aesthetically through literature, art and music, as well as spontaneously through introspection. Its practical benefits are considered valuable enough in Eastern cultures that it is purposely cultivated through meditation. These cultures, moreover, regard this experience as a ‘higher’ state of consciousness, associated, as Shear says, ‘with a global enhancement of the individual’s well-being, physical health, effectiveness in activity ... and also with further, even more enjoyable “higher” states of consciousness said to occur when this experience comes to be a component of all of one’s other, more ordinary sorts of experience’ (Shear, 1996b, p. 65).

The notion in the *Maitri Upanishad* that he who has ‘put to rest objects of sense, thereupon let him continue void of conceptions’ of course means one thing in deconstruction and another in the experience of pure consciousness. Deconstruction, through the freeplay of the signifier, postpones the ultimate meaning of language (the transcendental signified), yet retains the auditory content or sound (the signifier), and therefore does not completely empty the awareness of its content. The awareness is not void of conceptions insofar as it still observes the object of sound. Nevertheless, the play of the signifier seems to mediate between awareness and its contents, expanding the contents toward a kind of unity in a manner similar to aesthetic rapture. Indeed, the valorizing of rhetorical play by deconstruction has led to a debate over its compatibility as a philosophy with the ideals of logical accountability. Richard Rorty, among others, has accused Derrida of confusing literature and theory (Rorty, 1991, pp. 119–28). But Derrida claims that he always tries to do justice to a text by emphasizing the relation between singularity (or rhetoric) and generality (or theory). This relation belongs to the anterior movement of writing (or *arche-writing*) which Derrida describes with terms such as ‘re-mark’ and *différance*, a movement of repeatable singularity (re-mark) that keeps a text open to new contexts and, for literary texts especially, to new ways of emptying-out conceptual meaning. In terms of unity, the difficulty with deconstruction as a theory is that it contradicts itself in practice by mixing two ontological modes: reason (associated with the contents of awareness) and aesthetics (associated with the tendency of awareness to move toward the unity of its own being). The fact that deconstruction in its application subverts itself illustrates the *différance* of

verbal discourse, the apparent gap between language and reality. But the deconstructive claim that the speaking subject is always different from the subject spoken of has less to do with the supposed *différance* of verbal discourse than with the difference between the 'I' of awareness and the contents of awareness. That is, in describing an experience of pure consciousness, which is non-dual, the speaking subject must articulate this description from within the duality of the contents of awareness after the experience of the subject spoken of has passed.⁵

IV

The description of pure consciousness in the *Maitri Upanishad* illustrates the stages of getting there from ordinary waking consciousness. Through the 'restraint of the breath' and the 'withdrawal of the senses,' the mind settles down and the awareness flows inward until it becomes absorbed in itself, and we experience a 'void of conceptions,' '[t]hat which is non-thought, [yet] which stands in the midst of thought' (Hume, 1921, p. 436). The awareness flows from diversity to 'the One,' an indeterminacy in the sense of all possibilities, a non-thought yet the basis of all thought and all points of view. Although deconstruction in practice seems to overturn its theoretical stance on the nature of consciousness and approach the experience of the mental procedures of Eastern cultures, it obviously has real differences to these procedures. To some extent the physiology is certainly involved as the play of *différance* takes us from binary oppositions, surface/depth, signifier/signified, toward indeterminacy. The senses are divided from the world of reference, the mind is focused over time by a sign whose meaning is dispersed along a chain of signifiers, and the awareness comes to an indeterminate state emptied of concepts at least in the sense of an ultimate meaning or transcendental signified. This indeterminacy results in a logic of paradox or a logical impasse — the 'aporia,' in deconstructive terms. As Derrida argues in 'Structure, Sign, and Play,' a 'movement of supplementarity' so heightens rhetorical play — with signs replacing each other in a chain of signifiers, each adding something more, a surplus — that it precludes the totalization of meaning and results in aporia (1973, p. 287). Aporia resembles the doctrine of voidness that Madhyamika Buddhists and Shunyavadis express by the phrase, *neti-neti*, 'not this – not this,' or 'neither this nor that' (see Shear, 1996b, p. 67).⁶ For a deconstructive postmodernism, aporia precludes unity and ultimate meaning and increases fragmentation and the multiplicity of relative truths, but in a manner that leads toward the void.

Reconstructive postmodernism offers a different response to aporia. From this perspective a logical impasse is a junction point between the ordinary waking and fourth states of consciousness — where the mind borders, as we have seen, on being

⁵ In their remarkable book, *Consciousness, Literature and Theatre: Theory and Beyond*, Peter Malekin and Ralph Yarrow (1997, pp. 22–57) elucidate the distinction between the non-dual experience of pure consciousness and the description of it after the fact through logical discourse.

⁶ See Robert Magliola's *Derrida on the Mend* (1984) for an in-depth analysis of deconstruction in terms of various Buddhist doctrines.

'void of conceptions.' Here, according to deconstruction, no signified, much less a transcendental signified, ever attains the status of a presence. Even the tools of deconstruction — such as *différance*, trace, and supplementarity — are implicated in the strategies of deconstruction. As Derrida says, 'the *supplement* is neither a plus nor a minus, neither an outside nor the complement of an inside, neither confusion nor distinction, neither identity nor difference' (Derrida, 1981, p. 43). These terms never reach conceptual presence and thus problematize deconstruction as a logical enterprise, adding to the experience of aporia. Yet the graphic sign in deconstruction loses its depth in such a way that the signifier becomes the signified in a kind of virtual unity that parallels the unity of the *logos* between sound and meaning, name and form. Although the awareness, if not the physiology, is here poised at the juncture between two ontological modes without transcending into the fourth state, the juncture itself is still created by the activity of deconstruction. In this way the proliferation of the signifier leads you to the border of the conceptual 'void,' but, unlike eastern procedures, not beyond, at least not in a systematic way enhanced by a settled metabolism. The two ways of interpreting aporia also correspond to two ways of understanding self-referral. In poststructuralism, self-referral is defined as the play of language which leads to increasing relativism, fragmentation and indeterminacy. But as proposed above, the move toward indeterminacy also results in a self-referral of consciousness, a narrowing of the gap between the awareness and the contents of awareness.

Like Forman's decontextualism, deconstruction leads consciousness beyond ordinary thinking toward non-thought. But in decontextualism conceptual emptiness is induced by the language of the *via negativa*, while in deconstruction it is approached by the self-referential nature of language itself. *Via negativa* language 'seems designed to project the subject outside the limits of his or her linguistic system. Language here functions more like a rocket pushing a capsule beyond Earth's gravity than a horse drawing a cart' (Forman, 1994, p. 45). The expressed form of language suggests a unified meaning not limited by its form. This negative referentiality is rejected by Derrida, who claims that 'there is nothing outside of the text' (Derrida, 1976, p. 163). Since we know the world only through its representation by language as a (self-referral) system of differences, our knowledge is 'always already' an interpretation subject to the movement of supplementarity, and never of the thing-in-itself. For Derrida, the basic feature of the text is not the graphic sign but the mark, which implies a 'general text' that goes beyond what is usually understood by text. As Derrida clarifies,

What I call the 'text' implies all the structures called 'real,' 'economic,' 'historical,' 'socio-institutional,' in short: all possible referents. Another way of recalling once again that 'there is nothing outside the text.' That does not mean that all referents are suspended, denied, or enclosed in a book, as people have claimed... But it does mean that every referent, all reality has the structure of a *differential trace*, and that one cannot refer to this 'real' except in an *interpretive experience* (Derrida, 1988a, p. 148; emphasis added).

Derrida further comments:

I never cease to be surprised by critics who see my work as a declaration that there is nothing beyond language, that we are imprisoned in language; it is, in fact, saying the

exact opposite. The critique of logocentrism is above all else the search for the 'other' and the 'other of language' (Derrida, 1984, p. 123).

In a sense (to be discussed further below), the self-referentiality of the text that seeks the 'other of language' implies a field of consciousness at the basis of all knowledge. It also implies that knowledge of fragmentation or the 'differential trace' is radically different from knowledge of wholeness, which is no longer a matter of 'interpretive experience' but a matter of being, or the identity, which is anterior to thought, between 'I' and awareness. Once accepted as real, this identity cannot be delegitimized by conceptual theory.

V

The deconstructive claim that the conceptual content of a text — what it says — often seems at odds with the rhetorical mode of saying it, can be understood in terms of the way meaning varies according to different structures of consciousness. The deconstructor Paul de Man (1983, pp. 187–228) argues that undecidability stems from a contradiction between a certain rhetorical figure such as a metaphor, which operates by condensation and similarity (on a vertical axis), and an opposing figure such as metonymy, which operates by displacement and contiguity (on a horizontal axis). Metaphorical similarities, being related to metaphysical unities, favour the ideal or the synchronic axis, but this hierarchy often depends on the repression of the metonymic or the associative axis. Metonymy, representing difference as opposed to metaphorical unities, returns at the deconstructive moment and causes the text to unsay what it seems to say.

For de Man, metaphorical unities in writing are subject to an infinite deferral of meaning through the repeated divisions of metonymic contiguities. But the all-encompassing and basic relation of contiguity is not linguistic — as Mangan suggests in his preference for direct experience — but the relation between awareness and the contents of awareness. In this case, which reverses de Man's argument, content-free awareness (as a form of unity) returns at the metonymic (experiential) moment and causes deconstruction (as a theory of difference) to unsay what it seems to say. For one thing, the deconstructive self-referral of language serves as a metaphorical unity insofar as signifieds are condensed into signifiers. This, combined with the self-referral of consciousness, leads to a logical impasse which, as suggested above, forms a junction with pure awareness. In any act of representation, the associative or metonymic dimension of pure consciousness comprises the ultimate state of 'non-thought, which stands in the midst of thought,' and as such has the potential to change thought, in a reversal of the way deconstruction is said to change it. That is, from deconstructive fragmentation to the glimpse of a reconstructive wholeness. Ironically, pure consciousness as a metonymic agency — the diachronic experience of the reader positioned outside the text — is activated by deconstruction in its metaphorical function of condensing all signifieds in the text to the freeplay of the signifier. This rhetorical play results in the contents of the reader's awareness moving toward greater unity and wholeness, and not just the contents but also awareness itself, as in the case of aesthetic rapture. Theoretically deconstruction aspires to the displacement of

meaning in the direction of a conceptual void, but it approaches this state only in practice.

Poststructuralism, then, is not as alien to pure awareness as it may at first appear. According to the poststructuralist Jean Baudrillard (1988), representation is ultimately nothing other than simulation unrelated to any reality outside of language (pp. 169–70). Baudrillard, like Derrida, negates the value of the sign as a means of verisimilitude. More radically, he also negates the world of facts. ‘We are in a logic of simulation which has nothing to do with a logic of facts and an order of reasons. Simulation is characterized by a precession of the model, of all models around the merest fact — the models come first.... Facts no longer have any trajectory of their own, they arise at the intersection of the models’ (p. 175). Simulation replaces the real with ‘the precession of the model,’ which becomes more real than the real itself, or ‘hyperreal’ (pp. 166–7). Although his deconstructive model seems nihilistic, Baudrillard describes a situation similar to that described in the Upanishads and Sanskrit poetics regarding the relation between language and reality. For Indian literary theory, which holds that there are unified levels of language and consciousness, the unity of sound and meaning, name and form is represented by the suggestive power of figurative language (*dhvani*) (Chakrabarti, 1971, p. 176; Coward, 1990, pp. 37–43). Not only is the sign united within itself here, it is also said to be united with consciousness in such a way that meaning does not precede language, as Derrida condemns in logocentrism. Rather, language, reality and consciousness are interconnected and coterminous. As Chakrabarti (1971) notes, ‘[d]hvani, the suggested meaning *par excellence*, is also a transformation, i.e. another state, of the Eternal Verbum’ (p. 43) — the *logos*. Access to this experience is gained through aesthetic rapture (*rasa*), in which, as S.K. De observes, the awareness, ‘transcending the limitations of the personal attitude, is lifted ... above pain and pleasure into pure joy, the essence of which is its relish [*rasa*] itself’ (De, 1963, p. 13). The implication here is that nothing is outside of consciousness — a reconstructive interpretation of Derrida’s claim that ‘there is nothing outside of the text.’

To say that ‘there is nothing outside of the text’ — outside the ‘differential trace’ or the ‘interpretive experience’ — still applies in ordinary waking consciousness, but it suggests also that nothing exists outside of pure consciousness. Furthermore, to say with Baudrillard that simulation threatens the difference between the real and the imaginary is to suggest how the deeper unities of language and consciousness are more true and real than their surface differences. By withdrawing the senses from the surface, one finds that the deeper, more unified structures of consciousness more radically call into question the surface world of ‘facts.’ Roger Penrose, exploring the connection between fundamental states of consciousness and nature, asks: ‘Might there be any relation between a “state of awareness” and a highly coherent quantum state in the brain? Is the “oneness” of “globality” that seems to be a feature of consciousness connected with this? It is somewhat tempting to believe so’ (Penrose, 1987, p. 274). More recently he and Stuart Hameroff have argued ‘that consciousness occurs if an appropriately organized system is able to develop and maintain quantum coherent superposition until a specific “objective” criterion (a threshold related to quantum gravity) is reached’ (Hameroff & Penrose, 1996, p. 36). They regard

'experiential phenomena as also inseparable from the physical universe, and in fact to be deeply connected with the very laws which govern the physical universe' (p. 37). Similarly, Jonathan Shear argues 'that a scientific study of the subjective phenomena of consciousness is likely to play a significant role in any adequate resolution of the "hard problem"' (Shear, 1996b, p. 68), that is, 'the problem of accounting for the existence of experience in a physical world and suggesting that this problem might be resolved by postulating consciousness as a fundamental component of nature' (Shear, 1996a, p. 2).

It seems, therefore, that our experience of unity and diversity are ultimately complementary rather than mutually exclusive, as deconstruction would have it. The metaphysical despair associated with deconstructive postmodernism stems from the sense of loss in moving toward increasing diversity. Jacques Lacan links this despair to the stages of self-loss or lack that occur as one enters the 'symbolic order,' the patriarchal world of linguistic difference (Lacan, 1978, pp. 204-5). As suggested here, the occasional exhilaration also felt in such a move would stem from deconstruction leading to a juncture with content-free awareness, the fourth condition characterized by the joy of freedom and oneness.

VI

Contemporary thinkers argue that the postmodernist self is fragmented by relative truths and saturated by a myriad voices. We seem to have no way of 'getting down to the self as it is,' to the 'I' of pure awareness. Deconstruction of course questions the assumption that there is an 'I' to be found beneath the accumulated layers of thoughts, memories, emotions, sensations, moods and images. The romantic and modernist self, defined in terms of intuition and reason respectively, have given way to a postmodernist self defined in terms of lack, or as Barbara Johnson would say, 'a presence whose lack has not been preceded by any fullness' (Derrida, 1978a, p. xii). Consciousness, as Derrida claims, becomes a 'determination and effect within a system which is no longer that of presence but that of difference' (Derrida, 1973, p. 147). As Gergen says,

The social saturation brought about by the technologies of the twentieth century, and the accompanying immersion in multiple perspectives, have brought about a new consciousness: postmodernist. In its retrospective stance, it is skeptical, doubting the capacity of language to represent or inform us of what is the case. For if language is dominated by ideological investments, its usage governed by social conventions, and its content guided by literary style, language does not reflect or mirror reality. And if language is not truth-bearing, then the very concept of objective reporting is rendered suspect. If this is so, there are no objective grounds for saying that people possess passion, intentionality, reason, personality traits, or any of the other ingredients of the romanticist or modernist world views (Gergen, 1991, p. 228).

The self in postmodernism is apparently undermined by the flow of attention outward through the senses away from the unity of pure consciousness. With the multi-media saturation of the self operating on the basis of difference, the self gets dispersed along a thread of cultural and historical marks that increase rather than decrease the conceptual contents of our awareness. This conceptual multiplicity, or what Gergen calls *multiphrenia*, 'the splitting of the individual into a multiplicity of self-

investments' (pp. 73–4), results in a heightened sense of subjectivity and a corresponding depreciation of objectivity. But of course in addition to our individual perspectives, we also participate in a larger dance, a larger collective that moves across great cycles of time (see Prabhavananda, 1979, pp. 140–1). The larger story of human experience consists of a collective subjectivity of partial truths, and according to eastern cultures some of this story resides in the gap or silence between the multiple perspectives that saturate the postmodern individual.

The fact that we are overpopulated with conflicting voices makes us shift constantly from one conception to another without dwelling on any one conception for any length of time. This bewildering sequence of conceptions is interspersed by a series of gaps, which one could say corresponds to the condition of non-thought associated with pure consciousness. Our immersion in multiple perspectives, therefore, is only one side of the story, the other side being the gaps of non-thought or silences between perspectives. As deconstruction tells us, the conceptual underpinnings of our perspectives are tenuous, and the mind forever finds itself faced with new aporias. But these aporias or logical impasses, which break up the flow of our thought and general experience of the world, verify the presence of the light of consciousness, which even as thoughts and the world come and go is usually a constant. Let us suppose for the sake of argument that a science of consciousness, as Shear would say (1996b, p. 66), has confirmed the accuracy of the reports of pure consciousness in eastern cultures and contemporary research. It might then be fruitful to speculate on what it would be like if we were more grounded in the stability of the pure Self, and whether we might more easily be able to brook the multiplicity of postmodern voices, and indeed to appreciate how our immersion in these multiple voices with their attending aporias may provide a way to increase this stability.

The freeplay of postmodern culture and its lack of conceptual depth has to a certain extent the effect of liberating the self from the field of difference by causing it to fall continually back upon the conceptual void in the spaces between perspectives. The constant alternation between the steady onslaught of perspectives and the conceptual breaks between them suggests the possibility of our awareness shifting from the ordinary structures of consciousness toward the structure of pure consciousness and back. In the context of eastern cultures and meditation, this shifting has the effect of culturing the experience of 'higher' consciousness. Although the extent to which this experience is promoted by postmodern culture remains speculative, Gergen and other writers have commented on the potential of postmodern culture for counteracting the negative impact of a deconstructive postmodernism.

The postmodern posture invites all possible options for human experience and dissolves the boundaries between intelligibilities. To an extent, the difference between a deconstructive and a reconstructive postmodernism in the empirical world is largely a matter of theory. Although Rorty's pragmatism, which rejects the notion of ultimate truth and goodness (Rorty, 1991, p. 317), may differ from an idealist pragmatism, idealists and realists both believe that local truths and goodness have the potential to enhance the harmony of the larger dance. The fact that even apparently anti-idealist

theories can inadvertently expand the structures of consciousness suggests the natural power of the mind to move spontaneously toward greater wholeness.

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