

Chapter 5

DECONSTRUCTING THE BOOK OF JOB*

At least since the time of Gregory the Great's 35 books of *Moralia in Job*,¹ the book of Job has been regarded as a vast quarry for moral truths and wise sayings about the human condition. In particular it has been thought to offer the answer to the knottiest questions about the meaning of life, the problem of suffering, and the moral order of the universe. In the bibliography of my recent commentary on chs. 1–20 of Job² I have listed more than a thousand books and articles that profess to state the unequivocal answers of the book of Job to such questions. Can they all be right? If they cannot, is it because their authors were incompetent, or might it be that there is something about the book that lends itself to many divergent interpretations? It is perhaps time, in fact, to wonder whether the Book of Job, like many other works of literature, if not indeed all, may be open to a deconstruction?

In this chapter I will be arguing that the book does indeed deconstruct itself in several fundamental areas. I will try to distinguish

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¹ Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Job*, ed. M. Adriaen, 3 vols (Corpus Christianorum. Series Latina, 143, 143A, 143B; Turnhout: Brepols, 1979-85). In English: *Morals on the Book of Job*, Oxford: H. Parker (1844-50).

² David J.A. Clines, *Job 1–20* (WBC, 17; Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1989).

these deconstructions from simple incoherence, and I will suggest that to some extent it is inoculated against its deconstructability by its rhetoric.

As a point of departure I take the well-known formulation by Jonathan Culler of the strategy of deconstruction:

To deconstruct a discourse is to show how it undermines the philosophy it asserts, or the hierarchical oppositions on which it relies.¹

Not every deconstructionist would be happy with such a transparent account of what in many hands is a very much more esoteric and mystifying procedure. Nor does this formulation lend itself to that aspect of deconstructionism that is a strategy in philosophy. But for deconstruction as a procedure with texts this is a statement which both seems understandable and sounds promising.

Some distinctions need to be made. To deconstruct a discourse is not simply to show its incoherence—which some writers have indeed attempted to do for the Book of Job, at least in its present form. For if a discourse should undermine the philosophy it asserts in the same manner and with the same degree of explicitness that it asserted it we should be merely confused or else amused at its incompetence as a discourse, and pronounce it simply incoherent. For a discourse to need deconstructing or to be susceptible to deconstruction the undermining has to be latent, as indeed the metaphor of undermining already tells us. In deconstructing, we are distinguishing between the surface and the hidden in the text, between shallow and deep readings. We are allowing that it is possible to read the text without seeing that it undermines itself, and we are claiming that the deconstructive reading is more sophisticated as a reading and at the same time more aware of the character of the text. It would therefore not be possible to challenge a particular deconstruction of a text by producing a non-deconstructionist reading; a deconstruction could only be called into question by arguing that those elements in the text that the critic thinks undermine it do not actually do so, and that the discourse is perfectly in harmony with itself throughout all the levels on which it can be read.

¹ Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction. Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), p. 86.

1. Moral Retribution

The first arena in which we may see the Book of Job deconstructing itself (or, we might prefer to say, in which it is open to deconstruction by the reader) is the issue of moral retribution, the doctrine that one is rewarded or punished in strict conformity with the moral quality of one's deeds. This is a view widely supported in the Hebrew Bible, above all by the Book of Proverbs, but no less by the theology of the Book of Deuteronomy or of the prophets. Pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall (Prov. 16.18). In the path of righteousness is life, but the way of error leads to death (12.28). If Israel obeys the voice of Yahweh its God and is careful to do all his commandments, Yahweh its God will set it high above all the nations of the earth (Deut. 28.1). And if it is not careful to do all the words of the law, then Yahweh will bring upon it extraordinary afflictions, afflictions severe and lasting, and sicknesses grievous and lasting (28.58-59).

Now if we ask, What is the stance of the book on this central dogma of old Israelite religion?—which is to say in Culler's words, What is the philosophy this book asserts?—we are at first disposed to say the following. The plot of the book of Job affirms that in the case of Job the traditional dogma is false, for he is a righteous man who, to the surprise both of himself and his readers, suffers the fate of the wicked. On this reading, which is an ordinary reader's view as well as the scholarly consensus, the issue of the book is whether the conventional nexus between piety and prosperity, sin and suffering holds, and whether it is possible to make the usual causal inferences backwards, from prosperity back to piety and from suffering back to sin.

Given that this is the general impression we have of the book as a whole, we are bound to have some difficulty with its opening chapter, in which it is the very opposite that seems to be affirmed. For there the impression is definitely given, though it is not said in so many words, that the story of Job illustrates not the *falsity* but the *truth* of the traditional dogma.

We first encounter what we suspect is the old dogma enshrined in the opening verses of the prologue:

There was a man in the land of Uz ... blameless and upright, fearing God and turning away from evil. And there were born to him seven sons and three daughters, and his possession was seven thousand sheep and three

thousand camels ... (1.1-3).

The simple ‘and’, technically the waw-consecutive indicating a subsequent action to that of the previous verb, is admittedly all we have to go on. Nothing here says explicitly that we are dealing with cause and effect, nothing prevents us from insisting that here there is a mere temporal progression or even perhaps the laxness of a naive story that orders contemporaneous facts into a temporal sequence to give the impression of narrative—even though the only real temporality is in the movement of the narrator’s eye, first resting on this item, then on that. Nevertheless, most readers find here more than mere temporal succession; they notice at the very least, even if they are not Hebraists, a sense of the fitness of things, an inner bond between the piety of the man and his prosperity, between rather his superlative piety and his superlative prosperity, a fitness not only in kind but in degree, a fitness that is nothing else, when expressed theologically, than the dogma of retribution.

So is this book in favour of the principle of retribution or against it? Does it not look as if the book as a whole might be undermining what it asserts in its opening lines on this dogma? Suppose that we leave the question open for the moment and read further down the chapter. Before very long we come to realize that not only in the narrator’s mind but in the minds of the two characters, God and the Satan, the old traditional causal nexus between piety and prosperity is evidently being taken for granted—in heaven no less than on earth. Says God:

Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, fearing God and turning away from evil? (1.8).

And the Satan replies:

Does Job fear God for nothing, gratuitously? (1.9).

According to the Satan, God must be thinking that Job *does* fear him gratuitously, that the piety of Job therefore is unmotivated and is the origin of his prosperity. The Satan’s own suspicion is that it is the other way around, and that it is Job’s prosperity that is the origin of his piety, that it is only in order to become prosperous or remain prosperous that Job is so exceptionally pious. When the point is put to him, God has to admit that he does not know the difference; he had been assuming all along, as do most humans, that the principle of

retribution runs from the deed to the result, and not from the result to the motivation. God therefore has to allow an experiment to be carried out on Job to discover whether the dogma of retribution, to which he has been giving his assent, is true. Now if the narrator of this book has God believing in the doctrine of retribution, may we not suppose that the narrator was willing us also in these opening sentences to accept it, naively, yes, and unquestioningly, the way such dogmas are generally accepted?

This philosophy does not, of course, keep on being sustained throughout the prologue. For once the suffering of Job is determined upon a new world order has come into existence in which piety does not necessarily lead to prosperity and in which what it is that leads to suffering is not necessarily sin. In this second philosophy it is the righteous man who suffers. In the first philosophy only the wicked suffer.

Does then the first philosophy deconstruct the second, or, does the second deconstruct the former? Can we speak of either of them undermining the other?

No, not undermine. Just confront. There are conflicting philosophies here, indeed, but the warfare between them is all above board. For against the view that piety leads to prosperity the narrative affirms both the blamelessness of Job and the reality of his divinely imposed suffering. And against the correlative view that it is sin that leads to suffering the narrative affirms that, on the contrary, in Job's case it is piety that leads to suffering, indeed that exceptional piety leads to exceptional suffering. What happens in the narrative of the prologue is that the philosophy that is at first affirmed is then negated by the philosophy inherent in the events of the narrative as it unfolds. The first philosophy stands to the second as exposition stands to complication in a narrative; no narrative can get moving unless it begins to contradict the *status quo ante*, no philosophy is worth affirming unless in contradiction to that already affirmed or implied. That is all as it should be, and no more than we should expect of any narrative. There is therefore, I conclude, no deconstructing going on here, nothing that could be called an *undermining*.

Where then stands the philosophy asserted by the poem of 3.1–42.6, the core of the book as a whole? On the side of the first or the second philosophy? This seems open to no doubt. It is on the same side as the second philosophy of the prologue, that it is the righteous, not the

wicked, who suffers; all it does is to expound it at length, dramatically and unarguably. What the poem does, philosophically speaking, is to prove over and over again that the doctrine of retribution is wrong. Every time Job's friends fail to carry us with them in their denunciations of Job, and every time Job excites our admiration for his injured innocence, the poem convinces us again that the doctrine of retribution is naive, dangerous, inhuman and, above all, false. If ever for a minute in the course of the dialogue we are tempted to believe that Job after all must deserve something of what he suffers, or if for a moment we find it hard to believe that anyone can possibly be so blameless as Job is making himself out to be, the affirmations of both the narrator and God in the prologue stride forward in our memory: there is none like him on earth.

Not that we are ever permitted to forget that the standpoint of the poem is, Athanasius-like, in opposition to the world that surrounds it. For the friends of Job, each in his individual way, begin all their thinking from the conviction that the traditional dogma is true, and Job himself makes no secret of the fact that he too, until these recent calamities, has always thought that way. He is the first to acknowledge that his sufferings are, *prima facie* at least, witnesses against him (16.8); he has always thought suffering was ammunition against humans, not testimony for them. It is this very break with convention, this brave shouldering of an unpopular commitment, that makes the philosophy of the Book of Job so universally recognized and treasured.

So far there has been the confrontation of philosophies, and the massive assertion of the second, that the doctrine of retribution is false. A surprise, however, is stored up for the last eleven verses of the book (42.7-17), of which it does seem to be true to say that they deconstruct the second philosophy in the direction of the first. Which is to say—since the second philosophy is the one affirmed by the great bulk of the book—the epilogue deconstructs the book as a whole.

The epilogue has often made readers uncomfortable. I suspect that the discomfort they have experienced has been the psychological registering of the deconstruction that was in progress. Until recently we did not have this name for the process, however, and so did not perhaps properly appreciate its character.

The discomfort is expressed sometimes in aesthetic terms, as if it were a lapse in literary taste to have the tortured Job first brought to a new religious and intellectual perception of the world—a vision that

enables him to accept his suffering and bow before the author of it in reverence if not penitence—, and then to recount how on top of that he gets double his money back, for all the world like a contestant on some game show.¹

At other times the discomfort takes the form of a historical judgment that the epilogue is to be assigned a secondary status in the history of the book's composition.² If we can affirm that it does not come from the hand of the master poet and thinker, the lack of fit between the poem and the epilogue can be lived with. In such a view there is, incidentally, a curious but commonly entertained assumption that to understand the *origin* of a discrepancy is somehow to *deal with* the discrepancy, to bring about a new state of affairs in which it is as if the discrepancy did not exist. It is, indeed, something of an oddity with this move in the case of the epilogue to Job that by most accounts the epilogue is not a chronologically secondary accretion to the poem, but the earlier folktale frame into which the poem has been slotted; so what is literarily secondary is not the work of some late and clumsy redactor (redactors being archetypically of limited intelligence) but pre-existent narrative stuff which the poet of Job simply did not excise. The discomfort is multiplied.

Yet another form the discomfort takes is a moral decision that the epilogue is not really very important. The story of Job, it is said, would be essentially the same without the epilogue. All that needs to be achieved by Job and for Job has taken place by 42.6, and the epilogue adds nothing to the poem religiously or philosophically. Job's restoration comes as a bonus to him and to those readers who require a happy ending, but it is really neither here nor there from the point of view of the meaning of the book.

¹ The nineteenth-century commentator R.A. Watson remarked (though he went on to reject this line of thought): 'Did Job need these multitudes of camels and sheep to supplement his new faith and his reconciliation to the Almighty will? Is there not something incongruous in the large award of temporal good, and even something unnecessary in the renewed honour among men?' (*The Book of Job* [ExpB; London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1892], p. 409).

² 'As an essential part of the old Folk-tale, [the Epilogue] could not be discarded. To have made the hero die in leprosy would have been too audacious a contradiction of what may have been a well-authenticated tradition' (J. Strahan, *The Book of Job interpreted* [Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1913], p. 350). Similarly Marvin H. Pope, *Job* (AB, 15; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 3rd edn, 1973), p. lxxxi.

Amid all this discomfort, it is even more disconcerting that what one hardly ever sees argued is the view that in fact the epilogue undermines the rest of the Book of Job. This is worse than uncomfortable, and that is perhaps why it is not argued. For who wants to argue that a world-class work of literature is so much at odds with itself as that, and so determined not to speak with a single voice; or, even worse, that a work of such great theological penetration ends up by giving assent to the very dogma it set out to annihilate?

For that is the position of the epilogue. It tells us, and not at all implicitly, that the most righteous man on earth is the most wealthy. If in ch. 1 he was the greatest of all the easterners, in ch. 42 he is simply one hundred per cent greater than that. And if there was any doubt in ch. 1 whether his piety was the cause of his prosperity and whether perhaps it was not the other way about, by ch. 42 no one, not even in heaven, is left in any doubt that it is the piety of Job, somewhat eccentrically expressed, to be sure, that has led to his ultimate superlative prosperity. What the book has been doing its best to demolish, the doctrine of retribution, is on its last page triumphantly affirmed.

Why not call this an incoherence? Should it be dignified with so glamorous a title as a deconstruction? Perhaps we can answer in the following way. In the switch from the first philosophy to the second in the prologue to the book we could see the familiar enough process of setting up a straw man that the rest of the book will demolish. But we are so unused to, or so uncomfortable with, the last page of a book pulling the rug from under all that has been going on throughout the book that we do our best to maintain that that is not what is happening at all. The very fact that the ending of the book of Job is not normally regarded as logically incoherent with what precedes it is an evidence that the contradiction which it embodies is no straightforward confrontation of philosophies but, in the strict sense, an *undermining*.

Should we not, however, before we throw up our hands in aporia and cry deconstruction, seek a *reconciliation* of the two philosophies? Could we perhaps argue that the central part of the Book of Job only sets out to show that the doctrine of retribution is not *inevitably* true, and that there can be notorious cases of its inapplicability? That the ending of the book wants to assert that despite the failure of the dogma to explain all human fortunes, in the end and in the main it is true enough after all? That even, perhaps, the case of Job is a special case, indeed an extraordinary case, maybe an utterly unique case? Has not

the story itself been at pains to point out that this man Job is a man unlike other humans, that this man's fate is wholly to be explained by an unparalleled set of circumstances in heaven? So does that not mean that whatever may be true for Job is likely to be untrue for every other human? That the Book of Job, in the end, is not about Everyman, but entirely about the lone and remarkable individual Job?

If that is so, and that is where taking the ending 'seriously' (as they say) leads us to, then the poem has no philosophy to set forth, being about nothing at all except the unfortunate man Job. That would indeed be a short way with dissenting philosophies: simply showing that one of them is not a philosophy at all, and that there can therefore be no dissension.

No, perhaps that conclusion is too extreme. Let us take a different tack. Rather than assert that the Book of Job in its central section is only about the individual Job, and that Job is not typical of anyone at all, let us argue that it propounds the view that quite often the righteous suffer the fate that typically belongs to the wicked. Whether in the case of others it is heaven that is to blame or not hardly affects the issue. On this view, it is the *fact*, not the *origin*, of the suffering of the righteous that constitutes the philosophical problem of the poem. Then can we reconcile the epilogue of the book with such a philosophy? Could the epilogue be saying that if the righteous suffer, that is only a temporary setback? That the doctrine of retribution is to be applied to the broad sweep of things, and not to the trifling ups and downs of human fortunes? That, in such a case, what all the interlocutors should have been stressing was that Job, being by all accounts a perfectly innocent man who by cruel misfortune had been brought to calamity, could confidently expect that the dogma of retribution would come into its own in the long run and his end would be sure to be at least as good as his beginning? Very well; if that is what the book is saying, then the Book of Job is not about Job himself particularly, but about Job as a representative of a humanity that suffers what it does not deserve but is on the way to a happy dénouement. But such an explanation suffers from a problem of its own: if that is the philosophy of the book, how shall we accommodate the facts that Job is introduced to us at its beginning as an utterly exceptional human being and that his suffering is attributed to a unique event in the heavenly realm? How can the history of Job be representative of humanity? How can the unique be typical of the general?

These two quests for a reconciliation of the philosophies fail, I conclude. If, on the one hand, we attempt to house the anti-retributionist philosophy within the dogma of retribution, as a kind of modification or tempering of it, we denature the drama of the book. But equally, on the other, if we assert the retributionist philosophy of the epilogue over against the anti-retributionist stance of the poem, we rub the poem out of the book. That the poem should supervene upon the naivety of the prologue in its opening makes sense; but that the epilogue should undermine the grand poem and return us to the first naivety is disorientating, to the point of being deconstructive. What are we to make of a narrative that purports to conclude with a happy ever after but only returns us to the point where it all started, with what assurance that the same calamities cannot befall the doubly innocent Job? Is it so certain that lightning never strikes twice in the same place?

For a text to deconstruct itself means that there is no firm ground in it for the reader to take a stand on. Each time we begin to state the view the book takes of this fundamental question in theology and ethics—retribution—we find ourselves headed towards an aporia that is not merely a morass of indeterminacy in which it is difficult to discern what it is the book asserts but a truly deconstructive state of affairs where each of the philosophies it actually does assert is undermined by the other. Where that leaves us as readers is a point I want to return to at the end of this chapter.

2. *Suffering*

The second arena in which the Book of Job is deconstructible is its handling of the question of suffering. If we take as our starting point our general impression of the book (and why not? for that only means the preunderstanding we bring to it), we shall probably agree that a prime concern of the book is the problem of suffering.

What is the problem of suffering, in fact? Most of the textbooks on ethics and the commentaries on Job accept the commonsensical view that the problem of suffering is its *cause*, which is to say, Why suffering?, Why this particular suffering? And the book itself encourages us to regard that as its concern too; for it begins its narrative precisely with an account of how the suffering of the hero is decided upon in heaven—which is to say, with a narrative of a causal chain. Job himself of course has no idea of why he is suffering, but the

book insists upon the readers knowing, and knowing in advance, and knowing all there is to be known about the matter. There is no question of any deferment of disclosure of real purposes or causes to the end of the story. Everything is up front; this is no story beguiling us with half-truths and false clues.

But the moment we ask, And what exactly was the reason for Job's suffering?, we run into a problem. The story bears retelling, if only for the soupçon of hermeneutical suspicion that can be introduced into the telling. What happens in heaven is that a question is raised that has apparently never before been asked, in general or in particular. The particular question is, Does Job fear God for nothing? The more general question is, Do humans fear God gratuitously? Job fears God, no doubt, but is it gratuitous, or is it for the sake of the reward? Heaven has been up till now as accepting as earth of the doctrine of retribution, which takes as its foundation the observation: the pious are the prosperous. But now the question is raised: Assuming there is a causal connection between the two, between piety and prosperity, in which direction does it operate? Could prosperity be, not the *result* of piety, but its *cause*?

The difficulty is that neither God nor the Satan knows which comes first, the chicken or the egg (or, as they say in Italian, as if to underline the problem, *l'uovo o la gallina*), the piety or the prosperity. This is no doubt because when the principle of retribution is functioning properly the pious are the same as the prosperous, and so you can never separate out cause and effect. We readers who have persevered to ch. 42 of course know by now what we think of the principle of retribution, but the God of ch. 1 has never engaged in deconstructions, dwelling as he does in an informal and somewhat rustic court, where there are none of the typical oriental courtesies but plenty of blunt speech, and no divine omniscience but only a willingness to find out, whether by report or experiment.

Experiment. That is the word. Job's suffering will be (not a wager, for the Satan has nothing to win, or lose, by the outcome, but) an experiment in causality. It is a simple matter to prove whether the piety hangs on the prosperity. Remove the prosperity and see if the piety falls. The experiment has to be done, not only for the sake of the truth, but even more for the sake of God's well-being. How could God ever look himself in the face if it were to turn out that none of his creatures, not even the most godfearing man of all, loves him for his own sake but only for what they can get out of him?

Which means to say that the reason for Job's suffering lies not in Job, not in the way the world works, or in the principle of retribution, or in any dogma, but deep in God and his need to know the truth about humankind and thus about himself (creators, like trees, have to be known by their fruit). Job suffers to prove God's integrity and to lay to rest the doubt the Satan has raised that perhaps no one in the wide world really reverences God for his own sake but that everyone is simply trying to use him.

Now the reason for Job's suffering is presumably not the reason for anyone else's. Once God has been convinced that gratuitous piety is possible, he does not need to experiment again to find that out. If none of the piety of this superabundantly pious man hangs upon his prosperity, the lesser piety of lesser mortals may also be equally clear of self-interest. Even if some people are pious for the sake of the blessings that will result, it is enough to have proved in principle that such is not necessarily the case. Job has answered the question of the causal connection between piety and prosperity paradigmatically and definitively.

Which then means: The reason for Job's suffering is never the reason for anyone else's. What the narrative gives with one hand it takes away with the other. For a moment we thought, when we were told the reason for Job's suffering, that we had penetrated to the book's explanation for human suffering in general. But that cannot be, for Job's case is unique. For a moment we were encouraged to believe that there is no mystery at all about suffering, that all is plain as day: Job suffers for a reason that can be simply told and which he could have understood as well as we can. But the instant we recognize that this reason is unique to Job, at that moment we are in the dark again about the meaning of human suffering generally.

So to the problem of suffering inasmuch as the problem is its *cause*, the book says, No problem. Here is the cause. But the moment we see it we realize that this answer is no good to us, for we wanted to know the reason for human suffering in general, and the book's answer has nothing to do with that.

How is it then that we thought in the first place that the book was about the *origins* of suffering? Is it because it purports to be telling us in its opening scenes about origins, causes? Not really, because it was claiming nothing, nothing more grand than to be a tale about an antique patriarchal figure from the days when wealth was measured in camels. But it succeeded in misleading most of the people most of the

time. Can that be because it was really a deconstructive narrative, reaping where it did not sow, and more especially, sowing where it did not reap, sowing in our heads grand ideas of universal truths and never reaping but letting them run rank? Or is it deconstructive in the other direction, innocently maintaining it had no designs on the universe but all the time winning its way into world literature on the strength of its evident global human sympathies?

That deconstructive discomfort makes us wonder whether we should be trying another tack over this question of the problem of suffering. What will happen if we suggest that the real problem of suffering, for the book as much for ourselves, is not the problem, Why suffering?, but the problem, What must I do now that I am suffering?, or, How am I to suffer? That is, the existential question rather than the more intellectual question of origins.

On that route we encounter in the book first, not a deconstruction exactly but certainly a conflict. For the prologue makes plain that the response of a truly pious man to unexplained suffering is to bless the God who has given and who has taken away. The pious Job sees the hand of God in the predations of Sabaeans and Chaldeans as much as in the fire from heaven and the whirlwind, and he accepts without demur that God has the same right to deliver 'evil' as he has to deliver 'good'. But the moment we turn the page into the poem in ch. 3 (by a happy accident, I have to do literally that in my edition of the Revised Standard Version), we strike against another image of Job, whose response to 'evil' is to abuse the author of it and demand he give an account of himself. It is a enormous shock to the system when we find God in ch. 42 approving of this rebellious and irreverent Job, and declaring that this Job has spoken of him 'what is right', unlike the friends who have spoken only orthodox theology in careful circumspection of God.

So although the book proffers two answers to the question, What kind of sufferer is approved of by God?, or, What should I do when I am suffering?, it leaves us in little doubt about which is its preferred answer. It is not even a matter of its recommending pious acceptance so long as that is possible and the stiff upper lip does not quiver (in the mode of chs. 1–2), with approval being given to hysterical and venomous outbursts once they can be no longer restrained (in the mode of chs. 3–31). On the contrary, it appears to be the outbursts of chs. 3–31 that are being recommended. But that conflict of ideologies or

behaviours is not one that leads in itself to a deconstruction, since the book resolves it, at least ostensibly, no matter how shocking the resolution may be.

Where deconstructive thoughts gain a toehold is over the issue (again) of whether the book speaks for humanity at large, or only of the isolated man Job. There seems little doubt over what was the right thing for Job to do, but does the book mean us to follow Job's example? We cannot help remembering that Job is the most pious man on earth, testified to by both the narrator and God (the former the more omniscient, but the latter presumably the more authoritative) as a blameless man. From the perspective of the narrative, he has a perfect right to protest against the treatment he is receiving, for he knows, and we all know, that he does not deserve it. But what of the rest of us? Does the book mean to suggest that protesting against one's suffering is a form of asserting one's innocence? Is it an indirect warning that no good will come of behaving like Job unless one is in Job's moral position to begin with? If that is so, we no longer know whether the book offers an encouragement or a warning. Is it saying, Behave like Job, or Don't dare behave like Job? What we are told about Job deconstructs the example he affords. Job becomes an example for no one, for is it not the case that 'there is none like him on earth'?

Thus, over the question of the meaning of the book in relation to the problem of suffering, we find ourselves forced into accepting by the logic of the narrative that Job's case can have no relevance to humanity at large, while every instinct we have about literature and life compels us in the opposite direction. It looks as though this Book of Job is another self-deconstructing artifact.

3. After Deconstruction, What Then?

When a text has been deconstructed, what happens next? This is a question not often raised by professional deconstructionists, who tend to believe in a never-ending spiral of deconstructions, but it is a pressing question for many other readers, who cannot bear too much dizziness and nausea.

One thing that happens is that the text goes on being read by readers who have never heard of deconstruction—and even being read pre-deconstructively by readers who have seen a deconstruction being performed before their very own eyes. Which is to say that the text goes on, to a greater or lesser extent, having the meanings it always

has. A deconstruction does not mean that a text cancels itself out and becomes a mere cipher. Simple conflicts and incoherences may do that, but a deconstructed text loses little of its power in the deconstruction, though it may lose all of its authority as a trustworthy testimony to the way things really are in the external world.

What sustains a book's life beyond its deconstruction is its rhetoric, that is, its power to persuade beyond the bounds of pure reason, its ability to provoke its readers into willing its success even beyond its deserts. The Book of Job had already enjoyed a notable victory of rhetoric over logic long before the word deconstruction was ever breathed. For it had been persuading generations of readers to take sides with its hero Job in his ignorant reproaches against heaven even while they themselves have had perfect knowledge of what was hidden from Job. They have known that in heaven it is entirely accepted, even by the Satan, that Job is the most righteous of men, and they recognize that if Job knew that his tirades would be sapped of their energy. He would still, indeed, have something against heaven, for it still would be unreasonable of God to make an innocent man suffer in order to establish some theological point to the satisfaction of heavenly disputants; but Job would not be able to protest that his innocence was going unrecognized, and he would not be able to call God to account for branding him an evildoer. So he would be totally unable to speak many of his most moving speeches, for example:

Be silent, let me alone! I must speak!
Let what may befall me.
I will take my flesh in my teeth,
and put my life in my hand.
He may slay me; I am without hope.
Yet I will defend my conduct to his face ...

Grant me these two favours only, O God,
so that I need not hide myself from you.
Withdraw your hand far from me,
and let not fear of you unnerve me.
Then summon me, and I will answer;
or let me speak first, and you shall reply to me.
How many iniquities and sins are laid to my charge?
Show me my offence and my sin.
Why do you hide your face from me?
Why do you count me your enemy?
Would you strike with dread a leaf driven by the wind?
Would you pursue a withered straw? (13.13-15, 20-25).

But we readers happily endure the contradictions of our position, privy to knowledge that undercuts Job's stance, and siding with Job nevertheless. Rhetoric triumphs over mere fact, and we would not have it otherwise. We are willing, as we listen to Job, to entertain the possibility that the prologue to the book does not exist and that there is no such perfectly simple explanation of Job's suffering as the prologue suggests. We recognize in the unenlightened Job the human condition, embattled against an unjust fate, and we will him to succeed in his struggle even at the moment when we know it is ill-conceived and unnecessary. Our assent to the logic of the story, in which Job will cravenly withdraw his charge against God the moment God chooses to communicate with the man, is wholly sincere, but we do not regret for an instant that Job has been kept in the dark so long; we were overjoyed that a man has had the opportunity, so properly seized and so long sustained, to approach his God 'like a prince' and 'give him an account of all [his] steps' (31.37). It did not matter in the least that all this defiance was, in a manner of speaking, the outcome of a huge misunderstanding.

In just the same way, no deconstruction can rob readers of what they have savoured in the Book of Job. Even when it has been deconstructed, the book can still go on exciting or entrancing us, enraging us against heaven or compelling our admiration for the divine, even assuring us that these and these are the truths about God and the universe. But when we believe its hero, we will believe him because we want to, because it suits our sense of the fitness of things, and not because he has divulged a truth about a transcendental signified that is one and incontrovertible.

The problem with the dogma of retribution or any other dogma is not that it is wrong, but that it is a dogma. And you can't cure the problem of a dogma with another dogma. Whenever you have a case of dogma eat dogma, you always have one dogma surviving and snapping at your heels. The heart craves dogma, even a dogma dying a death of a thousand qualifications. But the deconstructive strategy eliminates dogma as dogma, and in recognizing that multiple philosophies are being affirmed in the deconstructible text loosens our attachment to any one of them as dogma. It does not however follow that it weakens their persuasive force, their seductiveness. It may even be, sometimes, that when a fearsome dogma has been overpowered and shorn of its authority, we take to it more kindly and are attracted by its

defencelessness, begin to find it charming, and even fall to wondering whether there was not perhaps some quality in it that might account for its having become a dogma in the first place.