Reviews


Reviewed by Jasper Neel, University of Waterloo

Sharon Crowley was the logical (dare I use so discredited a notion as "logic" in reviewing a book on deconstruction?) and appropriate choice to write *A Teacher's Guide to Deconstruction*, the first publication in NCTE's new Teacher's Introduction Series. The series, according to NCTE Deputy Executive Director Charles Suhor, "is geared towards the intellectually curious teacher who would like to get an initial, lucid glance into rich areas of scholarship in our discipline" (vii). So far as I know, Crowley, whose first publication on the subject appeared in 1979, has been studying the relationships among deconstruction, rhetorical theory, and classroom pedagogy longer than anyone else in the profession.

Crowley's assignment carried with it two difficulties: inventing a new series of publications, and introducing an audience of classroom teachers to the esoteric, disorienting notion of deconstruction. Crowley has done an admirable job of each: setting a fine example for future authors in the series, and writing a text that will be very useful for its audience. For the first time there is a brief, clearly written introduction to deconstruction that one can give to undergraduates, to high school teachers, or to anyone who needs quick, unpretentious access to the field of discourse known as "deconstruction."

Crowley's text has several strengths. To begin with, it is readable. (Yes, I know that's an insult to a deconstructor, but I'll explain later why it's really a compliment, just as I meant it to be. And, yes, I know that any well-schooled deconstructor could spend hours explaining to me that I have no way to know what I mean and no way to mean what I would know if I could know anything. I'll also explain later how I can mean just what I say, just as Crowley means just what she says even though she says she can't do it.) From start to finish, Crowley has written carefully and clearly, avoiding the jargon-ridden, obfuscated style so characteristic of theorists in general. Any intelligent reader can spend an afternoon with this text and come away fully competent to begin rethinking the writing and reading processes in light of Derridean thought.

Crowley offers a careful, fair summary of the major Derridean theses. The most important of these theses is Derrida's sustained and repeated critique of the metaphysics of presence. Crowley's first undertaking is to
summarize this critique. In completing the summary, Crowley offers a
distinction between "traditional" reading, which seeks to articulate the
author's meaning, and "deconstructive" reading, which presumes the ab­sence of any such meaning. Later in the book, Crowley makes a second
important distinction, one made no doubt by others but never—to my
knowledge—so well as here: she summarizes the history of analysis and
synthesis growing out of Cartesian philosophy and explains why the West has
always regarded synthesis as secondary and inferior. Crowley is particularly
good at summarizing the effect Derrida's critique of presence has on Western
notions of the self, which, not surprisingly, gets radically called into question.
She shows briefly and incisively why a composition teacher might be
attracted to deconstruction by showing how the critique of presence opens to
collaborative writing and demystifies notions of authority. Another strength
of the book is that it offers clear, useful definitions of key Derridean terms,
particularly différence, supplement, and absence.

In sum, I can with confidence say that this book does quite well what it sets
out to do. I must, however, take issue with some of what the book sets out to
do, for, as Crowley would have it, deconstruction is an entirely benign system
that brings enlightenment to the darkened world of English teaching. Decon­struction seems tame and sensible, friendly and inevitable, just the appropri­ate corrective for a discipline gone awry. Aside from the opening declaration
that deconstruction is not dead, there is no critical evaluation at all of Derrida.
He becomes oracular, always repaying the close attention he demands, a
writer comparable in every way with Joyce (xvi-xvii). By the end of the
second chapter, innocent readers must be wondering how they ever managed
to teach at all while remaining ignorant of so coherent and unavoidable a
system as deconstruction:

On the theoretical level, deconstruction provides a relatively coherent de­scription of the nature of texts and textuality, a description whose tenets
should help us to verify the coherence of any models of the writing process we
construct. On the level of critique, deconstruction should do for traditional
writing instruction what it does for texts: it can provide a means of reading
current classroom techniques in such a way as to expose their strengths and
deficiencies. (29)

Well, you can take my word for it: Derrida doesn't always repay the
reader's efforts to struggle through his texts. More often than not, one thinks,
"Is that all? Can it be that Derrida has taken all this time to tell me that
Rousseau or Freud or Plato didn't really know the truth?" And comparing
Derrida to Joyce is as silly as comparing Bloom to Blake or Hartman to
Milton.

More to the point, secondary school teachers should know the dark side
of Derridean theory. Though Derrida may not be Darth Vader, he's no Luke
Skywalker either.
In fact, one must be quite wary about and with deconstruction. The pedagogy that emerges from Crowley’s book is a case in point. Almost every taxpayer, school teacher, and school administrator in the English-speaking world would agree that the role of the schools is to prepare students to participate in a competitive, capitalist economy. While they might give lip service to the history of ideas, to individual development for its own sake, or to some other platitude, in the final analysis they want graduates who can read, write, cipher, behave themselves in public situations, and function productively in some sector of the economy. Any sort of deconstructive pedagogy would unwork education of this sort by constantly unsettling the power relationships that inform it and constantly revealing the always already absent justification that validates it. In other words, a deconstructive English or language arts classroom would be a scene for political and theological re-education.

Let me articulate three of the most obvious ramifications of deconstruction: (1) one must give up any hope of justifying any sort of metaphysical belief (and, yes, that effectively precludes belief in God, or belief in truth, or belief that any political system is right); (2) one must give up belief in such notions as “soul” or “true self,” accepting them as nothing other than nostalgia-ridden absences created by the constant motion of language; 3) one no longer expects language or writing to communicate preconceived beliefs or opinions. Must we accept one and two to get to three? If we get to three through deconstruction, absolutely. But what would happen to most North American English teachers who set out to deconstruct these three notions? While I’d be the first to agree that the danger of deconstruction should not prevent anyone from carrying it into the classroom, I’d also like to be sure that anyone considering such pedagogy knows exactly what its implications are, both for the students’ world views and for the teachers’ career—and even community—prospects.

One final caveat, this one having to do with the power of deconstruction itself. Near the end of her book, Crowley offers a deconstruction of the genre known as “exposition.” She defines exposition in a quite traditional way by quoting Charles Sears Baldwin: “Expository discourse amounts to a ‘succinct and orderly setting-forth of some piece of knowledge.’” According to Crowley, however, if “one accepts Derridean notions about writing... ‘expository writing’ is not thinkable. From a deconstructive point of view, writing does not ‘expose’ much of anything, except perhaps itself” (43). This dogma forces a binary opposition on Crowley’s text: either it succumbs to the unworking of deconstruction, exposing nothing but its own failure, or it flouts the whole notion of deconstruction by succeeding in the face of its own dogma. In fact, the text accomplishes the latter. It exposes Derrida’s critique of the metaphysics of presence, it exposes terms such as différance and supplement, and it exposes a wealth of knowledge that chastens English teachers, making them both more sophisticated and more learned than they
were. Sharon Crowley can in fact read and understand Derrida, and she can use the much maligned five-paragraph-theme model of introduction, three body parts, and conclusion to expose what she has learned, just as I can recognize the craft and accuracy of her exposition. Admittedly, she does not offer the eschatological fulfillment of human existence that leads to the silence of absolute truth. But who thought she would? Or even wants her to?

So, yes, by all means give this book to your students and encourage them to think about it. But suggest that they believe what it does, not what it says it does—that is, unless you’re willing to begin accepting texts like Glas and La carte postale instead of texts like Crowley’s. Above all, make sure that your students understand deconstruction’s political and theological implications before they set about “constructing” a pedagogy based on it.


Reviewed by Timothy W. Crusius, Texas A&M University

A collection of eleven essays selected from a conference on Kenneth Burke held at Temple University in 1984, Legacy has already received high praise from reviewers. The praise is fully merited. The essays themselves are all of high quality—always stimulating, especially when the interpretations are most violent, sharply departing from Burke’s self-understanding and from orthodox views of him. For example, Burke has often acknowledged his debt to Aristotle, and most rhetoricians see him in the Aristotelian tradition of philosophical rhetoric, but Michael Leff exposes parallels with Cicero—kinships of style, attitudes, and method that may well be more significant than the largely conceptual ground Burke shares with Aristotle. And Herbert W. Simons, in his excellent introduction to the book, refers to J.S. Nelson’s identification of Burke with the “new sophistic,” which, of course, has its roots in the old one, in the Latin rhetorical tradition of Cicero and Vico, and in such modern figures as Nietzsche (see Nelson’s What Should Political Theory Be Now?). Simons also refers to Dilip Gaonkar’s reading of A Rhetoric of Motives (forthcoming in Simons’ The Rhetorical Turn: Invention and Persuasion in the Conduct of Inquiry), which likewise takes Burke as belonging more to the once-scorned sophistic tradition than to the Platonic-Aristotelian line.

Also challenged is the dominant humanistic view of Burke’s criticism, the Burke one finds, for example, in Wayne Booth. Two essays link Burke with Derrida. Cary Nelson argues that Burke “comes to believe that language is all there is, that no material world exists for us.” What Burke suggests instead is, first, that we see always through terministic screens; second, that language