

(Con)Textual Hospitality in Deconstruction

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Abstract

The article attempts to analyse the relation between deconstruction and metaphysics through the notion of hospitality. Starting from Hillis Miller's essay on "The Critic as Host", in which the critic refers to M. H. Abrams' s /Wayne Booth's assertions that the "deconstructionist" reading of a given work "is plainly and simply parasitical" on "the obvious or univocal reading", the article takes into account different hosts and guests on the threshold of the text. If we are to consider deconstruction as a parasite for whom, in Derrida's famous but famously misunderstood formula, "there is nothing outside the text", it sustains itself on the hope for something always to come, beyond the normatized laws of a delimiting threshold for hospitality which inscribes the context as parasitical outsider and the text as lawful insider.

Keywords: *hospitality, text, context, deconstruction, reading*

Towards A Possible or An Impossible Hospitality?

For the Greeks hospitality meant both protection and guidance, it meant welcoming the guest in one's house and considering him as a friend, washing his feet, offering him food and drink, without even asking his name. Hospitality arose from what Derrida calls "obligation, a right and a duty all regulated by law," [5, 4] more precisely "the right of the stranger not to be treated with hostility" [5, 5]. *Xenios Zeus* was the Greeks' protector of hospitality (*xenos* meaning in English both *stranger* and *foreigner*). According to Benveniste, *xénos* indicates relations between men bound by a pact, and *xenia* represents the gift exchange between the contracting parties, declaring their intention of binding their descendants by the pact.¹ Homer gives the best example of Greek hospitality in his *Odyssey*: Nestor welcomes Telemachus on the threshold of his house as a *hostis*, a complete stranger. Nestor does not know his guest's name, yet he receives him in his house, makes him welcome. Nestor asks one of his sons to sleep close to Telemachus to take care lest his guest should be harmed in any way. Pisistratus, Nestor's son drives the chariot that Nestor offered to Telemachus so that he could travel from Pylos to Sparta rapidly. Later on, Nestor finds out that Telemachus was the son of Odysseus.

For the Romans, "quod errant pari iure cum populo Romano"², yet not all the ones who were not Romans were called *hostes*. A *hostis* was defined in contrast with *peregrinus* (the one living outside the boundaries of a certain place), and unlike the *peregrinus*, a *hostis*, in spite of keeping his status as a "stranger", could enjoy equal rights with the Romans. A *hostis* was for Romans "neither the stranger, nor the enemy" [1, 76]. The Romans held a deity, attested by S.

¹ See [1, 77]

² "The hostes had the same rights as the Romans" [see the definition of Festus in 1, 77]

Augustine, *Dea Hostilina*, whose task was according to Benveniste “to equalize the ears of corn or to ensure that the work accomplished was exactly compensated by the harvest” [1, 76].

Irrespective of Greek or Roman practices, the notion of hospitality is connected to a weak form of potlatch and “founded on the idea that a man is bound to another (*hostis* always involves the notion of reciprocity) by the obligation to compensate a gift or service from which he has benefited” [1, 77].

Despite those practices attested since Antiquity, Derrida wonders whether pure hospitality is at all possible³, [5, 8] just as he questioned the possibility of ever being in a position to make a gift. Any host awaits his guest, as Klossowski noted

having no greater nor more pressing concern than to shed the warmth of his joy at evening upon whomever comes to dine at his table and to rest under his roof from a day’s wearying travel, waits anxiously on the threshold for the stranger he will see appear like a liberator upon the horizon. And catching a first glimpse of him in the distance, though he be still far off, the master will call out to him, ‘Come quickly, my happiness is at stake’. [Apud. 5, 10]

The possible guest of any host is thus a Messiah who would make the host’s life brighter by giving him the possibility to offer, to welcome his guest on the threshold, treating him as a member of his house/country/land and completely disregarding the otherness of the guest. The host whose feet will be washed, whose hunger and thirst will be quenched will fill the host’s life which otherwise would have no meaning.

According to Benveniste, ‘hospitality’ can be ultimately traced back to *hosti-pet-s*, in which Latin *hospes*, whose literal sense is ‘the guest-master’, alternates with *-pet*, also appearing in the form *potis*, meaning originally personal identity, but then referring also to power, mastery, despotic sovereignty [1, 72]. Benveniste mentions the peculiar case of Sanskrit in which “the senses of “master” and “husband” correspond to different declensions of one and the same stem” [1, 72]. The Greek language yet makes the distinction between *despotes* and *posis*. According to Benveniste, *posis* is a poetic term for husband, spouse, yet Derrida mentions also the meaning of “fiancé,” “lover,” “the secret spouse” in Euripides. For Benveniste, *posis* should be distinguished from *despotes*, because, even if it signifies power or mastery, it does not refer to the “master of the house”. Derrida showed his distrust for Benveniste’s interpretation, since in several texts from Aeschylus as well as in Plato’s *Laws* and *Republic*, *despotes* can also mean “master of the house,” “a synonym of *oikonomos* (the steward [économe] is the one who makes the law in the *oikos*, the household or the family, the master of the family also being the master of the slaves[...])” [5, 13]. The German *Hospitalität*, similarly to its Latin counterpart, has “a troubled and troubling origin” [5, 3], as it equivocates between *hostis* as host and *hostis* as enemy, and thus the very opposite of hospitality is embedded in its meaning. Both *hostis* as host and *hostis* as enemy derived from the still-attested Latin meaning of “stranger”⁴. Thus, hospitality aspires to, and eventually incorporates, its parasite, hostility, and it is this inimical alterity that Derrida’s more radical conception of ‘hostipitality’ wishes to recapture.

The host offers hospitality to the one who enters his house or home as long as he keeps his own authority, therefore kindly imposing his own rules of hospitality, inviting his guest in

³ Derrida returns to his idea in [4]: “no hospitality in the classic sense, without sovereignty of oneself over one’s home, but since there is also no hospitality without finitude, sovereignty can only be exercised by filtering, choosing, and thus by excluding and doing violence. Injustice, a certain injustice, and even a certain perjury, begins right away, from the very threshold of the right to hospitality” [4, 55].

⁴ “The notion ‘favourable stranger’ developed to ‘guest’; that of ‘hostile stranger’ to ‘enemy’” [10, 75].

the room that he (the host) has chosen, offering him the food or the drink that he (the host) has prepared. Somehow the guest must comply with the rules that the host establishes. The host's conception of hospitality can therefore easily become despotic orders that the guest must obey. Sir Gawain is offered shelter and food by Lord Bertilak but is forced into a 'game' of gift exchange against his will and is harassed by the host's seductive wife. Benveniste mentions verbs derived from *poti-*, like the Sanskrit *pátyate*, or the Latin *potior* with the meaning of "to have power over something, have something at one's disposal" [1, 74] as well as other compounds such as the Latin adjective *compos* which means "he who is master, who has command of himself" [1, 75]. The law of hospitality is thus what Derrida called "the law of the household, *oikonomia*, the law of his household, the law of a place (house, hotel, hospital, hospice, family, city, nation, language, etc.), the law of identity which de-limits the *very* place of proffered hospitality and maintains authority over it, maintains the truth of authority, remains the place of this maintaining, which is to say, of truth, thus limiting the gift proffered and making of this limitation, namely, the *being-oneself in one's own home*, the condition of the gift and of hospitality" [5, 4].

Yet at the same time the guest may ask for too much from the host, he may invade his benefactor's place, threaten the stability of the home and become the stock character from ancient comedies who would want more than the host's food and drink, who would claim the host's wife or his daughter, and eventually his life (cf Menander, Plautus and Terence, and Molière and Ben Jonson in the Renaissance). The host is entitled to make sure that the basic rules of his home are complied with, to "protect his own hospitality". In Derrida's terms, "I want to be master at home (*ipse, potis, potens*, head of house [...]), to be able to receive whomever I like there. Anyone who encroaches on my 'at home', on my ipseity, on my power of hospitality, on my sovereignty as host, I start to regard as an undesirable foreigner, and virtually as an enemy" [4, 53, 55].

Deconstruction versus Metaphysics: The Critic as Parasite

Historically, in the 'western' canon of literary criticism whose procedures are in part inherited from those of philosophical reasoning, the first host will have been the metaphysical reading, and the guest the deconstructionist (re-)reading, if one extrapolates Hillis Miller's essay on "The Critic as Host", which starts from a quotation within a quotation: M. H. Abrams quoting Wayne Booth's assertion that the "deconstructionist" reading of a given work "is plainly and simply parasitical" on "the obvious or univocal reading" [Apud. 15, 217]. This chain of interpreting a citation within another citation prompts Hillis Miller to ask about the nature of a critical essay which extracts a passage that does not belong to it through the act of citation: "Is a citation an alien parasite within the body of the main text, or is the interpretive text the parasite which surrounds and strangles the citation which is its host?" [15, 217].

What Hillis Miller argues against Abrams's traditionalist approach is reminiscent of what Derrida had questioned in Austin's category of "nonserious" language: "a performative utterance" which will be "hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy", therefore "in ways parasitic upon its normal use". [Apud. 7, 324-325] Derrida concludes that what Austin considers "nonserious", exceptional, impure is citation "on the stage, in a poem or in a soliloquy" [7, 325]. Whereas, for Austin the speech act embedded in certain situations (contexts) is parasitic upon 'normal' conditions of performativity, Derrida maintains that we cannot limit the context and how it bears on the text, that the context is nonsaturable. Thus, an event like a quotation, let alone an infinite regress of quotations, is no less "serious" or less "normal" than other so-called "ordinary" utterances, nor is their operational context to be seen as derivative and parasitical upon normative uses of language:

And if it is alleged that ordinary language, or the ordinary circumstance of language, excludes citationality or general iterability, does this not signify that the "ordinariness" in question, the thing and the notion, harbours a lure, the teleological lure of consciousness whose motivations, indestructible necessity, and systematic effects remain to be analyzed? Especially since this essential absence of intention for the actuality of the statement, this structural unconsciousness if you will, prohibits every saturation of a context. For a context to be exhaustively determinable, in the sense demanded by Austin, it at least would be necessary for the conscious intention to be totally present and actually transparent for itself and others, since it is a determining focal point of the context. The concept of or quest for the "context" therefore seems to suffer here from the same theoretical and motivated uncertainty as the concept of the "ordinary", from the same metaphysical origins: an ethical and teleological discourse of consciousness [7, 327].

Hillis Miller is looking into that situation in which "the parasite is destroying the host. The alien has invaded the house, perhaps to kill the father of the family in an act which does not look like parricide, but is" [15, 218]. A parasite cannot exist without its host. To get into a host, to survive on and through a host, is the reason of being of a parasite. Miller analyses the meanings of the prefix "para-", sometimes "par-", that indicates *alongside, near, beside, beyond, incorrectly, resembling or similar to, subsidiary to, isomeric or polymeric to*, as opposed to its Greek counterpart which means *beside, to the side of, alongside, beyond, wrongfully, harmfully, unfavourably, and among* [15, 219], and concludes that

"Para" is a double antithetical prefix signifying at once proximity and distance, similarity and difference, interiority and exteriority, something inside a domestic economy and at the same time outside it. Something simultaneously this side of a boundary line, threshold, or margin, and also beyond it, equivalent in status and also secondary or subsidiary, submissive, as of guest to host, slave to master [15, 219].

Parasite comes from Greek *parasitos*, whose initial meaning was a fellow sharing the food with somebody else (*para-*: beside, and *sitos*: food, grain). Later on, the larger meaning narrowed down to a professional dinner guest, someone who cadges invitations without ever giving dinners in return. In contemporary English the two meanings of parasite are according to the *OED*, a social meaning (*one who eats at the table or at the expense of another, always with opprobrious application, one that frequents rich tables and earns his welcome by flattery, one who obtains the hospitality, patronage, or favour of the wealthy or powerful by obsequiousness and flattery, etc.*) and a biological one (*an animal or plant which lives in or upon another organism (technically called its host) and draws its nourishment directly from it*).⁵ A person whose part or action resembles that of an animal parasite is called *parasite*, a mineral developed upon or within another one is a *parasite*, even vowels, consonants, and diphthongs can be parasitic. In biology, being *parasitic* means *living, as an organism, in or upon another pertaining to or of the nature of such organism*, yet by extension it means symbiotic and in biology symbiosis refers to *the association of two different organisms* (usually two plants, or an animal and a plant) which live attached to each other, or one as a tenant of the other, and contribute to each other's support.

Symbiosis makes it impossible to distinguish between the host and the guest, and who the parasite is. Migrating into the body of its host, the parasite mingles with the former, merges with it, transforms it. Such an invasion de-limits what is "inside" and what is "outside", erases the

⁵ All definitions taken from [16]

border between the eater and the eaten, compromises the very “threshold” where hospitality takes place.

Deconstruction as generalizable “host”

To call deconstruction a *parasite* is excessive since it is “an investigation of what is implied by this inherence in one another of figure, concept, and narrative” [15, 223]. Neither nihilism nor metaphysics, deconstruction proves to be “simply interpretation as such, the untangling of the inherence of metaphysics in nihilism and of nihilism in metaphysics by way of the close reading of the texts.” [15, 230] The only attempt Derrida ever made to define deconstruction, as he himself admitted in “The Time is out of Joint” [see 9, 27], was in the passage from *Mémoires for Paul de Man*, where he equated it with *plus d’une langue*, i.e. “more than one language”, “both more than a language and no more of a language” or the “transference between languages” [11, 15]. “A transference between French and American” [9, 27], deconstruction is a symbiosis between the two continents, “a love story” [9, 27], which, as Derrida admits, does not exclude the possibility of hatred.

In some sense, deconstruction, like any other interpretive/hermeneutic procedure, ‘parasitically’ grew on previous structures, even if Derrida himself has stressed that deconstruction is not a method or a critique [see 10], and does not work with (new) “concepts” which would command deconstructive operations [see 15]. It is in this light that *différance*, which “designate[s] a more quasi-originary ‘inscription’ than the sign” [15, 139], can be envisaged as a pre-critical event prior to any constitutive relation of parasitism and (limited) hospitality. For Derrida,

différance is not only irreducible to any ontological or theological – ontotheological – reappropriation but as the very opening of the space in which ontotheology-philosophy produces its system and its history, it includes ontotheology, inscribing it and exceeding it without return [8, 6].

As a philosophy which has always endeavoured to think beyond (or before) any law of “economic” return or appropriation as that which comes back to the same as the law of the house, father, despot, etc., deconstruction refuses the notion of a “proper”, “appropriate” meaning, context, or of a critical threshold on which one could make a safe distinction between property/propriety and the improper. Thus there is no pure guest or host in deconstruction, only an attempt to think beyond the usually restrictive limits of hospitality which implicitly or explicitly dictate a proper interpretive context to host and be brought to bear on a text.

The “principles” of deconstruction do nothing else but what Miller calls “playing on the play within language” [15, 230]. Deconstruction is also what John D. Caputo names

a call for the coming of something unforeseeable and unprogrammable, a call that is nourished by the expectation of something to come, structurally to come, for which we pray and weep, sigh and dream [3, 185-186].

Thus, a Messiah always to come, in generalizable conditions that would abolish the very notion of expectations - from a guest as well as from a host – deconstruction’s more “serious” version of Beckett’s *Godot*, who did not come yesterday but will definitely come tomorrow or the day after tomorrow... Moved by the impossible yet necessary task of thinking the possibility of a pure gift that would not be annulled in an economic exchange, or of absolute hospitality –

but also democracy to come or justice beyond law - deconstruction is “writing in the dark, groping like a blind man feeling his way with his stick (or stylus), producing at most a self-interrupting, quasi-phenomenology of blindness and of expectant faith” [3, 186]. If deconstruction is a parasite for whom, in Derrida’s famous but famously misunderstood formula, “there is nothing outside the text” [12, 163],⁶ it is one that sustains itself on the hope for something always to come, beyond the normatized laws of a delimiting threshold for hospitality which inscribes the context as parasitical outsider and the text as lawful insider.

The food of criticism

But for Hillis Miller the text is the third element, apart from the host and the guest, apart from the deconstructive reading whose aim is to free itself from the univocal reading that it contests:

The poem in itself, then, is neither the host nor the parasite but the food they both need, host in another sense, the third element in this particular triangle. Both readings are at the same table together, bound by a strange relation of reciprocal obligation, of gift or food-giving and gift or food-receiving [15, 225].

Hillis Miller argues against Harold Bloom’s hypothesis that there is no text, since only “a strong reading is the text”, [2, 7] and sees the text as the food of criticism, the sacrificial *host* that is going to be “broken, divided, passed around, consumed.” [15, 225] Yet a text, the food of criticism, has ingested some food itself in the form of other (inter)texts incorporated into it, as the writer of the text was once a reader of other texts whose corpses parasite the new text from within. For Derrida the text is “an institution forming its readers”, since without the text to decompose, to dissect, the reader would have no *raison d’être*:

By definition the reader does not exist. Not before the work and as its straightforward “receiver”. The dream... concerns what is in the work which produces its reader, a reader who doesn’t yet exist, whose competence cannot be identified, a reader who would be “formed”, “trained”, instructed, constructed, even engendered, let’s say *invented* by the work. Invented, which is to say both found by chance and produced by research. The work then becomes an institution forming its own readers, giving them a competence they did not possess before: a university, a seminar, a colloquium, a curriculum, a *course*. If we trusted the current distinction between competence and performance, we would say that the work’s performance produces or institutes, forms or invents, a new competence for the reader or the addressee who thereby becomes a countersignatory. It teaches him or her, *if s/he is willing*, to countersign [6, 74].

A text waits for its reader to be interpreted and the more educated and competent the reader is, the more s/he can figure the different “allusions, guest, ghost of previous texts” [15, 225]. The writer of the text himself was a reader of other texts that in this way parasite the body of the text the writer produces. The new text he produces incorporates its old texts - its parasites which it destroyed. The new text feeds “ungraciously on their substance, and at the same time it

⁶ As several deconstructionist critics have noted, bearing in mind the de-limitation of textual borders and the context’s nonsaturability, this formula could equally be written as: there is nothing outside the context.

is the sinister host which unmans them by inviting them into its home, as the Green Knight invites Gawain" [15, 225].

What deconstruction – and Derrida's quotation above – reminds us is that the 'text', in its porous relation to 'context' (via quotations, intertexts, etc.), has always already provided a structural inscription of debates of critical hos(ti)pitality that have pitted deconstructive against more traditional (metaphysical) interpretive procedures. Rather than freeing the nascent reader from the death of a tyrannical author, as in Barthes's epoch-making essay, the third party or *terstis* of the (con)text is the open banquet or *symposium* at which all critical, interpretive strategies, even those originating in the (first) writer, ultimately have to sit as witnesses. After all, such used to be the meaning and function of 'theory'... [13 xiii-xv].

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Ospitalitatea (con)textuală în deconstrucție

Rezumat

Articolul analizează relația dintre deconstrucție și metafizică, relație văzută prin intermediul conceptului de ospitalitate. Pornind de la eseul lui Hillis Miller, "Criticul ca gazdă", în care criticul american face referire la afirmațiile lui M. H. Abrams și respectiv Wayne Booth că lectura "deconstrucționistă" este "pur și simplu un parazit" care crește pe "lectura univocă și evidentă", articolul ia în considerație diferite gazde/ diferiți oaspeți care se întâlnesc pe pragul textului. Dacă am fi în situația de a accepta faptul că deconstrucția este un fel de parazit pentru care, după formula lui Derrida (atât de des interpretată greșit) conform căreia "nu există nimic în afara textului", atunci trebuie să acceptăm și faptul că deconstrucția se autosusține din speranța în ceva ce se află pe punctul de a sosi, dincolo de legile prin care se delimitează pragul de unde începe ospitalitatea. Deconstrucția tratează noțiunea de context ca pe un outsider care rămâne parazită, iar pe aceea de text ca pe un insider de drept.