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**Additions, Subtractions, Iterations: Deconstruction and the
Actuality of Context
(Abstract)**

- Full-length article in: JLT 8/1 (2014), 178-198.

The age-old rift between analytic and continental philosophy has never been as passionately and vehemently questioned as it has been in the last two or three years. The main line of attack, however, has been to demonstrate, following the example of Alain Badiou, Quentin Meillassoux and Graham Harman, that continental philosophy is no longer as tethered to an anti-realist position as it was for so many years, particularly, these same thinkers argue, during the period when Derridean deconstruction, Foucaultian discourse analysis and other such »poststructuralist« philosophies held sway; it is hardly surprising, then, that attempts at relating these purportedly surpassed figures to currents in analytic philosophy have been fewer and farther between. The present situation cannot but overspill into the context of literary theory, where for numerous reasons of varying persuasiveness these same poststructuralists have long been chided for their textualist or culturalist excesses and for their lack of attention to matters of more substantial interest: society, history, politics, reality, the world at large. It may be argued, however, that some of these philosophies retain much potential for articulations across the analytic-continental gap, articulations that have as yet passed unseen and, once identified, call for further analysis; in the context of literary studies, this is particularly important if the shift from a textualist or culturalist paradigm to a realist or materialist one is not to yield yet another epoch of monotonous and ultimately self-defeating insulation. One such articulation, I argue in this essay, is capable of bringing together two philosophical outlooks with well established literary-critical counterparts which at first sight have but little in common: deconstruction and the so-called possible-worlds interpretation of modal logic.

This articulation begins from the definition of a possible world. In contemporary philosophical logic, the concept of possible worlds is commonly interpreted as designating possible events or states of affairs that determine the extension or existential scope of the conceptual unity involved. On this view, the class of logically equivalent possible worlds corresponds to a unified set of possible reinterpretations of one and the same sentence and accords to each possible reinterpretation its own domain of individuals and relations. Assimilable into one and the same conceptual unity, these sets or states of affairs are usually conceived as alternatives to one another: every world that is possible with regard to a conceptual unity is conceived as a state of affairs that could have been realised instead of the actual one and therefore represents an alternative to the latter.

This essay argues that as such the definition of a possible world does not differ from Jacques Derrida's definition of context as the set of present elements that determine the meaning of a sign: for Derrida, each signifying unit may be repeated in various different contexts which are conceptually equivalent to the precise extent that that repetition of the signifying unit maintains the identity (whether semantic, graphic, or otherwise) of the unit in question. The essay argues that in this sense, reinterpretation may be considered logically analogous to the Derridean notion of iterability, or the potential for any sign or existent to be subtracted from one context and grafted into another, upon which the above discussion of possible contexts relies. Iterability, however, causes the notion of a possible world, or more precisely that of a plurality of possible

worlds, to become part of a structure that is no longer merely semantical or epistemological but also deconstructive and ontological; the relation between iterated units is not solely conceptualised in terms of alternativeness but additionally in terms of substitution. In the context in which it is iterated, the iterated unity may be said to substitute for what could have been actual in its stead; the iterated unity is therefore conceptualisable in relation to those unities which, as was also the case with respect to possible worlds, could have been realised in its place.

On the basis of this observation the essay extends the analogy between possible world and possible context and argues that the issue of reinterpretability and substitutability provides the possibility for a thoroughgoing rethinking of possible-worlds semantics in terms of deconstruction, and vice versa. The limited equivalence between iterability and reinterpretability thus involves or is transformed into a limited equivalence between alternativeness and substitution: there is no alternativeness except between substitutables and no substitution except between alternatives. If it is possible to reinterpret every semantically salient totality with respect to possible worlds, reinterpretability, considered as a semantic modality of Derrida's notion of iterability, will thereby be seen to extend contextual substitutivity all the way to the referent itself. The referent itself, apart from its inclusion in a conceptual unity, exists as a substitute of those referents or existents which could have realised themselves in its place. The referent itself – in its being and not merely as conceived – becomes thinkable as substitutable. This reversal, I argue, will then permit the reinterpretation of the modal distinction between the actual and the possible, and the consequences of this are at least twofold. On the one hand, if reality is substitutive, a semantics founded on substitutability will be able to account for this reality in an adequate manner; on the other, if actuality is paradigmatic substitution, it follows, given the relationality of substitution, that the actual always exceeds that which can at any given moment be said of it. This gives rise to the possibility of conceiving deconstruction anew such that it affirms a realist epistemology and a substitutive ontology of the actual. The actual, I argue, is the only thing that merits being considered as paradigmatic substitution; this permits the classically deconstructive notion of futurity to be incorporated into a realistically oriented philosophy and thus allied with a literary theory that seeks a way out of the old dichotomies that continue to dominate great parts of the theoretical field.

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2015-06-20
JLToonline ISSN 1862-8990

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How to cite this item:

Abstract of: Hanno Poutiainen, Additions, Subtractions, Iterations: Deconstruction and the Actuality of Context.

In: JLToonline (20.06.2015)

Persistent Identifier: urn:nbn:de:0222-002937

Link: <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0222-002937>