The Undecidable

The Undecidable:

Jacques Derrida and Paul Howard

By

Clare Gorman

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To my Mother, Mairéad

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FOREWORD

PROFESSOR JOHN BRANNIGAN
UNIVERSITY COLLEGE DUBLIN

There is a scene in *Derrida* (2002), the documentary film made by Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering Kofman, in which the philosopher fetches down some books from an awkward height and expresses amused bewilderment about who gave them to him and why. He holds in his hand copies of Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* and *The Vampire Lestat*, and makes the connection that he had been speaking at a seminar about cannibalism, had made some references to vampires, and someone had thought to present him with some of Anne Rice's novels. He had not read them. The amusement on Derrida's face reminded me of a moment a few years earlier when I had met him at a conference at the University of Luton, where I was a graduate student, and tasked with accompanying Derrida and a few other guest speakers to the conference hotel. For months we had wondered if Derrida would show up at the conference, as he had promised, and for months we had wondered why he had accepted the invitation to come to Luton, of all places. Word filtered through that Derrida was a fan of the comedy double act, Morecambe and Wise, and Eric Morecambe had made a running gag of his famous support for Luton Town Football Club. As a fan of the comedy duo myself, and on this first meeting, on a walk through a part of Luton which was without much interest to a visiting philosopher, I summoned enough courage to ask Derrida about his secret passion for Morecambe and Wise. He responded with that same amused, bewildered smile, and a polite but insistent "who?"

One can imagine Derrida reading this book with the same amused bewilderment, the same polite but insistent curiosity about the directions in which his thought might be turned. Ross O'Carroll Kelly is hardly an obvious source of inspiration for a philosopher who devoted his life's work to a sustained and wide-ranging critique of metaphysics and phenomenology. Yet Derrida's writings return persistently to the serious and subversive work which is performed by play, frivolity, excess and marginalia, especially in relation to the instrumental, economic reason which dominates our age. As Clare Gorman argues in this book, Paul

Howard's fictions of Celtic Tiger Ireland are the "cracked looking-glass" of our time, at once painfully revealing and satirical of the grotesque social and cultural realities of neo-liberal economics, and at the same time exemplary of its articulation of frivolity. Emerging first as humorous sketches of an Irish rugby fan in a newspaper sports column, Howard's fictions grew into national prominence with the inflationary logic of the economic culture which they incessantly mocked. Yet, in their frivolity—with all their intimate, ticklish, and cringing allusions to the rivalries and prejudices of class, locality, and gender, for example, and with their abundance of tokens of excessive wealth—these fictions demonstrate a mastery of the binary structures of need and desire, use and futility, identity and disposability which Derrida had shown to underpin modernity itself. "Frivolity consists in being satisfied with tokens," wrote Derrida in *The Archeology of the Frivolous*: "It originates with the sign, or rather with the signifier which, no longer signifying, is no longer a signifier."[1] Celtic Tiger Ireland was just one exemplary space of such frivolity and excess; Ross O'Carroll Kelly was its chief fictional incarnation.

In advancing a Derridean reading of the works of Paul Howard and his iconic character, Clare Gorman's book is a novel and adventurous undertaking. As perhaps was evident in Derrida's puzzled look at the copies of Anne Rice's novels in the documentary film, although his work had ranged across literature, as well as philosophy, anthropology, law, linguistics and psychology, it had not ventured into popular or genre fiction (unless we include Edgar Allan Poe's "The Purloined Letter" in this category). Indeed, sustained critiques of the very distinction between "high" and "popular" literature in the academy over several decades, although compelling theoretically, have not yet produced a critical practice of close-reading and deconstructing "popular" fictional texts. It is also daring to draw Derridean strategies into an historicist framework, since famously, as J. Hillis Miller's presidential address to the MLA in 1986 made clear, the literary academy had heatedly debated and vied for the supremacy of either theory (poststructuralism) or history (historicism) in the late twentieth century, and historicism remains dominant in literary-critical methodologies today.[2] So too, with some honourable exceptions, Derrida's work has not had many scholarly champions in Irish literary criticism which, at the time of Miller's MLA address when Derrida was the *cause célèbre* of the theory wars in the Anglo-American academy, was

[1] Jacques Derrida, *The Archeology of the Frivolous: Reading Condillac*. Trans. John P. Leavey Jr. (Lincoln, NA: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 118.
[2] J. Hillis Miller, *Theory Now and Then* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), 309–27.

preoccupied with more parochial wars between postcolonial and revisionist interpretations of Irish literary and political history. For all these reasons, Clare Gorman's book is a welcome sign of renewed interest in theorising and deconstructing the textual strategies of contemporary Irish writing, and an invitation to consider more fully the ethics and politics of this Ireland which Paul Howard's writing explores.

"Deconstruction is inventive or it is nothing at all," wrote Derrida in *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*: "it does not settle for methodical procedures, it opens up a passageway, it marches ahead and marks a trail."[3] In that inventive spirit, Derrida's bemused curiosity about the directions in which deconstruction might lead, about the texts which deconstruction might read, was itself indicative of an orientation towards possible futures, possible others, which are the hospitable conditions of any criticism worthy of the name. And it is in that same inventive and hospitable spirit that Clare Gorman's book opens a deconstructive dialogue with the works of Paul Howard, and marks a trail for an Irish literary criticism worthy of the name.

[3] Jacques Derrida, *Psyche: Inventions of the Other, Vol.1* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 23.

INTRODUCTION

For Ireland, 1995 to 2000 was a period of wage competitiveness, export performance, undisciplined spending—a time of rapid economic growth fuelled by foreign investments, during which property prices soared. Free third level education meant that the youth of that generation were achieving Degrees, Masters and PhDs at a remarkable rate. Students drove convoys of Volkswagen Golf TDIs (of course!) to University College Dublin. Graduates held lofty titles in the world of finance, banking, marketing and legislation. Those who settled on a trade were not neglected, and plumbers, carpenters, plasterers and electricians all became "growth machines" thanks to the booming property market. This generation had more disposable income than any previous one. It would be these upper-class denizens of Dublin who came under a fictional microscope and found their own literary expression in the works of Paul Howard and his eponymous South-Dublin character, Ross O'Carroll-Kelly.

Paul Howard was, in my opinion, the first Irish novelist during the last decade to have captured explicitly a period of Irish history and its aftermath. To borrow the famed Joycean analogy of a looking-glass held up to the face of the Celtic-Tiger, I would argue that it is to be found in these books, where the affluence of south Dublin is sardonically captured. The prerogative echelons of this elite class displayed, along with "the money, the cars, boats, the golf-club membership, the apartments in Villamoura, the box at Leopardstown" (Howard 2007b, 219) displayed what can only be described as a sense of hubris and greed. This was the norm in some sections of Celtic Tiger Ireland and is represented between the covers of Howard's books, albeit in comic fashion. Howard portrays characters that during this opulent period have coffee in Starbucks and live in the postmodern, globalised, urban culture that was very much the reality of twenty-first-century Ireland. It is an era that will be remembered for men drinking Heineken, possessing Leinster season tickets, wearing chinos and relying on their Brown Thomas store card. Howard has also brought his characters into line with recent developments post 2000, updating their lives and perspectives on the subject of recession and how this has touched and transformed the materialistic and commodity-fetishized Dublin in his early series. Howard's Celtic Tiger and the

aftermath commentary are underpinned by cutting-edge satire that progressed from a column in the *Sunday Tribune* to a sixteen-book series. Within this series is a book of mock interviews with Ross, *We Need To Talk About Ross*, and a mock travel guide, *Ross O'Carroll-Kelly's Guide to (South) Dublin: How To Get By On, Like, €10,000 A Day*. He has also written a number of plays and a spoken word album, but these remain outside the scope of this book.

The Miseducation Years deals with Ross's last two years at the fictional Castlerock College and the all-important Leinster Senior Cup victory in rugby. *The Teenage Dirtbag Years* sees Ross attend college at UCD. *The Orange Mocha-Chip Frappuccino Years* presents Ross leaving home and working for his friend J.P.'s father as an estate agent. *PS, I Scored the Bridesmaids* describes his marriage to Sorcha (his recurring love interest), while *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nightdress* deals with Ross's discovery that he has a son called Ronan, living on the northside of the city. *Should Have Got off at Sydney Parade* tells of the birth of his second child Honor, and Ross's business investment in a nightclub called Lillie's Bordello. *This Champagne Mojito is the Last Thing I Own* sees Ross's father imprisoned for tax evasion, and Ross's realisation that "boom-time" Ireland is now over. *Mr S and the Secrets of Andorra's Box* deals with Ross travelling to Andorra to manage a rugby team and with the discovery that he has a half-sister named Erika. *Rhino What You Did Last Summer* sees Ross travelling to America to win Sorcha back. While *The Oh My God Delusion* deals with Ross and the "recession" in Ireland. *NAMA Mia!* looks at Ross's adjustment to the recession and *The Shelbourne Ultimatum* sees his recovery after his attempted murder. *Downturn Abbey* delivers the news that Ross is going to be a grandfather. Lastly, *Keeping Up With The Kalashnikovs* details Ross's attempt to save his friend Fionn and Sorcha's pregnancy with triplets.

The "core objective" of this book is to amalgamate critical theory and literature to display a working example of applied critical theory using the French Philosopher Jacques Derrida and his theory of deconstruction. Indeed, one of the strongest criticisms of theory in general is how it lacks in a relativistic way regarding contemporary issues. I refute this claim and aim to demonstrate, by blurring the boundaries between theory and text, that not only do new interpretations emerge within Howard's literature, but that they also provide a critique of a culture that has manifested itself within contemporary twenty-first-century Ireland. Through the medium of theory, this book participates in an epistemology strategy of Howard's works. Thus, reading the texts through this deconstructive perspective and introducing many of Derrida's concepts, non-concepts and neologisms,

constructs a critique of the socio-linguistic realm of Howard's work and offers a working example of applying theory to literature. Hence, this book is built around a succinct accessible overview of deconstruction by mapping out distinctive elements of this theory and how these can be used to unravel new interpretations and meanings of Howard's work. The book does not attempt a full chronological history of Howard's fictional series but will use chosen examples to analyse the nodes of Derrida's deconstructive strategy. For it is within the creation of such new perspectives that critical theory resides.

The first two chapters of this book examine the nature of development regarding deconstruction, chronicling Derrida's major ideas and concepts as these form the lens through which Howard is read. This begins with an examination of the questions of "what is deconstruction?" and "can it be defined as a theory or a method?" For this, I use Derrida's own explanation of the term in an attempt to detail the meaning of deconstruction. Initially, Derrida probes the internal dynamic of "logocentrism"—the given meaning or interpretation of words, ideas and concepts. For Derrida, language is permeable and this digresses from previous metaphysical thinkers where language was seen as a conceptual fixed system where there was a unity between the signifier and the signified. In order to pursue and validate this claim, Derrida explores the notion of a centre and how every structure within our society possesses a fixed frame of reference from which we can extract meaning and interpretation. Derrida shows how the presence of a centred thinking organises coherence and stability for all structures.

In a sense, this idea further relinquishes Derrida's claim that language is structured in terms of a binary opposition in which one term always takes precedence over the other—black versus white, male versus female, inside versus outside, etc. This sees every concept entwined within a chain of difference in which the other relates to the self and vice versa. Hence, the notion of "maleness" is determined by various comparisons and contrasts to "femaleness." Derrida goes on to consider that these structures as the driving force behind logocentrism and the subject of an internal decentring through the notion of undecidability, which is the bleeding of boundaries between terms where the membrane which creates the binary opposition becomes plexus. This means that when binaries are dismantled they transfuse and merge so that meaning and interpretation is altered. It is within this crossing of borders, limits, genres and ideological constructs that ambiguity dwells and creates new perspectives and interpretations. I will use Derrida's concept of undecidability and justify his believe that indecisiveness dwells at the heart of concepts when they are deconstructed

by taking the term "literature," as in the field of "literature," and showing how it can depict undecidability. This is the work of cultural critics.

This is followed by a spelling out of what Derrida believes are the fundamentals for deconstructing this binary opposition. This involves first reversing and then reinscribing it into a new structure and a new discursive field, wherein the two elements of a binary opposition ooze into each other and create what can be termed an undecidable. I will use Derrida's reading practices to deconstruct the binary oppositions of mainly speech and writing and maleness and femaleness, which were teased out in the texts of Howard. I will show the irruptive elements, the cracks and fault lines in the texts of Howard to demonstrate the problematic nature of boundaries, and "crack open and disturb the tranquillity" (Caputo 1997a, 32) of dominant readings of these texts. I will go on to give an example of this transgressed thinking by analysing the term "literature," and although this field is divided into "high" literature and "popular" literature, there is indeed a crossing permeability and the two terms have more in common than what divides them. I will trace Derrida's three most notable undecidables—the *pharmakon*, *khōra* and the *hymen*—and the notions of *différance* and the *supplement*, which demonstrate their workings. This chapter will spell out the working of each and go on to give an example from Howard's literature.

Subsequently, every text can only be described within its context and as Derrida's most famous statement in *Of Grammatology* (1976), "*il n'y a pas de hors contexte*" (there is nothing outside of context) (Derrida 1976, 136), claims, meaning is never simple and pure and is always troubled by the interaction between text and its context. Thus, the discussion of Howard's work, which is to follow, will take place within the context of a further discussion of society, law, ethics and what is essentially the fabric of contemporary Ireland.

Chapter three provides a working example of the initial stages of deconstruction, inverting the hierarchy through the process of "rupture" and subsequently applying a double reading which reinscribes the binaries in a new, less hierarchical structure. As an example of this process, I look at the overturning of the binary between the north and south sides of Dublin, an opposition found in the texts of Howard. This reading does not stop at this inversion of the binary, asserting that binaries are answerable to "a concept that can no longer be, and never could be, included in the previous regime" (Derrida 1981a, 42)—an undecidable.

Chapters four and five are based on an examination of Howard's texts, and as previously said I found areas of textual openings which lend themselves to two major binaries—speech and writing, and maleness and

femaleness. Hence, these two chapters will follow in the footsteps of Derrida and furnish a deconstructive critique of Howard's fictional series. Chapter four challenges the privileging of speech over writing, examining the way in which they enunciate the phonetic qualities of speech in Howard's writing, such as his use of deviant orthography and eye dialect to signify the idiolects of different social classes in Dublin, through which the binary of speech and writing is defamiliarised and deconstructed. The formal way of writing words has been changed to signify the spoken language of Dublin people. The text, it will be argued, is both written and spoken, and this is what formulates the law of undecidability.

Chapter five focuses on gender. The traditional gender roles of maleness and femaleness have been broken down, suggesting that in these texts, men and women no longer ascribe to stereotypical positions. The female gender has been traditionally associated with the body, with women generally represented in terms of feeling and emotions, while the male is traditionally associated with logical and rational concepts of the mind. The exploration of the politics of gender in Howard's work was not a case of a simple inversion of the binary, but again a displacement to the point where one half of the binary inhabited aspects of the other half and vice versa. In the case of Sorcha Lalor and Fionnuala O'Carroll-Kelly, the normative binary opposition, which would relegate them to a lower hierarchical status, is deconstructed through their characters and actions, and they demonstrate that they can be an irruptive force that challenges the gender norms of their cultural contexts.

In essence, the book partakes in a discussion of Derrida's theoretical matrix and is thus followed by an expansion of this metaphysics via a reading of Howard. Theory provides not only a method or way of reading—critical theory challenges existing or normative views of culture and ideological constructs. In my opinion, Helen Cixous's book *Devils and Angels, Textual Editing and Literary Theory* (1991) highlights that the greatest impact of critical theory "lies in its ability to combine writing, theory, and living." There is a "need of bringing theory to life" (Cixous 1991, xxii), and there is no better way of demonstrating that theory is "not just the talk on the cereal box" or "a walk on a slippery rock." Instead, it is "a way of living, speaking, and seeing the world" (ibid.), and what better way of exemplifying this than to apply it to texts written within twenty-first-century Ireland.

CHAPTER ONE

DECONSTRUCTIVE STRATEGY

Part I. Derrida and his System of Ideas

The theory of deconstruction allows individuals to see the way that experiences are "determined by ideologies of which we are unaware because they are built into our language," revealing the "hidden works of ideology in our daily experience of ourselves and our world" (Tyson 1999, 241). Derrida deals with metanarratives and illustrates how they affect everyday living. Theory is a sophisticated and layered critique as it combines "politics by measuring it through an ideal of home, of family" (Maxwell 1984, 102). It opens and challenges the conventional or the transcendentally signified, and this is the dominant reading or interpretation of a text. Indeed, theory interrogates the assumptions of the given meanings vested in texts, hence attaining "another way of thinking about the act of reading" (McQuillan 2000, 4). One of the achievements of literary theory in recent years has been to elicit and channel interpretive power in the service of a sceptical engagement with disciplines that depend upon a notion of total knowledge and grounded truth. Indeed, critical theory is thought of as a "radical break from past ways of thought, loosely associating this break with the philosophy of Nietzsche and Heidegger and the psychoanalysis of Freud" (Barry 2002, 66).[1] A personal response allows for a certain amount of insight into a text, but a reading that makes use of a critical analysis provides profoundness and insightfulness to meaning and interpretation within it.

[1] Derrida acknowledges the influence of his philosophical forefathers such as Nietzsche, Freud and Heidegger, especially within his essay *Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Science*: "Nietzsche, Freud and Heidegger, for example, worked within the inherited concepts of metaphysics. Since these concepts are not elements or atoms, and since they are taken from a syntax and a system, every particular borrowing brings along with it the whole of metaphysics" (Derrida 2008, 357).

The common assumption is that Derrida's writing style has been perceived as opaque because he is communicating through the medium of a metalanguage—a language that is investigating a language. Therefore, a criticism of Derrida is that his deconstructive strategy is in itself caught within what Derrida calls the "double-bind" of language. It can be undermined by its own truth-claims, and thus his argument is subject to its own deconstruction. For this reason, Derrida insists, deconstruction is not a "method" which can be flatly applied to something with a view to deconstructing it. He makes this point explicitly in his "Letter to a Japanese Friend," which appeared in *Psyche: Inventions of the Other, Volume 2* (2007). In this letter, he sets out to explain more about his "method" and makes a specific point about the relationship between deconstruction and method:

> 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 appropriated and domesticated by academic institutions? (Derrida 2007, 4)

Having spelt out what deconstruction is not, he goes on to explain what he sees as the epistemological operative medium of deconstruction. It is something that "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*)" (Derrida 2007, 4). Here, his point is that deconstruction is always already within texts and just needs to be operationalized through a process of careful reading.

This close reading is defined by Joseph Hillis Miller (2002) as involving a pause "over every key word or phrase, looking circumspectly before and after" each word, and where the reader is "anxious not to let the text put anything over on him or her" (Miller 2002, 122). This indicates that deconstruction hinges upon good reading skills, and that one must practise "rhetorical reading" and pay close attention to linguistic devices, observing how "figurative language is used and spotting that all important irony" within texts (Miller 2001, 122). I hope that my work in this book will come under the model of close reading, so that areas of contextual

opening are highlighted to display a working example of Derrida's deconstructive strategy.

Thus, Derrida sees deconstruction as consisting of "deconstructing, dislocating, displacing, disarticulating, disjoining, putting out of joint the authority of the 'is'" (Lucy 2004, 12). Deconstruction does not take place separately from the text but only arises from a moment of close reading. This method of reading seems to possess a certain formlessness as it sets out to deconstruct the impossibility of a system, because deconstruction is "far from a theory, a school, a method, even a discourse, still less a technique that can be appropriated—at bottom *what happens or comes to pass*" (ibid., 14). Deconstructing insists on the endless act of reading, which decentres existing structures, ideas and common-sense values. The word "decentres" is not used innocently here, as it leads to another important landmark on the map of deconstruction leading to one of Derrida's most radical claims—the idea of the centre, or lack of a centre.

Part II. The Notion of a Centre

Prior to deconstruction there was a norm or centre in Western thinking, which held true for institutions, texts, traditions, beliefs and society. This thinking presupposed a centre or origin at the core of every structure and was seen as the ontological ground of such structures. A fundamental feature of Derrida's critique claims that centres are also constructs that are camouflaged as points of origin, and this suggests that they are "able to define the unity of its project or its object" (Derrida 1976, 4), and thus define meaning. Hence, to borrow from Ferdinand de Saussure and his theory of the "Science of Signs," language is bound within a system in which the signifier and the signified are united. For instance, taking the word "rose," the signifier and signified passion are united in the sign. This denotes how the centres balance and define the structure because, for individuals, the notion of having structures lacking "any centre represents the unthinkable" (Derrida 1978, 352). Hence, we as readers are consoled by the idea that prose, fiction, novels or newspaper articles have one dominant meaning and we are happy in the knowledge that we have read and understood it. Individuals can proceed without troubling themselves with such matters as meaning, for they feel secure in the idea that they have reached an understanding of the texts and the world that surrounds them. Thus, by presupposing centres, structures depict a sense of coherence and allow individuals to think without incongruity. The concept of a centre is as old as the word *episteme.* This logocentrism is defined as: "the belief that the first and last things are the Logos, the Word, the Divine

Mind, the infinite understanding of God, and infinitely creative subjectively, and, closer to our time, the self-presence of full self-consciousness" (Derrida 1976, 1xviii). This notion of a centre as a given, and as outside the play of meaning in language, is one in which Derrida takes issue, and one which this book is centrally concerned with also.

Derrida makes the point that the centre in terms of any structure functions by limiting the "play" of the structure, so therefore, what exists is an order of meaning. He goes on to define typical conceptions of centrality based on the Cartesian view of the transcendental subject as positioned anterior to language:

> Thus, it has always been thought that the centre, which is by definition unique, constituted that very thing within a structure which, while governing the structure, escapes structurality … the centre is at the centre of the totality, and yet, since the centre does not belong to the totality (is not part of the totality), the totality *has its centre elsewhere* … The concept of centered structure is in fact the concept of a play based on a fundamental ground, a play constituted on the basis of a fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude, which itself is beyond the reach of play. (Derrida 1978, 279)

This critique of centrality can be related to aspects of literature and the production of meaning. In humanistic ideology, the writer produces anterior meaning in language; he (and it usually is a "he" in this ideological formulation) is the "centre" who exists outside the structure of the text, and beyond the limits of the linguistic play; he is the "fundamental ground" from whom meaning originates. Derrida implicitly makes this point in his list of substitutions of centrality that he sees as defining Western metaphysics: "essence," "subject," "transcendentalist, consciousness, God, man" (Derrida 1978, 280). In other words, the notion of the centre is as much a part of the structure as any other part; not only is the centre not outside the structure but it is defined by the structure. Derrida now stresses the need for the interpretation of the centre as part of the reading of any structure:

> Henceforth, it was necessary to begin thinking that there was no centre, that the centre could not be thought in the form of a present-being, that the centre had no natural site, that it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of non-locus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play. This was the moment when language invaded the universal problematic, the moment when, in the absence of a centre or origin, everything became discourse … that is to say, a system in which the central

> signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences. (Derrida 1978, 280)

In my view, Derrida's most significant achievement is the demonstration that the centres through which individuals create the world are Western philosophy's greatest illusion. He has exemplified that centres are constructs that deny their own contractedness in order to deceive individuals that this "moment of the present, the absolute 'this' time, or the now" is a creation "which excludes from itself all multiplicity" (Derrida 1982, 13). Derrida insists that it is necessary to begin thinking that there is no centre, or at least question that these centres have no natural site. Derrida draws on Nietzsche, saying that truth is merely a "mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms … truths are illusions of which one has forgotten that they are illusion … coins which have their obverse effaced and now are no longer of account as coins but merely as metal" (Derrida 1976, xxii). One can substitute centre for centre, as there is an infinite number of viewpoints from which to view language. Derrida has dismantled the face of language and the philosophy of meaning by contending that the concept of centred structure is in fact the concept of play based on a fundamental ground, a ply constituted on the basis of a fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude, which itself is beyond the reach of play. Derrida insists that one can "substitute centre for centre" (Derrida 1978, 353), as there are an infinite number of standpoints from which to view language. This "law of central presence" (Derrida 1978, 353) questions the belief that structures have a "fixed locus," demonstrating centres as functions of substitution. Subsequently, when one centre is uncovered another is reawakened. Derrida's study of writing since Plato constitutes that the origin of philosophy does not present a "unity of *logos and phone*" (Derrida 1976, 29). In essence, there is no unification between the signifier and the signified. Signs, when deconstructed, display a multitude of meaning and interpretations.

Part III. Binary oppositions—Examples from High Literature and Popular Literature

Derrida's relentless focus on "the centre" is connected with his resounding acclaim that Western Philosophy orders language within a binary logic, for instance speech/writing, inside/outside, man/woman or black/white, and in this binary logic, one term is always given priority over the other. I will attempt to shed some light on Derrida's notion of binaries as it is of great importance to the chapters that follow. I will trace this explanation with an

example of how Derrida uses binary logic as a way of deconstruction by applying his thinking to the archival binary of high and popular literature.

In *Of Grammatology* (1976), Derrida advocates the principle that the whole of Western thought since Plato and Aristotle is structured in terms of binary oppositions. It is the longing for a centre that provides "an authorizing pressure, that spawns hierarchized oppositions" (Derrida 1976, 1xix). The first term is known as the "masculine" characteristic, and is traditionally privileged over the "female" characteristic, which accompanies it. Essentially, an opposition of metaphysical concepts is never just a face-to-face opposition of two terms, but rather a hierarchy and an order of subordination. Binary oppositions are dependent on the idea of *différance*, a neologism, which is the differential and deferred nature of language. This determines that every concept is inscribed within a system and can only be understood through comparisons and contrasts to other concepts. For example, one understands the concept of the colour "black" because it is not "white," or that of "high literature" through various differentiations to and divergences from "popular literature."

Simply put, Derrida proceeds to dismantle the binary opposition by overturning it. What deconstruction sets about doing is defying the binary either/or logic thought a more ambiguous logic of both/and. This is a necessary step in any deconstructive reading. Derrida states: "to deconstruct the opposition, first of all, is to overturn the hierarchy at a given moment" (Derrida 1981b, 41), but his reversal is only the first step in the deconstructive project. The whole project of privileging one term over the other is put into question as well as the actual binaries themselves. Writing in *Positions* (1981), Derrida explains how problematic it is to attempt to overturn the violent hierarchy. He stresses the need to avoid merely:

> Neutralizing the binary opposition of metaphysics and simply residing within the closed field of these oppositions, thereby confirming it … To do justice to this necessity is to recognize that in a classical philosophical opposition we are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of a vis-à-vis, but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other (axiologically, logically, etc.), or has the upper hand. To deconstruct the opposition, first of all, is to overturn the hierarchy at a given moment. To overlook this phase of overturning is to forget the conflictual and subordinating structure of opposition. (Derrida 1981a 41-42)

Therefore, there is an unsettling of the binary opposition by showing how it is overturned at a given moment in the text—an event Derrida calls a "rupture." The second phase or "double gesture," a double reading of

texts, is undertaken to uncover the ambiguity attached to the transcendental signifier. This involves an "inversion" of the binary where the subordinate term is given precedence over the dominant term. For example, female is given primacy over male within the male/female opposition, and it is through this crossing and displacement of binary borders that there exists a blurring, and boundaries and oppositions begin to bleed into one another and alter the discursive field within which they are situated. The idea of otherness can be dismantled, essentially obscuring the boundaries between the binary opposition. Each half of the opposition is not an isolated concept but a necessary part of the structure as a whole. The signifiers of language itself deconstruct any attempts at separation. Deconstruction seeks to dismantle the logic of these binaries by showing that either half of the binary is not an independent entity but depends on the other through mutual contamination. The boundary that constructs a sense of black verse white, self versus other, man versus woman or high culture versus popular culture, begins to seep and merge into the other, allowing the reader to see the text coming "undone as a structure of concealment, revealing its self-transgression, its undecidability" (Derrida 1976, lxxv) towards the dominant interpretation of a text.

Derrida has created terms that allow him to signify his double gesture and double reading of texts in order to uncover how undecidability dwells within the heart of meaning and interpretation. The three main ones are the *pharmakon*, *khōra* and the *hymen*, and what demonstrates the workings of these undecidables are the notions of *différance* and the *supplement*. These are aporetic tropes that form the conceptual basis of deconstruction, as they deconstruct the binary logic on display. As previously stated, I hope that the analyses and interpretations of the chapters to follow shall fall victim to a close reading practice, which deconstructs binaries by looking for irruptive elements of the text that can then produce what Derrida sees as "undecidability." This is:

> [u]nities of simulacrum, "false" verbal properties (nominal or semantic) that can no longer be included within philosophical (binary) opposition, resisting and disorganizing it, without ever constituting a third term, without ever leaving room for a solution in the form of speculative dialects. (Derrida 1981a, 43)

My reading of these binaries will take on "both/and" logic, as I am not trying to simply overturn the binaries. My reading of Howard does not stop at what Derrida calls the reversal of binaries; there is never "a straightforward reversal of priorities, a turning of tables" (Norris 2002, 149), and so I do not wish to jettison the study logocentrism. Instead, I aim

to demonstrate that oppositions, when deconstructed, haemorrhage into one another, and to show that binaries are merely a subject of banality and the unthought-of axiomatic structures in society. Deconstruction wrenches apart the neatness of metaphysical binary oppositions. For example, Derrida's analogy of "A is opposed to B, we have B is both added to A and replaces A. A and B are no longer opposed. Nor are they equivalent" (Derrida 1981b, xiii). This demonstrates how the boundaries between oppositions are not fixed.

Take, for example, literature, where the orthodox distinction between high and popular literature has marked the literary field since the scribal era. The authors who, by tradition, have been regarded as major or great and are regularly studied at universities signify high literature. Hence, popular literature is considered frivolous and light-hearted, the kind of reading that does not require serious concern or discourse. Its content is thought of as clichéd, senseless and superficial. This distinction between the two fields has long been studied by academics, and Jonathan Culler (1975) makes two fundamental arguments to highlight that the opposition is like any other framework and can be deconstructed. Culler's thinking echoes Derrida's words in order to make the point that that there is a blurring of margins, a: "sort of overrun [*débordement*] that spoils all boundaries and divisions and forces us to extend the accredited concept, the dominant notion of a text" (Derrida 1979, 83).

Culler uses a headline from a French newspaper to expose that the literary field is merely a construct that can subsequently be deconstructed. The title states:

> *Hier sur la Nationale September*
> *Une automobile*
> *Roulant å cent å l'heure s'est jetée*
> *Sur un platane.*
> *Ses quatre occupants ont été.*
>
> [Yesterday on the A7
> An automobile
> travelling at sixty miles per hour crashed
> Into a plane tree.
> Its four occupants were killed.] (Culler 1975, 161)

What Culler has done is to take "a piece of banal journalistic prose and set it down on a page as a lyric poem, surrounded by intimidating margins of silence" (ibid., 16). The different cultural context means that the reader brings a completely different set of expectations to the text, which results

in a transformation of the meanings generated. For example, the word "yesterday" may now carry an alternative meaning "referring now to the set of possible yesterdays, it suggests a common, almost random event" (161). Subsequently, the "neutral reporting style" and lack of detail surrounding the passengers' deaths may also be examined in a different light and thought to be a mark of "restraint and resignation," which "may even note an element of suspense" (ibid.). Culler is here demonstrating what occurs when one reads the text as a poem as opposed to reading it as a newspaper headline.

It is Culler who, for me, has given one of the best definitions of literature by making an analogy between literature and a garden. He initially presents the question: "what makes us (or some other society) treat something as literature?" (Culler 2000, 22). In answering this question, he juxtaposes the depiction of a weed ("weeds are simply plants that gardeners don't want to have growing in their garden") with a non-weed, which we call a flower, and to which we ascribe value. However, a difficulty presents itself when a gardener is weeding a new garden, or a garden in a different country, or a garden that is from another social class, where familiarity has not provided the comparisons and the ready knowledge of what constitutes value and what does not. In this case, how can one tell the difference between a weed and a non-weed, and, by analogy, between literature and something not considered of literary value, without such a matrix of familiar values? Culler states: "perhaps literature is like a weed." This highlights the difficulty of attempting to disregard written material as non-literature. It is one's personal choice that is operative in selecting between weeds or non-weeds, and between literature and non-literature. Subsequently, some literature might be "judged undesirable by different groups in different places" (ibid.). This difficulty presents itself to literary scholars and is one that is yet to be fully answered. There is no doubt that the act of choosing whether a piece of work may or may not be deemed literature is mediated and shaped through educational, economic, aesthetic, ideological and institutional structures, so that the individual is often replicating already-made choices. This demonstrates that literature has been bound by norms and boundaries which have been created by society, thus displaying that readers are not free to read, as what is and is not considered literature has been previously acknowledged by culture. Individuals are already seeing literature through an ideologically weeded garden.

Culturally, then, texts do not hold equal value: "some texts are taken to be richer, more powerful, more exemplary, more contestatory, more central, for one reason or another" (Culler 2000, 18). In taking Culler's

analogy further, a weed could be used to depict popular literature and flowers or plants can be seen to represent high literature. Both weed and plant/flower exist within their own right, in the same way that popular and high literatures inhabit places of different importance within the field of writing. Both weeds and plants have the same chemical and biological composition, and the same point can be made with respect to high and popular literatures—they are both built on and in language.

Essentially, I am referring to an order that remains frameless, lacking any structures. This reflects Derrida's thinking of how the history of Western thought has relied on stable dualisms, and demonstrates that such seemingly stable structures in fact rely on a "double logic," an "order of both this and that and simultaneously neither this nor that" (Derrida 1988, 39). This marks a process of blurring between oppositions, for an opposition "is inverted only to be later re-inverted or de-inverted," thus demonstrating that when their hierarchy is dismantled, the polarities are interminably dual and ambiguous. This is achieved through those tropes of undecidability just mentioned, through which it is "necessary to analyse, to set to work, *within* the text of the history of philosophy, as well as *within* the so-called literary text" (Derrida 1981a, 42) to locate the:

> Unities of simulacrum, "false" verbal properties (nominal or semantic) that can no longer be included within philosophical (binary) opposition, resisting and disorganizing it, without ever constituting a third term, without ever leaving room for a solution in the form of speculative dialects. (Derrida 1981a, 43)

This type of deconstructive reading attempts to liberate culture from the structures of binary logic and, instead of grafting parts from one element of the binary onto the other, it creates a new structure which will redefine the notion of the couple as interdependent, just as Culler did with the term "literature."