

§ 1 Letter to a Japanese Friend

Dear Professor Izutsu,

At our last meeting I promised you some schematic and preliminary reflections on the word “deconstruction.” What we discussed were prolegomena to a possible translation of this word into Japanese, one that would at least try to avoid, if *possible*, a negative determination of its meanings or connotations. The question would be therefore what deconstruction is not, or rather *ought* not to be. I underline these words (“possible” and “ought”). For if the difficulties of translation can be anticipated (and the question of deconstruction is also through and through *the* question of translation, and of the language of concepts, of the conceptual corpus of so-called Western metaphysics), one should not begin by naïvely believing that the word “deconstruction” corresponds in French to some clear and univocal meaning. There is already in “my” language a serious [*sombre*] problem of translation between what here or there can be envisaged for the word and the usage itself, the reserves of the word. And it is already clear that even in French, things change from one context to another. More so in the German, English, and especially American contexts, where the *same* word is already attached to very different connotations, inflections, and emotional or affective values. Their analysis would be interesting and warrants a study of its own.

When I chose this word, or when it imposed itself upon me—I think

This letter, first published in Japanese, as was my intention, before being published in other languages, appeared in French in *Le Promeneur* 42 (1985): 2–4. Toshihiko Izutsu is a well-known Japanese Islamologist.

it was in *Of Grammarology*—I little thought it would be credited with such a central role in the discourse that interested me at the time. Among other things I wished to translate and adapt to my own ends the Heideggerian words *Destruktion* or *Abbau*. Both words signified in this context an operation bearing on the *structure* or traditional *architecture* of the fundamental concepts of ontology or of Western metaphysics. But in French the term “destruction” too obviously implied an annihilation or a negative reduction much closer perhaps to Nietzschean “demolition” than to the Heideggerian interpretation or to the type of reading I was proposing. So I ruled that out. I remember having looked to see if the word *déconstruction* (which came to me it seemed quite spontaneously) was good French. I found it in *Littré*. The grammatical, linguistic, or rhetorical senses [*portées*] were, I found, bound up with a “mechanical” sense [*portée “machinique”*]. This association appeared very fortunate and fortunately adapted to what I wanted at least to suggest. Perhaps I could cite some of the entries from *Littré*. “*Deconstruction*: Action of deconstructing. / Grammatical term. Disarranging of the construction of words in a sentence. ‘Of deconstruction, common way of saying construction,’ Lemare, ‘De la manière d’apprendre les langues [On the Way of Learning Languages],’ chapter 17 of *Cours de langue latine*. *To deconstruct*: 1. To disassemble the parts of a whole. To deconstruct a machine to transport it elsewhere. 2. Grammatical term . . . To deconstruct verse, rendering it, by the suppression of meter, similar to prose. / Absolutely. ‘In the system of prenotional sentences, one also starts with translation and one of its advantages is never needing to deconstruct,’ Lemare, *ibid*. 3. *To self-deconstruct* [*se déconstruire*]: . . . to lose its construction. ‘Modern scholarship has shown us that in a region of the timeless East, a language reaching its own state of perfection is deconstructed [*s’est déconstruite*] and altered from within itself according to the single law of change, natural to the human mind,’ Villemain, Preface to the *Dictionnaire de l’Académie*.”¹

Naturally it will be necessary to translate all of this into Japanese, but that only postpones the problem. It goes without saying that if all the meanings enumerated by *Littré* interested me because of their affinity with what I “meant” [*“voulais-dire”*], they are concerned, metaphorically, so to say, only with models or regions of meaning and not with the totality of what deconstruction aspires to in its most radical ambition. This is not limited to a linguistico-grammatical model, nor even a semantic model, let alone a mechanical model. These models themselves have to

be submitted to a deconstructive questioning. It is true then that these “models” have been behind a number of misunderstandings about the concept and term “deconstruction” because of the temptation to reduce it to these models.

It must also be said that the word was rarely used and was largely unknown in France. It had to be reconstructed in some way, and its use value was determined by the discourse that was then being attempted around and on the basis of *Of Grammatology*. It is to this use value that I am now going to try to give some precision and not some primitive meaning or etymology sheltered from or outside of any contextual strategy.

A few more words on the subject of “the context.” At that time, structuralism was dominant. “Deconstruction” seemed to be going in the same direction, since the word signified a certain attention to *structures* (which themselves were neither simply ideas, nor forms, nor syntheses, nor systems). To deconstruct was also a structuralist gesture, or in any case a gesture that assumed a certain need for the structuralist problematic. But it was also an antistructuralist gesture, and its fortune rests in part on this ambiguity. Structures were to be undone, decomposed, desedimented (all types of structures, linguistic, “logocentric,” “phonocentric”—structuralism being especially at that time dominated by linguistic models and by a so-called structural linguistics that was also called Saussurian—socio-institutional, political, cultural, and above all and from the start philosophical). This is why, especially in the United States, the motif of deconstruction has been associated with “poststructuralism” (a word unknown in France until its “return” from the United States). But the undoing, decomposing, and desedimenting of structures, in a certain sense more historical than the “structuralist” movement it called into question, was not a negative operation. Rather than destroying, it was also necessary to understand how a “whole” was constituted and to reconstruct it to this end. However, the negative appearance was and remains much more difficult to erase than is suggested by the grammar of the word (*de-*), even though it can designate a genealogical derivation rather than a demolition. That is why this word, at least on its own, has never appeared satisfactory to me (but what word is?) and must always be girded by an entire discourse. It is difficult to erase it afterward because, in the work of deconstruction, I have had to, as I have to here, multiply the cautionary indicators and put aside all the traditional philosophical concepts, while reaffirming the necessity of returning to them, at least under erasure. Hence, this has been

called, precipitously, a type of negative theology (this was neither true nor false, but I shall not enter into the debate here).²

All the same, and in spite of appearances, deconstruction is neither an *analysis* nor a *critique*, and its translation would have to take that into consideration. It is not an analysis in particular because the dismantling of a structure is not a regression toward a *simple element*, toward an *undecomposable origin*. These values, like that of analysis, are themselves philosophemes subject to deconstruction. No more is it a critique, in a general sense or in a Kantian sense. The instance of *krinein* or *krisis* (decision, choice, judgment, discernment) is itself, as is all the apparatus of transcendental critique, one of the essential “themes” or “objects” of deconstruction.

I would say the same about *method*. Deconstruction is not a method and cannot be transformed into one. Especially if the technical and procedural significations of the word are stressed. It is true that in certain circles (university or cultural, especially in the United States) the technical and methodological “metaphor” that seems necessarily attached to the very word “deconstruction” has been able to seduce or lead astray. Hence the debate that has developed in these circles: Can deconstruction become a methodology for reading and for interpretation? Can it thus let itself be reappropriated and domesticated by academic institutions?

It is not enough to say that deconstruction could not be reduced to some methodological instrumentality or to a set of rules and transposable procedures. Nor will it do to claim that each deconstructive “event” remains singular or, in any case, as close as possible to something like an idiom and a signature. It must also be made clear that deconstruction is not even an *act* or an *operation*. Not only because there is something “patient” or “passive” about it (as Blanchot says, more passive than passivity, than the passivity that is opposed to activity). Not only because it does not return to an (individual or collective) *subject* who would take the initiative and apply it to an object, a text, a theme, and so on. Deconstruction takes place, it is an event that does not await the deliberation, consciousness, or organization of a subject, or even of modernity. *It deconstructs itself. It can be deconstructed* [Ça se déconstruit]. The “it” [*ça*] is not here an impersonal thing that is opposed to some egological subjectivity. *It is in deconstruction* [en déconstruction] (*Littré* says: “to deconstruct itself [*se déconstruire*] . . . to lose its construction”). And the *se* of *se déconstruire*, which is not the reflexivity of an ego or of a consciousness, bears the

whole enigma. I recognize, my dear friend, that in trying to make a word clearer so as to assist its translation, I am only thereby increasing the difficulties: "the impossible task of the translator" (Benjamin). This too is what is meant by "deconstruction."

If deconstruction takes place everywhere it [*ça*] takes place, where there is something (and is not therefore limited to meaning or to the text in the current and bookish sense of the word), we still have to think through what is happening in our world, in modernity, at the time when deconstruction is becoming a motif, with its word, its privileged themes, its mobile strategy, and so on. I have no simple and formalizable answer. All my essays are attempts to have it out with this formidable question. They are modest symptoms of it, quite as much as attempts at interpretation. I would not even dare to say, following a Heideggerian schema, that we are in an "epoch" of being-in-deconstruction, of a being-in-deconstruction that manifests or dissimulates itself at one and the same time in other "epochs." This thinking of "epoch" and especially that of a gathering of the destiny of being and of the unity of its destination or its dispersion (*Schicken, Geschick*) can never give rise to any certainty.

To be very schematic, I would say that the difficulty of *defining* and therefore also of *translating* the word "deconstruction" stems from the fact that all the predicates, all the defining concepts, all the lexical significations, and even the syntactic articulations, which seem at one moment to lend themselves to this definition or to that translation, are also deconstructed or deconstructible, directly or otherwise, and so on. And that goes for the *word*, the very unity of the *word* deconstruction, as for every *word*. *Of Grammatology* questioned the unity "word" and all the privileges with which it was credited, especially in its *nominal* form. It is therefore only a discourse or rather a writing that can make up for the incapacity of the word to be equal to a "thought." All sentences of the type "deconstruction is X" or "deconstruction is not X" a priori miss the point, which is to say that they are at least false. As you know, one of the principal things at stake in what is called in the texts "deconstruction" is precisely the delimiting of onto-logic and above all of the third person present indicative: S is P.

The word "deconstruction," like any other, acquires its value only from its inscription in a chain of possible substitutions, in what is so blithely called a "context." For me, for what I have tried and still try to write, the word has interest only within a certain context, where it replaces and lets

itself be determined by so many other words such as “writing [*écriture*],” “trace,” “differance,” “supplement,” “hymen,” “*pharmakon*,” “margin,” “cut [*entame*],” “*parergon*,” and so on. By definition, the list can never be closed, and I have cited only nouns, which is inadequate and done only for reasons of economy. In fact, I should have cited the sentences and the interlinking of sentences that in their turn determine these nouns in some of my texts.

What deconstruction is not? everything of course!

What is deconstruction? nothing of course!

I do not think, for all these reasons, that it is a *good word* [un bon mot]. It is certainly not elegant [*beau*]. It has definitely been of service in a highly determined situation. In order to know what it was that imposed it in a chain of possible substitutions, despite its essential imperfection, this “highly determined situation” would need to be analyzed and deconstructed. This is difficult, and I am not going to attempt it here.

One final word to hasten the conclusion of this letter, which is already too long. I do not think that translation is a secondary and derived event in relation to an original language or text. And, as I have just said, “deconstruction” is a word that is essentially replaceable in a chain of substitutions. This can also be done from one language to another. The chance for (a) “deconstruction” would be that another word (the same word and an other) be *found* or *invented* in Japanese to say the same thing (the same and an other), to speak of deconstruction, and to lead it elsewhere, to its being written and transcribed. In a word that will also be more beautiful.

When I speak of this writing of the other that will be more beautiful, I clearly understand translation as involving the same risk and chance as the poem. How to translate “poem”? a “poem”? . . .

Please be assured, dear Professor Izutsu, of my gratitude and of my most cordial feelings.

—Translated by David Wood and Andrew Benjamin