A GREAT DEAL OF FOOLISHNESS has been written about deconstruction. For years, insults have been hurled at scholars who are considered supporters of deconstruction. The insults have been steeped in righteous condemnation and steeled with dismissive swipes. Deconstruction has been denounced as unethical, apolitical, antihumanist, and nihilistic. The death of deconstruction has been proclaimed (Johnson, 1994; Lehman, 1991; Martin, 1995).

The whole fuss seems bizarre in light of the actual practice and influence of deconstruction. Perhaps deconstruction has fired fear in people because it is difficult to define, and what cannot be defined, cannot be pinned down and labeled; yet here lies the productive energy of deconstruction. In the very difficulty of naming and defining deconstruction, in the slipperiness of language that refuses to be pinned easily, deconstruction demonstrates and represents an understanding of language as vibrant and creative, opening up possibilities for meaning making.

My interest in deconstruction as a way to read poetry is motivated by my experiences as a student and teacher, in both school and university classrooms, as well as by my experiences as a poet. I first heard about deconstruction when I was in my early 30s. I had taught in secondary schools for 8 years, and had recently returned to graduate school to pursue a degree in creative writing and English literature. I was intrigued by the possibilities that deconstruction opened up for writing and responding to poems.

It is worth noting that my engagement with deconstruction as a way of responding to poetry developed at the same time that I was earnestly pursuing my own poetry writing, and finding in the writing just how mysterious and untamable language can be. Deconstruction acknowledges diverse and intricate connections between reading and writing by releasing the energy of language at play, as it plays out in texts.

In my second year of undergraduate study in English literature, I recall a practical criticism course where the professor distributed copies of poems with the poets’ names deleted, and expected me to match the understanding of the poem that he had devised from his successive readings. Not once did I even come close to matching the professor’s response, and subsequently I was awarded a C grade. I could never understand why the poet was deleted, why the socio-political-cultural contexts were ignored, or why the poem invited only one expert reading.

In the course I learned only my inadequacy. But I also recall, with shame, that during the early years of my teaching, I expected my students to produce at least shadows of the responses that I carried around with me in the teacher’s guidebook. I perpetuated the practices I had known as a student.
In my undergraduate English studies I was trained to look for meaning, like a beagle on the trail of a rabbit. The rabbit might twist and turn and hide, but if I persisted I could outwit the rabbit. Deconstruction reminds me that there is no plump rabbit seeking to avoid my capture and consumption. Deconstruction also reminds me that reading poetry is a constructing activity. Reading is not like flicking on the lights in order to reveal what is there because what is there comprises only so many black squiggles. Readers make meaning as they interact with texts.

Defining Deconstruction

Deconstruction is founded in the contemporary philosophical view that the world, as known and experienced, is constructed and disclosed in language. Reading texts with the philosophical approach of careful and rigorous critique, deconstruction demonstrates that language use constructs plural meanings. As an approach to responding to texts, deconstruction seeks to go beyond the apparently clear and manifest meanings in order to reveal how texts can be interpreted in many different ways because language is always slipping and sliding as it works, and is worked, rhetorically to create meanings.

Instead of looking for a harmonious meaning of a text, the reader brings a skeptical, questioning approach and pays attention to elements in the text that contradict one another or fail to cohere. By attending to the openings in the text, the reader keeps the text open (Cherryholmes, 1988; Crowle, 1989; Culler, 1982; Derrida, 1976, 1981a, 1981b; 1992; Gilbert, 1989; Silverman, 1989, 1994; Wihl, 1994).

Even the effort to define deconstruction remains an open text. Some claim that deconstruction cannot be defined. In *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice*, Norris (1982) begins with a cautious note: “To present ‘deconstruction’ as if it were a method, a system or a settled body of ideas would be to falsify its nature and lay oneself open to charges of reductive misunderstanding” (p. 1). Nevertheless, undaunted by Norris’s warning, Johnson (1981) provides in her introduction to Derrida’s *Dissemination*, a useful and often cited explanation of deconstruction:

Deconstruction is not a form of textual vandalism designed to prove that meaning is impossible. In fact, the word “de-construction” is closely related not to the word “destruction” but to the word “analysis,” which etymologically means “to undo”—a virtual synonym for “to de-construct.” The deconstruction of a text does not proceed by random doubt or generalized skepticism, but by the careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text itself. If anything is destroyed in a deconstructive reading, it is not meaning but the claim to unequivocal domination of one mode of signifying over another. This, of course, implies that a text signifies in more than one way, and to varying degrees of explicitness. (p. xiv)

Deconstruction is a practice of reading that begins with the assumption that meaning is a textual construction. Perhaps even more useful than the noun “construction” is the verb “constructing” because deconstruction is a continuous process of interacting with texts. According to deconstruction, a text is not a window a reader can look through in order to see either the author’s intention or an essential truth, nor is the text a mirror that turns back a vivid image of the reader’s experiences, emotions, and insights. Instead, deconstruction is a practice of reading that aims to make meaning from a text by focusing on how the text works rhetorically, and how a text is connected to other texts as well as the historical, cultural, social, and political contexts in which texts are written, read, published, reviewed, rewarded, and distributed.

Deconstruction has been condemned and dismissed for its fundamental assumption that language is untamable for both the reader and the writer. Some critics contend that deconstruction holds that communication is impossible, and in order to highlight this notion as ludicrous, they simply point to numerous examples of people who obviously communicate and understand one another. They also argue that deconstruction claims that a text can never mean anything because a reader can always propose still another diverse interpretation. But what deconstruction really objects to is interpretive closure. There can be no univocal, authoritative reading or writing of a text. There is always something more. Deconstruction acknowledges and encourages a multiplicity of meaningful responses. It promotes playing with texts. It celebrates the wildness of language, full of wonder.

What is especially commendable about deconstruction as an approach for responding to poetry is that readers, especially young readers in classrooms, do not have to be unnerved by self-deprecating fears.
that their responses to a poem are wrong. Instead of right and wrong answers, deconstruction encourages plural responses. Instead of a hidden meaning that must be revealed, the poetic text is a site where the reader’s imagination, experience, understanding, and emotions come into play in unique performances.

As Marshall (1992) proposes, deconstruction “is dedicated to the process of reading (in the sense of opening up meanings), not of interpreting (in the sense of closing in on a particular meaning)” (p. 23). The goal of deconstruction is to open up the text, which is not a puzzle to be laboriously pieced together but a textual space in which to perform.

This is not to say that a deconstructive approach to reading means there is no discipline or rigor. On the contrary, deconstructive reading is careful reading in the sense that deconstruction takes care in attending to the text. Readers are motivated and influenced in their reading by their knowledge and understanding of conventional strategies for reading. Their practices of reading are informed by both personal and communal matrices of expectations and assumptions about how texts are constructed and interpreted.

In sticking to these personal and communal matrices, readers might not realize how readily they adopt a particular position in relation to the text, how willing they are to dismiss elements of the text they are unprepared for, how motivated they are to closure, how eager they are to consume the text. By being aware of these personal and communal matrices, readers can adopt different perspectives in relation to the text as a site for the production of multiple meanings.

Marshall (1992) addresses the fundamental pedagogical issue of diverse responses to a text. She holds that “as thinkers we need to hold in our minds a space for interpretations that are other than ours” (p. 188). Marshall stresses the need for readers to “acknowledge our own agendas, our own histories, our own subject positions as we interpret texts, and simultaneously acknowledge the potential for the logic of other interpretations” (p. 188). She optimistically predicts that plural responses can open up a space that “may become the space for dialogue” (p. 188).

Deconstruction is reading a text by writing more texts about the text. Reading and writing are closely connected practices. Derrida (1981b), who is generally credited with the construction of deconstruction as a philosophical practice of writing and reading, describes his writing as grafting on the host texts of others: “Above all it is necessary to read and reread those in whose wake I write, the ‘books’ in whose margins and between whose lines I mark out and read a text simultaneously almost identical and entirely other” (p. 4). Only through this process, “this interweaving, this textile, is the text produced . . . in the transformation of another text” (p. 26).

Derrida regards all of his texts as grafts, as insertions into the textual flow. He describes his books as “unique and differentiated textual operations” in an “unfinished movement” with “no absolute beginning” (p. 3). For Derrida writing is the process of grafting texts in the margins, the spaces, the gaps of others’ texts.

Deconstructive Reading: Five Approaches

Based on this understanding of deconstruction as a critical, literate, and creative practice, I invite my students to consider the following five reading strategies informed by deconstruction. My purpose is not to present a list of definitive approaches. Instead, these strategies provide a useful heuristic for guiding readers in asking questions that they might otherwise not consider.

Self-referentiality

In one of my favorite Norman Rockwell illustrations titled Triple Self-Portrait, Norman Rockwell is drawing an illustration of Norman Rockwell while watching Norman Rockwell drawing in a mirror. This illustration reminds me to interrogate the complex dynamics of perspective and perception in a poem. Of course, even this Triple Self-Portrait can only imply the presence of the real Norman Rockwell who remains invisible outside the frame of his Triple Self-Portrait.

How often do readers identify the speaker in a poem with the poet? To whom does the “I” in a poem refer? Does the “I” refer to the author, the speaker, or the reader? Are authors responsible for all responses to their texts? What is the relationship between the world of the text and the empirical world? In what ways is a poem like a mirror or a photograph? How does a poem construct interrelationships among writers and readers and texts?
I am frequently asked about my poetry, "Did you really do that?" as if my poems are a strictly autobiographical record of events in my lived experience. I encourage my students to question the conventional reading practice whereby an easy identification is assumed between the speaker in a poem and the poet who wrote the poem, the world presented in the poem and the world of the poet.

Reading from different positions

When I read a poem, I sometimes focus attention on characters other than the speaker. What do events look like from their perspectives? I ask how a male reader might respond and how a female reader might respond. I consider the reliability of the speaker. I question my responses. What positions does the text invite me to occupy or what positions are available for me as a reader? What is the connection between truth and fiction? What are the possible ways of describing the speaker's voice in a poem?

Landale (1995) begins her poem "Pose":

Here we are arranged
into set-pieces on the sofa.
Manners by mother,
& temper by Dad.
Fear all our own. (p. 3)

The poem presents the speaker's perspective on a family photograph. There are six people in the photograph, and the speaker describes and comments on each of the six people. One reading of the poem is simply to paraphrase the observations of the speaker, but what kinds of textual possibilities open up when a deconstructive approach focuses on the perspectives of the others in the photograph? How reliable is the speaker? How might the poem be narrated by others in the photograph? What stories might other photographs of the family tell?

Binary oppositions

Deconstruction pays close attention to binary oppositions such as light/dark, good/evil, white/black, presence/absence, love/hate, and strength/weakness. Such binary oppositions involve a value-laden hierarchy with one element given priority over the other. Deconstructive reading contests this order of priority. By calling into question the typical attitude toward the hierarchical ordering of the elements in a binary opposition, readers can open up spaces for innovative perspectives.

The poignant significance of Levertov's poem "Epilogue" (1984) is disclosed as the reader ruminates on the binary oppositions between illusion and reality. The poem begins:

I thought I had found a swan
but it was a migrating snow-goose.

I thought I was linked invisibly to another's life
but I found myself more alone with him than without him. (p. 58)

"Epilogue" sets up a binary opposition. The relation between an idea and its opposite is a relation of distance and tension. The customary attitude to a binary opposition is to valorize one idea over the other. Hence, love is privileged over hate and white over black. But if readers examine a binary opposition by calling into question the typical attitude toward the hierarchical ordering of the elements, they can arrive at new understandings.

Every poem invites multiple responses, and students need to be reminded that a poem does not have a single interpretation. The following responses to "Epilogue" illustrate some of the ways the teacher might guide students in responding to the poem. For anybody who has ever fallen in love and then fallen out of love, the experience described in the poem is familiar. "Epilogue" has a clear pattern, like the bare, stark lines of a piece of traditional Shaker furniture. There are four stanzas and each stanza is one sentence organized in two lines. The first line begins with "I thought" and the second line with "but" (the conjunction of contrast). The pattern utilizes parallelism, and, as the Hebrew poets prove, parallelism is an effective way to express an observation, emotion, or idea by accumulative repetition. Each stanza is so much like each other stanza that there is the effect of an echo resounding loudly and clearly with mounting emphasis.

When I first began reading "Epilogue," my initial reaction was a nod of recognition—yes, I had often confronted disappointment when dreams proved to be illusory in the light of lived experiences. I first read the poem as a sad reminder of lost hopes, a heartfelt confession of resignation to loss. But as I continued reading, I realized that my initial responses were determined by the way I was willing to read the binary oppositions as simple contrasts between one idea and another. In my reading I was
caught up in a prolonged sigh for the illusion of romance, as well as a sense of weary frustration with the way that reality barges imperatively into cherished dreams.

But a deconstructive reading pays attention to the relationship between the pairs of words: "swan/snow-goose," "linked/alone." It is too easy to read the contrasts between the pairs of words as a binary opposition that says one is better than the other. Instead of reading "Epilogue" as a lament for lost love, why not read it as a witty and wry proclamation of maturing wisdom? Perhaps the narrator challenges the mesmeric quality of illusion in order to embrace reality with a jubilant spirit.

My response to "Epilogue" illustrates the way a reader can linger with a poem in order to tease out some of the possible meanings that might be missed or ignored in a reading that takes for granted the way one element is valorized over the other in a binary opposition. Students need to develop an interrogative stance toward a poem. Students need to be continually alert to the ways language is used.

**Figurative/literal language**

Consider the conventional approach to figurative language in poetry. Because students are typically taught that a poem, according to generic expectations, employs figurative language, they are always looking for symbols and metaphors. Students often take an allegorical approach to interpreting a poem where every word must connote significance far beyond any obvious denotative significance. A rose is apparently never a rose when referred to in a poem; it must be symbol for love or beauty or life.

Deconstruction reverses this common approach by suggesting that where a text courts a figurative interpretation, readers could interpret the language literally. A conventional reading approach suppresses the play of the language. By questioning and juxtaposing literal and figurative language, the text is opened up for new opportunities of interaction. This kind of approach can lead to playing with language, like the student who put his baseball cap on his leg and grinned, "Look at my knee-cap." And it can lead to paying more attention to the play of literal and figurative signifiers in a poem.

Walcott’s poem “The Fist” (1984) begins:

> The fist clenched round my heart
> loosens a little, and I gasp
>
> brightness; but it tightens again. When have I ever not loved
> the pain of love? (p. 63)

Some questions my students generated include: What does the heart typically signify in poetry? What would a “fist clenched round” a heart look and feel like? How can a fist be clenched round a heart? Is a fist big enough to clen a heart? What does it mean to “gasp brightness”? How can brightness be gasped? Perhaps the brightness is being grasped in a gasp? The speaker loves the pain of love. Is the speaker a masochist? a mad person?

**Intertextuality**

Every text is related to other texts. Intertextuality refers to the ways a text overlaps with other texts. How are readers’ responses influenced by their knowledge of other texts? As Johnson (1985) explains, “intertextuality” designates the multitude of ways a text has of not being self-contained, of being traversed by otherness” (p. 264). Every text bears traces of other texts: citations, references, structural codes, allusions, phrases, images, generic conventions, themes.

Consider my poem “O”:

> I was on a toboggan, standing up,
> like a California surfer, like Frankie Avalon
> flying straight out down Lynch’s Lane
> all the way from Old Man Downey’s house
> riding the blue-white snow, over the first
> boy-built bump, rope tied tightly
> around my mitt like a bronco buster’s grip,
> and Cee shouting words I thought were curses
> because he’d never made it from the top
> and I was going to,
> the hill and snow and toboggan and me
> all one like a postcard from Austria,
> over the last bump, bracing for the sharp bend
> where Lynch’s Lane twists into Bannister’s Road
> shooting through the air with a grin
> frozen on my face, the letters E-S-S-O
> growing bigger and bigger until I dived into the
> O
> a perfect bull’s eye, and woke up the next day
> singing Old MacDonald had a farm
> EIEIO
> and Cee said he was glad I wasn’t dead,
> but I knew darn sure he was just glad
> I was stopped by the truck
> and not still surfing all the way
> through the O and around the world.
> (Leggo, 1994, p. 30)
“O” is an uncomplicated poem that is always fun to share with others, but for all its relative simplicity it is intertextually connected to many other texts. I grew up in a Newfoundland mill-town. Until I was 15 years old, I had never traveled out of Newfoundland. Yet “O” is traversed by the texts of California beach movies I saw during Saturday matinees, the televised Calgary Stampede and Zane Grey western novels, a postcard from Austria, an industry logo, a popular children’s story, and even hints of *Alice in Wonderland*. Moreover, the poem is part of the tradition of reminiscent writing that recalls the antics and mishaps of childhood, perhaps with a hint of exaggeration or heightened drama. In addition, the editor of one literary journal rejected the poem with a note that she liked “O” but wished that I had written it in a more poetic and less narrative way. While I was hardly jubilant about the rejection, I was pleased that the editor recognized that the poem challenges the conventions of lyric poetry by foregrounding the story element.

**A Room of Mirrors**

A final example might help unfold some of the advantages that I perceive in deconstruction for reading poetry. Consider the poem by Julia de Burgos titled “To Julia de Burgos” (1990). The poem begins:

> The people are saying that I am your enemy,
> That in poetry I give you to the world.
> They lie, Julia de Burgos. They lie, Julia de Burgos.
> The voice that rises in my verses is not your voice;
> it is my voice;
> Between us lies the deepest abyss. (p. 414)

I do not think that, years ago, I would have been willing to use this poem with my students. There was a time when I generally chose poems that were fairly straightforward and comprehensible. I operated with the notion that my students were either apathetic or fearful regarding poetry because they had been subjected to poems that were too obscure and too complex. So, I chose poems written in a plain style. But informed by deconstructive approaches to reading, I am now eager to use a diverse range of poetry in classes.

By the time I introduced “To Julia de Burgos” to my grade-12 students, I had nurtured in them an attitude of openness about responding to literature out of their personal experiences, about questioning texts from different positions, about multiple readings, and about the relationship between the speaker in a poem and the author. Some students interacted with “To Julia de Burgos” by reflecting on their own sense of private and public identities, and I appreciated their responses as personally meaningful. But I also saw students engaged in a complex examination of the relationship between the empirical world and the world of the poem, between the poet as a person in society and the poet as a voice in her poem.

For some readers the poem is like a room of mirrors in which Julia de Burgos is reflected from many different angles, and it is impossible to discern the real Julia de Burgos from her images. There is no closing off the communication that is generated between the poem and the reader. The real Julia de Burgos refuses to step out of the room of mirrors, and in the multiplicity of images she manifests her identity as plural and undecided. Similarly, this poem about poets and poetry, voices and words, lies and truth, is like a room of mirrors casting contradictory reflections and refusing a single focal point from which understanding can be organized and ordered.

**Conclusion**

As I draw to a conclusion which can never be more than a temporary cessation of meaning making, I acknowledge that I have not defined deconstruction. All I have done is hint at the fruitfulness of deconstruction. I have learned to celebrate deconstruction because deconstruction celebrates readers; deconstruction celebrates writers; deconstruction celebrates texts; deconstruction celebrates the socio-political-cultural contexts in which readers and writers and texts interact; deconstruction celebrates language.

**References**


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Literary Theory in the High School English Classroom
