Deconstruction and Petting: Untamed Animots in Derrida and Kafka

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This essay reads Kafka’s short story “Die Sorge des Hausvaters” in relation to Derrida’s text “Che cos’è la poesia?” I argue that both Kafka and Derrida are invested in the importance of the figure of the pet for a critique of humanism, and I develop this theme over an extended analysis of these two texts’ treatments of comparative etymology. I conclude by distinguishing the body of the pet from that of the machine, the thing and (implicitly) the animal by examining its relationship and structural proximity to the figures of outliving and the remnant.

1. Grammatology and domesticity

Is grammatology a domestic science, or is it best left to the professionals? This question precociously overlays the institutional, disciplinary and professional codes Occasionally called “deconstruction” with the claims deconstruction makes about the violence of language, the character of literariness and the origins of geometry. It does so in order to force the reflection that, despite the anti-institutional leftist politics out of which deconstruction emerged and which have been, for many decades, nourished by the utopian impulses of deconstructive thought, the academic institution of deconstruction constitutes a police force within the academy. Such deconstruction operates not only as a canonizing body, as John Guillory has so effective argued, but as the acid test of the professionalism of an initiate. Among all the liberatory effects of the events collectively referred to as “theory,” there has been a profoundly repressive one: the production and regulation of a process of professionalization in the humanities which is committed to a kind of categorical and conceptual technocracy.

How best to interrupt this process? First, it is necessary candidly to acknowledge a categorical difference between two contemporary deconstructive modes of criticism. One strand of contemporary criticism, elements of which may be seen in the work of scholars from postcolonial studies, gender and sexuality studies, disability studies, and diverse outgrowths from traditional cultural studies, have apparently picked up the check for deconstruction, identifying and explaining vernacular acts of deconstruction in the lived experiences of marginalized subjects. This move tends to be coincident with a sense that deconstruction is a first stage, prior to politics, whether the sense of “politics” is taken to be primarily textual (as in
the continuing utility of deconstruction in the so-called “canon wars”) or pertaining to the realm of jurisprudence and the critique of law (as in Judith Butler’s recent work on precarity). For other writers, deconstruction continues to be, in the afterlife of its major practitioners, a familiar and productive strategy for the reading and re-reading of canonical literary and philosophical texts. This species of deconstruction, which is as likely to take place in (one of the few) continental philosophy departments as within literary studies, understands itself as a recuperative and legitimizing reading of the institution of deconstruction. If it is less likely than its counterpart to be embroiled within the most visible political battlegrounds of the humanities, it nonetheless sees itself as part of a wider left critique of philosophy, one which evades and eschews the apparently unsophisticated “identity thinking” produced by the convergence of deconstruction and cultural studies.

While these two approaches diverge dramatically in their sense of the political character of deconstruction, they share a sense that deconstruction can be thought in terms of professionalization. The first legacy of deconstruction is constantly and emphatically committed to a logic of the profession, and particularly to the recuperation of the excluded into the profession. It demands professional representation for its subjects, and in return it demands that the profession itself spend more time paying attention to the world outside the university. The second tradition holds that the utopian project of deconstruction is available only at the end of a long, subjectivating process of reading; it continues to read deconstruction as a kind of **bildungsroman** in which the subject of deconstruction achieves self-knowledge only after it has been subjected to various procedural and counter-institutional interventions. This deconstruction sees its aim, then, as becoming not merely a profession, but to become the hegemonic profession of the humanities.

As will have been quite clear, my sympathies are more with the first school than the second. Nonetheless, the aim of the present work is to think deconstruction as institutively resistant to both logics, and indeed to any thinking of professionalization. We understand deconstruction least when we police its operations; we undermine its critical power most devastatingly when the work of paleonymy becomes the exchange of predetermined categories. My reading of the *animot* in Kafka and Derrida is an attempt to think deconstruction as a satire on the profession, indeed, as a satire on the distinction between domestic and professional forms of labor in any case, especially through the careful unworking of the binary logic that such a distinction presupposes. One consequence is that deconstruction is no longer on the side of the technocrat, but becomes an act of affection. Kafka and Derrida, I claim, produce deconstruction that is affectively literate. That is to say, this work wishes to think of deconstruction itself as a kind of pet in the house of the profession.