Works Cited


Jacques Derrida on Teaching and Rhetoric: A Response

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When I talked with Gary Olson about *JAC*’s interview with Jacques Derrida, I heard the term “deconstruction moonie” for the first time. If I understand correctly, the phrase refers to a person who uncritically subscribes to deconstruction as the authoritative way to interpret the workings of language and culture, and who does not easily brook dissent from this view.

Any deconstruction moonies who may be lurking in the halls will be disappointed, I'm afraid, by Derrida's responses to Olson's questions about rhetoric and teaching composition. Derrida persists in giving what he calls "une réponse de Normand"; "yes and no"; "on the one hand and on the other hand" (8). This is not simply Gallic coyness, however. Despite (or perhaps because of) his status as an intellectual celebrity, Derrida is wary of simple answers to difficult questions.

In the interview, Derrida reminds readers of a couple of things that American deconstructionists are wont to forget. Prominent among these is his reiterated assertion of the importance of tradition. This apparently surprised Olson, but it shouldn't have. As Derrida observes, deconstruction cannot happen without a tradition to deconstruct. Those who read nihilism into deconstruction picture it as an advocacy for disorder, for deconstruction of tradition and culture. But this is a sheer impossibility. How is it possible, for example, to feel the necessity to deconstruct a literary canon if you have never felt the exclusionary pressures exerted by that canon? How is it
possible to feel the necessity of opening up writing instruction to something other than instruction in formalism if you have never felt the oppression imposed on writers by instruction in traditional methods?

A deconstruction exposes and critiques reified ways of seeing, exposes them for what they are: interested. The reification of any way of reading (even deconstructive reading) is always motivated by institutional or cultural politics. As those of us who regularly find ourselves on the down side of English department politics know only too well, terms like "deconstructionist" and "poststructuralist" can be used to justify business-as-usual as easily as terms like "organic unity" or "canonical writer." In the interview Derrida expresses his suspicion of "self-appointed deconstructionists" who would appropriate his work to claim authority for their own interested ways of reading (13). He worries about this possibility since, like anything else in language, the name "deconstruction" can be put either to repressive or liberatory uses; "that's why you can't stop watching and analyzing. You can't simply rely on names, titles, or claims" (14).

Deconstruction can't be worn like a new hat. It happens. It happens when certain cultural pressures work to reify some ways of seeing while other forces work to reify others. The tension which results between authorized and alternative readings of texts, or pedagogies, or cultures, or anything else, is necessarily deconstructive. To give a small example from the institutional history of composition instruction: so-called "process pedagogy" deconstructed some aspects of current-traditional rhetoric, in particular its suppression of the fact that the process of composing does not always repeat the spatial alignment of prose on a page. Teachers who were familiar with the oppressive and limited view of writing given by current-traditional rhetoric undertook its deconstruction because no one else was in a position to do so. This deconstruction of a reified writing pedagogy was naive and partial; that is, it was not undertaken with some deconstructive methodology in mind, and it offered a limited critique of the traditional writing classroom. But it was no less necessary for all that.

The advantage of deconstruction is that it permits us to oppose tradition to its suppressed alternatives, and from this opposition to generate yet other alternatives. As Derrida repeatedly implies in the interview, the oppositional assumptions we habitually make are too simple, because they overgeneralize. Olson asks a series of either-or questions: should writing be taught in the disciplines or in a single department by persons skilled in rhetoric? Is writing a universal technique, or does it manifest itself differently in different disciplines? Are you on the side of the rhetoricians or the philosophers? Derrida refuses to take sides on any of these questions because both sides (all sides) have their uses, have things to teach us. Rather, he looks for new models which appropriate features from both alternatives, and his guidelines for constructing such models are drawn from ethics and politics rather than from metaphysics.
Derrida is reluctant to take sides on general questions because he is acutely aware of the situatedness of any debatable issue. He does not comment on the relevance of the ancient sophists to contemporary rhetoric partly because we know so little about them, but, more importantly, because their historical situation is not ours. Nevertheless, his refusal to accept non-situated readings of any situation smacks of the sophistic. For example, he implies that universalized composition pedagogies aren't particularly desirable since there are always exceptions to any rule. One cannot condemn traditional teaching, exactly, because "there are very disturbing ways of teaching quietly and, apparently, according to the most traditional forms" (10). Compositionists who unilaterally advocate the use of student-centered classrooms should not overlook the pedagogical potential of the traditional teacher-centered classroom, in the right time and place.

The problem with universalized pedagogies is that they disguise and compromise the context of teaching. French students are not American students; what may be said about composition in French in France may not necessarily be said about composition in English in America; the teacher who only lectures is not necessarily conservative or authoritarian. What is constant in the context of university teaching is the academy itself, with its carefully defined specializations and status hierarchies. A universalized image of the academy often motivates the creation of universalized pedagogies, whether these are intended to extend the hegemony of the academy or to work against its power in favor of students. Such pedagogies are useful to the extent that they may be modified by and in the local situation in which they are employed.

From where Derrida sits, a productive examination of pedagogy would begin with a deconstruction of privileged pedagogies, not necessarily to overthrow them, but to determine from whence they derive their authority. For example, a deconstruction of current-traditional rhetoric discloses that this rhetoric reifies the authority of the academy and works to silence or displace the authority of students and teachers. Or, radical criticisms of social constructionism charge that its (seeming?) reification of peer consensus is oppressive to minority voices. A deconstruction undertaken along these lines would seek to know why consensus has been privileged at this moment in composition's institutional history, and whose interests are served by such privileging.

A deconstructive reading of composition studies would not content itself with looking at pedagogies in isolation, however. It would ask larger questions about composition as an academic institution. It would ask, irrevocably enough, why composition is blessed (or cursed) at this moment in its history with a plethora of competing pedagogies. It would ask further whose interests are served by infusing composition theory with deconstruction, with social constructionism, with Freirean neo-Marxism, or with any other perspective for that matter. It might even ask why the theoretical
diversity and excitement that characterize the meetings attended and jour-
nals read by composition teachers are not shared by faculty who don't teach
writing, or by the culture at large, all of whom persist in defining freshman
composition as a course in grammar, spelling, punctuation, and usage.

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No Title: A Response to Sam Meyer

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In "Prose by Any Other Name: A Context for Teaching the Rhetoric of
Titles" (JAC 8), Sam Meyer offers a "context for teaching the rhetoric of
titles." He recommends that students take titles not as "a necessary evil or
a mere convention," as "decoration," but rather as "an integral part of the
composing process" (71, 80). But is this the rhetoric of titles? Do other
contexts suggest other rhetorics? Meyer looks chiefly at the glossy world of
big-time fiction publishing, of Ernest Hemingway and Maxwell Perkins.
What happens when we look at different contexts—for instance, the equally
big-time worlds of nonfiction or of working-world prose? That recommends
for our small-time world of writing classrooms and writing research a
different pedagogy, what might be called teaching the pragmatics of titles or,
alternately, teaching the rhetoric of non-titles.

I used to believe in Meyer's rhetoric. Then about ten years ago a student
taught me a lesson—one that took me about eight years to learn. I had sent
half the class back to their seats to finish the in-class essays they thought they
were ready to hand in. "No title," I had said. "You don't have a title. Ever
see an essay without a title?" As usual, they had looked dumbfounded and
then had resumed work, largely by sitting and staring at their essays—leaving
me to sit and stare at them and wonder again about the reluctance of students
to make titles. (Sometimes they end up asking me for one.) Later, I found
in the stack of papers a title I certainly would not have proposed but one that
proved memorable. Secured with inverted commas, aggrandized all in caps,
it was placed exactly in the middle of a cover sheet, just where students
imagine titles should stand: "NO TITLE." At the time, I was a little irked and
a little amused, thinking the student was challenging me with a logical
paradox on the order of "I always tell lies" or "This sentence is false." I
figured the title was making some adolescent point about obsolescent rules
for writing essays. But it set me to thinking, in off moments, whether it wasn't