Derrida, Jacques

Definition: Derrida, Jacques from Philip's Encyclopedia

(1930-2004) French philosopher, born Algeria. He was widely influential and is best known for developing the ideas of deconstruction. He wrote and lectured prolifically, and held academic posts in France and the United States. Key works include Writing and Difference (1967) and Dissemination (1972).

Summary Article: Derrida, Jacques
From Key Terms in Literary Theory

Algerian-born philosopher (1930–2004) who developed deconstruction. His works have had an enormous influence on literary theory and continental philosophy. His experience growing up in a French colony and as a Jew during World War II shaped his adult interests in language and politics.

Derrida studied phenomenology at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris in the 1950s; his colleagues there included Gille Deleuze, Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser, Jean-François Lyotard, and Roland Barthes. In 1966 he attended a conference at Johns Hopkins University on “The Language of Criticism and the Sciences of Man,” where he delivered “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” the lecture that introduced the fundamental ideas of deconstruction. In this essay, he uses Levi-Strauss’ insistence that the human mind functions through creating categories of binary oppositions to critique Western philosophy’s reliance on this hierarchical dualism, where one term of an opposition is valued over another term. Derrida suggests that these binaries are not forms of “truth” or universal structure, but rather constructions that depend for their stability on maintaining an absolute separation which can be ruptured.

In 1967 Derrida published three major works articulating his theories: Writing and Difference, Speech and Phenomena, and Of Grammatology, for the last of which Gayatri Spivak wrote an introduction and did the English translation. All three of these works address the idea of deconstruction though none of them define it; Derrida's writing style resists making logical arguments because such writing replicates the logocentrism of Western philosophy. Rather, his writings are evocative and read more like literary works than like scholarly arguments—a choice that has frustrated many of Derrida's readers.

Derrida taught at the École Normale until 1983, when he became the “Director of Studies” in “Philosophical Institutions” at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris. He was also a frequent visiting professor in the United States, teaching at the University of California at Irvine, Johns Hopkins, Yale, and the New School.


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