Reader Response

"Where Have You Come from, Reb Derissa, and Where Are You Going?"
Gary Olson’s Interview with Jacques Derrida

JASPER NEEL

Students come to my classes these days wearing T-shirts that read, “Shit happens.” The teenager who murders his girlfriend in the film River’s Edge explains, “You’re born, shit happens, and you die.” He displays neither militancy nor anger. Students who adorn their bodies with the statement seem to regard it as a face-value explanation that random events occur and pass. “Shit” in this parlance is the most neutral available term. This “shit” is not offensive, revolting, ugly, or odoriferous. It functions as in, “We were at the mall doin’ a bunch o’ shit.”

“I often repeat this,” Derrida says matter of factly in the JAC interview: “deconstruction is not a method or a theory; it’s something that happens—it happens” (12). “The deconstruction of logocentrism,” he repeats, “is not a matter of decision, it’s not a matter of deliberate politics; it happens—it just happens” (20). In this sense, deconstruction was at work for millennia before the Tel Quel group began publishing. It is an utterly neutral, natural phenomenon.

Residents of Memphis, Tennessee old enough to remember World War II are likely to remember Dr. Robert G. Lee, the longtime pastor of Bellevue Baptist Church. By 1950 Bellevue was the largest church in the central South and one of the largest churches in the nation. Dr. Lee’s powerful sermon about Jezebel, “Pay Day Some Day,” made him famous throughout the South. When called upon to advise young Southern Baptist ministers, Dr. Lee always admonished them to seek formal training. “Go to New Orleans,” he would say with an arch smile. “Do what they tell you at the seminary there. Then when you graduate, just listen to the Holy Spirit and preach the Bible. The Holy Spirit hasn’t had courses in homiletics or systematic theology, but He won’t hold these courses against you if you listen to Him, and your congregation won’t listen to you if you haven’t had these courses.”

“People who read me and think I’m playing with or transgressing norms,” Derrida says, “usually don’t know what I know: that all of this has not
only been made possible by but is constantly in contact with very classical, rigorous, demanding discipline in writing, in ‘demonstrating,’ in rhetoric.” He continues:

My classical training in France has been a great influence—all those competitions that I suffered from. The French system was and still is terrible from that point of view; you have to go through a number of selective competitions which make you suffer to make you better. I’m politically against this system and I fight it; nevertheless, I had to go through it. Yet, however negative it may be from some point of view, it’s good discipline and I learned a lot from it. (4-5)

“I start with the tradition,” he repeats. “If you’re not trained in the tradition, then deconstruction means nothing. It’s simply nothing” (11).

Deconstruction, like shit, just happens. Deconstruction, like the best, most powerful fundamentalist preaching, depends on a conservative curriculum whose competitive, agonistic operation marks the student, thereby enabling the radical struggle for “freedom” that comes after graduation.

Deconstruction, one might say, is a catachresis—in Coleridge’s sense of the term as well as Perelman’s. Derrida is what Herbert Spencer called a catastrophist. For composition professors, deconstruction functions as a sort of catachrestic catastrophism. It is both an opportunity and a liability, a labile chance, if you will. Unfortunately (or perhaps fortunately) we cannot let it “just happen” because it both implies and demands a certain fundamentalism.

First the chance; then the l(i)ability.

Chance

We can use “Derrida,” as he himself says, to argue that “writing is the essential performance or act” (4). Indeed, we can hardly resist using him this way, for if writing is “the essential act,” then writing sets existence in relief, thereby settling the existence-essence precedence problem rhetorically. Using Derridean deconstruction, however, requires composition professors to make their wager on a perfecta card. Winning never just happens; it always entails loss and implies responsibility. If we win, then we must admit that those who cannot write also cannot perform the “essential act” and thus have no access to existence; as a result, the Freireans immediately demand to know how we intend to build “cultural action” into our professional self-definition. If we win, then writing precedes epistemic, exceeds ontology, and spreads itself both as the horizon on which the “episteme” can appear and as the medium in which the “logos” can reverberate; as a result, the deconstructionists dismiss us out-of-hand as graphocentrists. Derrida, perhaps against his wishes, shows us how to manage both what we win and what we lose: we begin with the logos, immediately transgress this beginning, and then inhabit a continuous, self-conscious deconstruction.
"For Heidegger," Derrida explains, "logos is a gatherer; it's something which assembles, unifies, gathers everything" (19). Logocentrism functions not as a center itself but rather as a "centering structure." Logocentrism allows authority both to gather itself and to resist the dispersion of the multiple. Through Derridean deconstruction, composition can live with logocentrism as a memory while transforming it into a pedagogy. The pedagogy may seem unchanged because order, unity, and correctness continue to operate much as they did before. The shift is subtle. The composition professor thinks (of) logocentrism rather than simply living (in) it.

The effect of the boundary enables this thinking (of) rather than simple living (in) logocentrism. "There should be a specificity," Derrida says; "there must be some specificity, something in the training of teachers in rhetoric, something in common" (8). But there must also be "a crossing of the boundaries" (6). Derrida uses the word "model" sixteen times in the interview, the word "norm" fourteen, the words "form," "formula," and "pattern" a combined total of six times. Boundaries—their necessity, their function, the operations they enable—allow the discussion of composition to occur. Deconstruction allows the emergence of such boundaries through a kind of unlimited oscillation—an arhythmic, erratic swaying back and forth across these boundaries.

This oscillation gives such utterly discredited notions as "cause-effect" back to composition, but with a difference (that is, a différence). When "cause-effect" returns through deconstruction, it returns as a trope with a history, a trope that provides two sorts of specificity. First, composition professors must know this trope's origin in Aristotle's Rhetoric (1399b5; 1400a30). Second, students must learn it as a rhetorical effect, as a line of argument that functions in the service of enthymemic proof. Deconstruction demands that the boundary generated by each specificity be transgressed. The ontic value of each boundary depends on such transgression. While the professor learns to read the Rhetoric against itself—as a sheaf of lectures, a weaving of Attic folk notions, a problem in and for history—the student learns to see cause-effect as a contradiction that often has the apparently innocent rhetorical effect of incontrovertible truth.

By interrupting the rhythm of oscillation and constantly erasing the boundary lines, deconstruction constantly unworks both the foundation and the justification of any pedagogy that might include "cause-effect." Without deconstruction, the oscillation becomes rhythmically consistent, thus allowing itself to be enclosed within a new, invisible boundary. Then textbooks, even whole courses, can operate under the unquestioned hegemony of such notions as "cause-effect." "I can imagine some perverse use of deconstruction in the hands of the authorities," Derrida warns. Such authorities could "maintain the given order by using apparently deconstructive arguments.... That's why you can't stop watching and analyzing" (13-14). At least for the compositionist, deconstruction must always operate as a kind of
More importantly, deconstruction "solicits" the institution of "composition" itself, which turns out to be nothing more than the Derridean version of the Heideggerian logos. Composition implies a bringing together, a location. Deconstruction, in contrast, questions everything composition has enabled: synthesis, thesis, position, positing, even the implication "that you can distinguish between the meaning, the contents of the meaning, and the way you put these together" (8). Deconstruction gives composition to composition professors and allows them to teach it by constantly making both the *com* and the *position* impossible. By dislocating the ontogeny of composition, deconstruction allows the composition of ontogeny.

With such unworking constantly at work, the composition professor can even grade papers. Grading papers, perhaps more than any other form of (mis)reading, depends on what Derrida calls a willed act of misunderstanding: "Each time you read a text—and this is my situation and the situation of every reader—there is some misunderstanding" (20). Through deconstruction, the requisite misunderstanding that constitutes grading papers can present itself as it is: "not a mistake or an absurdity. It's something that is motivated by some interest and some understanding" (20). Since misunderstanding cannot be avoided, deconstruction allows composition professors to foreground the motivation, the interest, the understanding, and the politics that authorize and inform their misunderstanding when they place a "mark" on a student's text.

We gain much by taking the opportunity of deconstruction. Within it we gain the security that writing is a teachable, learnable way to gather and unify existence. Through it we appear both as the authority who "knows" and as the one authorized to "mark." Because of it such landmarks as order and correctness still stake out an inhabitable territory where directions are possible. From it we learn how to construct our own discipline, our own specificity—a specificity that both identifies us and offers models and norms for our students. Most importantly, as a result of its continuing operation, we forever hold pedagogy, authority, location, and specificity in question, knowing that they never escape and are always undermined by the unfounded, unending process of construction. "All writing worth the name," according to Helen Vendler, "is the revolutionary effort toward freedom, away from the stereotypes of thought and language inherent in every belief system" (48). Derridean deconstruction allows composition professors to teach such writing.

**L(i)ability**

When we use Derrida, we unavoidably enable a composition haunted by the liability of "minima" and fraught with the lability of politics.

"Of course," Derrida assumes, "the minimal requirements in grammar, clarity of exposition, and so on can be addressed everywhere" (6). "I don't
think there is a model for teaching," Derrida says of pedagogy, "once the minimal requirements are fulfilled in terms of language, grammar, comprehension, and so on ... " (11). While he does not complain himself, Derrida does see that the norms of writing "built through the ideology of the Third Republic" are no longer respected and that "we cannot recognize in children and young people now the same respect we had for spelling, and so on" (5).

Diction, grammar, clarity, spelling? What presumptions operate here? How much has been dismissed as "basic" or taken for granted in the "and so on" that so casually and confidently ends each of these statements? No one could be so obtuse a reader or so enamored of Derrida as to miss the elitism that marks these "minimal requirements." Someone somewhere must establish the tradition and ensure the minima on which such blithely innocent elitism depends. Who? How?

In what he calls "une réponse de Normand" (both yes and no), Derrida proposes an intentionally contradictory model for the university composition professor: "You can't teach writing simply as a formal technique. Each technique is determined by the specific content of the field. So the one who teaches writing in law school should ... be informed about the laws and not simply a rhetorician" (6-7). Derrida would have the compositionist trained in two specificities: the common core specificities of rhetoric (which at some point must include the minima) as well as the specificities of each field. It's a tough task, he shrugs, "but that's politics" (8).

Well, not too many composition specialists need a lesson in politics, especially academic politics, to know where they are likely to rank after the struggle ends. In what imaginable political structure will the departmental hybrid, the rhetorician-comme-whatever, be credited with having undergone the "rigor," the "very classical training" in the "field" that Derrida claims for himself with such serene pride? What risk does the hybrid run? Will she be the watcher after minima, the enabler of the deconstruction to come? Will he in fact be the pharmakos through whose exclusion the field constitutes itself?

Who, for example, is Derrida talking to when he explains that rhetoric includes more than figures and tropes? Or that it operates in the kairos? Or even that it has political, economic, and libidinal dimensions? What imagined interlocutor needs to be told or reminded of this? No one who has read Derrida should be surprised that when the crunch comes, when rhetoric and philosophy stand against each other, Derrida comes down squarely on the side of "philosophy, logic, truth, reference, etc." (16). His justification comes straight from the Gorgias: "rhetoric as a separate discipline, as a technique or as an autonomous field," he warns, "may become a sort of empty instrument whose usefulness or effectiveness would be independent of logic, or even reference or truth—an instrument in the hands of the sophists in the sense that Plato wanted to define them" (16). Though rhetoric may be powerful, though philosophy never quite seems to escape it, though too
much rigorous attention cannot be paid to it, Derrida the philosopher fears that you just cannot trust it. The rejections in *Gorgias* and *Phaedrus*, rhetorical though they may be, retain their “force and signification.” While Derrida attempts to inhabit the opposition between rhetoric and philosophy so as to put that opposition in question, he does so (and has done so consistently for twenty-five years) as a philosopher. “I'm not saying,” he makes unequivocally clear, “that all concepts are essentially metaphors and therefore everything is rhetoric” (16).

How do compositionists respond to such goodwill, such frank good sense? Since “deconstruction is America,” perhaps we need *une réponse de Missouri*. When Derrida assures us that “concept” exceeds “metaphor” and that some things escape rhetoric, our reply should be, “Fine. Let's wait for the first concept that is not a metaphor to present itself outside rhetoric.”

What might that discourse sound like? Yes, I worry about it too, for I think it has the blithe sound of “minimal,” “and so on,” “an empty instrument.” Not only have I heard that discourse in departmental meetings for fifteen years, I have also seen it written down—by Plato. The chance, in other words, is labile, fraught with liability. Can one hazard the chance, accept the lability, and yet escape the liability? Only if deconstruction can unwork itself; only if the Derridean strategy is separable from the Derridean project. The project, after all, depends on the most rigid, most prescriptive imaginable current tradition. Composition specialists *must* treat deconstruction as a theory that generates a method; the risk of letting it “just happen” is too great. “I hope,” Julia Kristeva once said to a questioner, “I am not correctly following any line whatsoever.”

*Vanderbilt University*

*Nashville, Tennessee*

**Notes**

1 The title of my response is quoted from the first line of *Phaedrus*, but I have replaced Phaedrus’ name with the signature Derrida leaves at the end of *Writing and Difference*.

2 The *Oxford English Dictionary* cites Puttenham (1589) as the first English user of the term, “Catachresis or the Figure of abuse.” In 1820 Coleridge used the term as follows: “The proverb is current by a misuse, or a catachresis at least, of both the words, fortune and fools.” The ancient Greek term meant “misuse of a word.” Perelman uses the term as follows: “When the metaphorical expression is the sole way to designate an object in a language, it is called a *catachresis*: the 'foot of a mountain' and 'arm of a chair’” (122).

3 In nineteenth-century scientific discussions, catastrophists, who generally held that some geological and biological phenomena occur because of sudden and violent disturbances of nature, were pitted against uniformitarians, who saw all developments in nature as part of uniform, continuous processes. Spencer, for example, wrote in 1879, “For a generation after geologists had become uniformitarians in Geology, they remained catastrophists in Biology” (iv. §17).

4 See Verdiglione 73; Roudiez 1.
Jacques Derrida on Teaching and Rhetoric: A Response

SHARON CROWLEY

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