G. K. Blank: Deconstruction: Entering the Bible through Babel.*

This short paper could be constructed in such a way that I might actually attempt to say a few clearly instructive things about the topic I have been asked to speak towards. I could, in other words, paraphrase what has already been paraphrased about a critical approach and theory that in part claims that all discourses are paraphrases of other discourses: in other words, “In other words” could be the opening phrase for all discourses. The phrase “In other words” suggests, paradoxically, that via a supplementary, the same thing can be said differently, that there is sameness in difference.

But instead I might begin by doing it (i.e. deconstructing) as I’m implicitly explaining it, thereby justifying the means by the end, the practice by the theory, the stone by two birds. And vice versa. Somewhere past the point yet intersecting with it I will ask questions and raise issues that Deconstruction poses about texts and textuality and the Bible. In fact I’m already troubled by what I have said, because when I say “said” I really mean that I have written said, and what I am now doing is translating written language into spoken language, as if somehow the saying or speaking has a privileged position over what I have written, as if spoken language has power over written language. But this is not so: These written words are causing me to speak. Speaking is an unfortunate trope for writing. To this issue I will return when I begin beginning again.

The precursor of literary criticism – that is, the interpretation of works that are for one reason or another assigned the name Literature – is scriptural exegesis. The literary critic and the Biblical scholar (sometimes called a textualist, I believe) are often engaged in the same business, and that business is the interpretation of texts. The word exegesis translated from the Greek in fact means interpretation. And interpretation, with its Latin root pretis, means explanation, and so through the labyrinth of etymology and translation we can say that exegesis and interpretation are explanation-making practices.

And now, as you may have guessed, I am tempted to ask what an explanation is, and without answering – knowing that answers always lead to other questions leading to other answers, and so on, ad infinitum; knowing full well that explanations also need explanations (remember: “In other words . . .”) – and so without answering I know that I have entered Babel, which, not really surprisingly, suggests both the “Gate of God” and “confusion”, especially the “confusion of words”. But in my use of the word Babel and my conscious entrance into a metaphor of place and a view of language that is and isn’t of my own making, I don’t want to make an either/or choice in its meaning.

Even if I wanted to I couldn’t. (Even if I said “I want Babel to mean ‘x’”, I am drawing attention to those meanings I have excluded. Confusion can only be generated by saying what meaning you mean. Now imagine the confusion generated by not saying what meaning you mean.) It is impossible to separate-out the meanings of a word. I want both meanings simultaneously (synchronically), because only the combination or collapsing of both meanings, plus all of those I’ve thoughtfully overlooked, can lead me vaguely towards the subject I have been invited to speak towards, which is the relevance of Deconstruction to the reading of ancient texts, although I feel “ancient texts” may be a crafty euphemism for the Bible.
But before I begin again (Will I ever get started? Will I ever get finished?), I might just say that Deconstruction holds that things – and especially written things: texts – are not about what they appear to be about; and in the process of examination one explanation collapses into its contrary. I am tempted, therefore, to say nothing at all about the topic. But what about the idea that texts are not about what they appear to be about? There is obviously both threat or relief in such an idea when applied to reading the Bible: relief for those who don’t read the Bible literally, and threat for those who do.

So for me, entering this paper is entering Babel, and not just because I am writing "on top" of other writings, but because I am entering the Bible through the gates of written confusion. But going through those gates does not mean I am going to come out on the side of clarity, for who among you would call the Bible unequivocal? In fact, many of you might have to seek other means of earning a living if the Bible were not a problematical text. And so too, I should add, would literary critics, for if plays, poems, or novels, were clear in their meaning, if in fact they had a meaning, we too would be out of business. The institutionalization of Biblical studies and literary studies testifies to the fact that texts are unstable and confusing, and that these texts necessitate the existence of sometimes highly-paid and often highly-educated professionals to perpetuate this instability and confusion. Thus writing about the confusion of texts not only propels texts through history but also ensures a future for those who follow. “Publish or perish” should now mean something different to you. We may be living in an ivory tower but we are all constructing Babel.

It may appear that I have used up the opening portion of this paper by saying very little about Deconstruction and even less about ancient texts. This is both true and untrue. I have already invested in this discourse a number of ideas and stylistic strategies which might be designated deconstructive. Even the statement, "This is both true and untrue" is axiomatic to the practice of deconstruction. But if I can for a moment fall back to some of the other things I have already said I can begin by making a return, which all beginnings are. There are no beginnings. Likewise in writing: every writing is a re-writing, a revision, a seeing-again once more.

So let me return to something I’ve just said, which was “... the Bible is a problematical text.”

I don’t think there can possibly be too many serious objections to calling the Bible “problematical”. Again: if the Bible were straightforward in its “meaning” there would not be the proliferation of Christian sects, the divergent and often contradictory translations, nor would there be the necessity of so many mediators that the Bible demands, whether pope, priest, minister, missionary or — here you are — Biblical scholars.

So there can be no objections to the Bible’s problematical nature. But what about calling the Bible a text?


The Bible may for some readers be an artefact of spiritual belief, but even for those readers it is necessarily a kind of writing; and all writing is subject to similar sorts of analysis. Further, the proper name assigned to a piece of writing — that is the author — is
also of limited and even misleading importance. The proper name attached to a text biases our reading of that text, whether that proper name is Shakespeare, Wittgenstein, or the ghost-writers for the Holy Ghost (Barthes 1977:142-8; Foucault 1977). What does accepting the Bible as the Word of God (many words, actually) do in prejudicing the reader's response or approach to interpreting the Bible? I'll leave that with you with the rejoinder that the speaking voice that is manifest in the Bible should not be an issue of faith but of reading and textuality.

And I'll also leave it with you that a difficulty or complication that many Biblical scholars have is that they are believers in the word of the text that their own practice of interpretation subverts. Can a Biblical scholar believe in the authority of both his own text and the one he is interpreting? Where is the capital-T Truth? As soon as you interpret, the truth is no longer self-evident. I've read a Biblical scholar writing something similar: “They [Biblical scholars] must decide whether they are willing to view the religious texts that are the object of their study as systems of difference rather than privileged channels of an extratextual transcendent, and whether these texts, then, retain any sort of privileged status at all” (Detweiler 1982:1).

As a related difficulty comes the problem of originality. An aspect of Deconstruction confronts the issue. The Bible (or any text for that matter) can be placed in such a way that it owes everything to previous texts. There is nothing completely original in the Bible. Everything is derivative, falling infinitely back upon previous myths, codes, stories, gossip, fables, laws, morals, and so on. And like all texts it misuses, mistranslates, and misinterprets what other materials it has integrated (Guillén 1971:47; Bloom 1973:95). Creative misreadings, these might be called, as all readings are. And I'll say it once more: look what the interpreters have done, piling one interpretation upon other necessarily misinterpretations. I'm reminded of a line from a song: “Look what they've done to my song...” Well, look what we've done to the text.

The Bible (or again, any text) can only be seen as an original work in relative terms. Further, the Bible is an especially difficult text in that not only is it subject to being an intertext (i.e. derivative and transposed from other texts), but it is also an intertext with itself: portions of it are repeated, retold, restated, reiterated throughout, and collation of these repeated passages can only point to the Bible's belief in its own unstable intertextuality: repetition as revisionary but creative form of contradiction. The Bible itself has a few words on originality: “... there is nothing new under the sun. Is there a thing of which it is said, 'See, this is new'?” (Ec. 1:9-10). The Bible thus contains its own disclaimer of originality. For this reason it might be proposed that the Bible cannot be read as history; or if one did want to say that it is history then it has collapsed into, among things, self-allegory, even parody.

In other words, like all discourses it has fallen inwards under the weight of being writing, which means it can only be about itself and the system that supports it, and that it has the reflexive or self-referential characteristics of writing.

The Bible's so-called originality is thus a figure of authorial privileging that is deluded by its seemingly external context (history), by its seemingly eternal context (transcendent history), and by its refusal to acknowledge that it is a kind of writing that is subject to the limiting delimitations of writing. In the beginning there was the word, but that word called out to other words which then called back to the words that called out.

At this point, now that I have disclosed that the Bible is a closed system to history but
an open one to writing, I can intuit a way out of this paper, and the way out is the way I might have taken in – that is, with a few words on post-structuralism (which is more or less anti-structuralism based on some aspects of structuralism), and Deconstruction, which is post-structuralism applied to literary and textual theory and the practice of those theories.

I will speak, therefore, of an author: Jacques Derrida. And I’ll say no more except that Derrida, almost single-handedly – and I think with his right hand in particular – instigated this radical re-evaluation of Western metaphysics which has quite happily spilled over and been lapped up by literary critics. Why literary critics were the first to be attracted to Derrida’s thinking is that literary criticism has always been self-consciously critical of its practice of acting on and in rhetoric, of doing things with words about other words (Culler 1982:180-280; Norris 1982:90-125).

Like the Bible, a way into but never out of Deconstruction is through writing. The question is: What is writing? Stubbornly lodged into our thinking is the notion that I began with, that speech (spoken language) is privileged over writing (written language); that writing is degraded speech; that writing is a subordinate but faithful representation of speech; and that speech as originating voice itself is somehow in direct relationship with meaning and truth. This is termed phonocentrism (Derrida 1976:12): the deceptive trope of authenticating presence that is behind speech and that masks and is imposed upon writing.

Lurking nearby and unquestioned is the idea that words (signifiers) stand for things outside of words (the signified), and that somehow these things outside of words have or possess meaning. I can only repeat that what words continuously call out to are other words, thus delaying or deferring the meaning. Discourses have rhetorical rather than referential status. Once you go into the dictionary you never get out. Writes Derrida: “There is nothing outside of the text” (Derrida 1976:158). The meaning of a word depends on its play of differences from other words (thank you Saussure [1974]; Derrida 1976:27-73), but as I’ve just mentioned, meaning is also always deferred, put off. This difference and deferral leads to one of Derrida’s key terms: différence, spelt with an “a” so that its meaning is evident only in writing and not in speech (Derrida 1973:129-60).

I’ve just said that words call out to other words, and marginally and parenthetically I want to cite a proverb, then reverse it, and then revise the reversal. The proverb is: “One picture is worth ten thousand words.” The reversal is: “One word is worth ten thousand pictures.” The reversal revised is: “One word is worth ten thousand other words.” The proverb in its original form marks a perpetuation of the signified’s status over the signifier.

Derrida writing that “there is nothing outside of the text” does not impose a border or boundary or limit on textuality. On the contrary, it is delimiting admission, because if nothing is outside the text then everything is inside the text wanting to get out. Borders are meant to be crossed; boundaries are meant to be extended; limits are meant to be transgressed. Derrida even appears to be commenting on “look what we’ve done to the text”: What has happened, if it has happened, is a sort of overrun that spoils all these boundaries and divisions [between “the supposed beginning and end of a work, the unity of a corpus, the title, the margins, the signatures, the referential realm outside the frame . . .”] and forces us to extend the accredited concept, the dominant notion of a “text”, of what I still call a “text”, for strategic reasons, in part – a “text” that is henceforth no longer a finished corpus of writing, some content enclosed in a book or its margins, but a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces. Thus the text overruns all the limits assigned to it so far . . . (Derrida 1979:83-4)
This, of course, is intertextuality.

I’m thinking again of a passage I earlier alluded to, the beginning of the Gospel according to John: “In the beginning was the Word.” In this passage the Word existed before creation, before the world. But “the Word” functions also as a mediator between the thought and the act. I realize that “the Word” is in one sense a trope for Jesus, and I also realize that John was playing around with the Greek idea and metaphor of logos; but I would nonetheless draw attention to the expected and necessary contradiction of the usage. First, “the Word” has this mediator function, standing between the thought and the thing. Yet second, “the Word” seems to have the function of initiator, of standing before the thought and the thing. So “the Word” is both between and before mediator and creator. The mediating function I am tempted to disclaim because words negotiate in flux only among themselves. The creating function I would prefer to acclaim and I am reminded of a few lines from P B Shelley’s remarkable poem, Prometheus unbound (1819), a poem that, like the Bible, is a version and revision of the myth of origins: Asia, the bride-to-be of Prometheus, talks about Prometheus’ gift to man:

He gave man speech, and speech created thought,
Which is the measure of the universe . . . (II. iv. 71-2)

Note here that speech, the word, creates thought, and not the other way around. The normal privileging is reversed.

Perhaps one more term might just as well come into play before I end: Logocentrism (Derrida 1976:43). This is many things, but perhaps it is best explained as two things:

1) the bias we have nurtured that there is meaning or truth beyond or outside of language; and

2) the privileging we have given to only one-half (the first half) of a large number of oppositions (Derrida 1982:329). For example: thought/speech, simple/complex, content/form, presence/absence, original/copy, host/parasite, philosophy/literature, art/criticism, nature/culture, whole/part, sameness/difference, central/marginal, order/chaos, practice/theory. These pairs and many others are normally constructed as opposites with the first term in a superior position.

Deconstruction deconstructs or undoes such opposites and demonstrates that these hierarchical oppositions are illusory; thus the privileging of the first term is non-supportable; and that the relationship is dialectical, so that on the most simple level one might say things like: all practice is theory; what is marginal is central; speech causes thought; all art is criticism; culture is natural; sameness is a category of difference; form has content; and so on. The differences in opposition and the hierarchical relationships collapse into différence. A reading that is deconstructive will, then, among other things, tease from the examined text what the text is doing by examining the oppositional claims it makes, and especially the claims it does not state (Derrida 1981:41). Deconstruction recognizes the paradox that it too makes claims and attempts to do something that can be undone: Deconstruction can be deconstructed. For some this is a frightening or useless endeavour; for others it is an exhilarating and useful enterprise that perpetuates both textuality and the impossible quest for meaning.

Faith cannot exist in the writing of the Bible. It is, if somewhere, if anywhere, somewhere else, – perhaps everywhere else. For believers the Bible must be marginal to
belief. Like all texts it merely offers a critique of writing, of itself. The Bible especially perpetuates the myth of authority, presence, and originality, and it perpetuates them in a special way because it is ostensibly about authority, presence, and originality. But neither should the Bible destroy belief, even if it suspends belief; for if belief depends on textual interpretation, then the only belief can be a belief in the problematics and proliferation of interpretation: entering the Bible through Babel.

Like any other descriptive system — if "system" is indeed the right word, yet there is no such thing as a right word — Deconstruction cannot claim any distinct amount of originality. It continues the long line of radical scepticism which stretches back much further than Heidegger, Nietzsche, Hume, and Montaigne — a long line of radical scepticism which devastatingly draws attention not only to the inadequacies of other descriptive systems, but also to the inevitable inadequacies of its own project. And I think that without doubt this is the most important feature of capital-D Deconstruction that I would like to draw your attention to: that above all — and I'm conscious of metaphor of sublime isolation by saying "above all" — that above all, the practice of what we do with texts, whether nominated as literary criticism or exegesis, must constantly come under question. We must continuously be checking what and why we are doing what we do in the act of acting upon texts — even while we are doing it. We must be constantly checking what assumptions are sleepily embedded in the practice of writing about and reading texts: critical self-consciousness.

Today in the study of literature there is a proliferation of theory, of texts on textuality, of interpretations of interpretation: the impossible but necessary quest for the meaning of meaning, knowing that there is neither meaning nor a metaperspective. Many have said that this proliferation is not only fadish but unhealthy, that it leads to nothingness, the abyss. To the charge that it is fadish I would admit, admitting at the same time that everything is necessarily fadish and passé. The temporality of thought is the witness of that: as Hegel points out in the opening chapter of The phenomenology of mind (1931), the now that now is is always a then, for as soon as you say "now", even right now, it is already then. Now, especially the written now, is merely a metaphor of presence, another form of rhetorical authority in the text. And of course it is just as fadish and passé to condemn Deconstruction as it is to embrace it.

To the charge that it leads to meaninglessness: the quest for meaning is an admission that meaninglessness exists, indeed predominates: Deconstruction finds meaningfulness in meaninglessness, certainty in uncertainty.

To the charge that it is unhealthy: those who say it is unhealthy are merely reacting against the healthiness of a patient who both diagnoses his sickness and questions his diagnosis. And so I have ended, perhaps unwisely, with a patient who is both healthy and diseased; and yet the opposition between sickness and health, which is a matter of life and death, collapses under the powerful will to question from within.

WORKS CONSULTED


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Dr G Kim Blank, The University of Victoria, Victoria, B.C., Canada.