

commodity, but Culler's *On Deconstruction* offers a sustained summary and critique of Derrida and related thinkers, a critique that Nealon seriously misrepresents.

Nealon suggests that this passage from Culler represents deconstruction as it is taught in theory seminars: "In undoing the oppositions on which it relies and between which it urges the reader to choose, the text places the [deconstructive] reader in an impossible situation that cannot end in triumph but only in an outcome already deemed inappropriate: an unwarranted choice or a failure to choose" (Nealon's interpolation). Only in the endnote do we learn that Culler is writing here not about Derrida at all but about Paul de Man. Nealon proceeds to debunk this approach, rightly, as representing only the first step of a deconstruction. He then cites the following passage from Derrida's *Margins of Philosophy*, a passage that delineates the second, and crucial, move, of displacement and reinscription:

Deconstruction cannot limit itself or proceed immediately to a neutralization: it must, by means of a double gesture, a double science, a double writing, practice an *overturning* of the classical opposition *and* a general *displacement* of the system. It is only on this condition that deconstruction will provide itself the means with which to *intervene* in the field of oppositions that it criticizes, which is also a field of non-discursive forces. (1269)

Nealon then explicitly faults Culler for not acknowledging "the importance of this displacement in Derrida's thought" (1270). But in fact Culler, on the first page of his chapter on Derrida and deconstruction (four pages after the passage regarding de Man that Nealon quotes), writes the following:

Deconstruction must, Derrida continues, "through a double gesture, a double science, a double writing, put into practice a *reversal* of the classical opposition *and* a general *displacement* of the system. It is on that condition alone that deconstruction will provide the means of *intervening* in the field of oppositions it criticizes and which is also a field of non-discursive forces" (*Marges*, p. 392/SEC, p. 195). (85–86)

Could Nealon possibly have missed this?

It might be helpful to reconsider in the light of Culler's actual presentation Derrida's remark, cited by Nealon, chiding Habermas for "abusing citations of Jonathan Culler at points where, it being a question of relations between a generality and its 'cases,' the latter is occasionally obliged to rigidify my arguments out of pedagogical considerations." Perhaps Derrida

lets Culler "escape unharmed" (1275) here because anyone who attempts to "explain" Derrida's thought, *including Nealon*, must rigidify his arguments in some form or another. Are we to assume that Nealon's quotation from *Margins*, and his contextualization of it, somehow does not rigidify Derrida, while Culler's use of *the same quotation* does?

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To the Editor:

In the first paragraph of "The Discipline of Deconstruction," Jeffrey T. Nealon writes, "[I]n the summer of 1992, at the School of Criticism and Theory, Barbara Johnson spoke on 'the wake of deconstruction,' exploring, among other things, its untimely passing away" (1266). I don't know if Nealon was present at Barbara's seminars, but, as a participant in the 1992 session of the School of Criticism and Theory, I remember that the "other things" Barbara did include suggesting that if our gathering was the wake of deconstruction, then we should have been able to open the curtain in front of which she was lecturing and reveal the body. There was no body behind the curtain. My literary-critical-deconstructive imagination tells me that if there is no body at a wake, then the body might well be resurrected. Deconstruction may be alive and well and roaming about seeking and discovering new disciples (and disciplines), appearing in new forms. Or its body may have been stolen by the original disciples . . . or the new historians . . . or the postcolonialists . . . or the Romans . . .

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To the Editor:

I would like first and foremost to thank Jeffrey T. Nealon for "The Discipline of Deconstruction." Certainly many students of literature and philosophy have supposed the work of Derrida to be identical with that of de Man. It is not—as de Man himself would have said. Nealon offers a much needed clarification as he argues for the uniqueness of the Derridean "intervention." He is also circumspect in questioning why Derrida never deliberately distanced himself from de Man. The issue is a complicated one, which it would be hasty to dismiss as mere cronyism, and only

through careful analysis of the relevant texts could any sort of answer be reached, as Nealon suggests by examining Derrida's confrontation with Habermas. In particular the lectures gathered in *Mémoires for Paul de Man* plead for further scrutiny, for it is there that Derrida not only reads de Man but asks the question "have I distorted de Man's thought, pushing it to an extreme?" (59).

Second, I would like to say that there are precedents for Nealon's reading of Derrida that go undiscussed and uncited and that are, I think, as important as Rodolphe Gasché's *The Tain of the Mirror*. In a letter one can only touch on the small but growing body of Derrida scholarship, all of which I would oppose to the many odes and invectives, which seem to be more popular. Interesting in this vein are M. H. Abrams's essays on Derrida, for, although Abrams was not particularly fond of his "opponent's" work, true to form he was able to summarize adeptly many aspects of a view not his own. What Nealon calls "double reading" Abrams calls "double dealing"; the juxtaposition of these terms should show both Abrams's bias and his insight. It would be a shame to overlook, also, John Sallis's *Delimitations: Phenomenology and the End of Metaphysics* and a collection Sallis edited, *Deconstruction and Philosophy: The Texts of Jacques Derrida* (to which Gasché contributed "Infrastructures and Systematicity"). And especially akin to Nealon's work are Christopher Norris's most recent essays, many of which have been collected in the volume *What's Wrong with Postmodernism*. There Norris argues that it is high time Derrida be scrupulously examined, and in "Limited Think" Norris gives some good hints about how such scholarship might proceed. Moreover, Norris specifically considers one of the key issues of Nealon's essay (to what extent Derrida might be responsible for the way in which others have interpreted his work) in "Deconstruction against Itself: Derrida and Nietzsche," first published in the Winter 1986 *Diacritics*. But I select Norris's work in particular because, while like Nealon's it suggests that Derrida's writings have been widely misconstrued, unlike Nealon's it never suggests that the distortion has had anything to do with the false assumption that de Man and Derrida are somehow interchangeable.

Finally, I would like to address a certain misunderstanding concerning Derrida's critique of Saussure. While Derrida has written that he does not question the truth of what Saussure says, he is quick to attach the qualifier "on the level on which he says it" (*Of Grammatology* 39). Thus, on the notion that "in a

language, in the *system* of language, there are only differences," he has written that "on the one hand, these differences *play*, . . . on the other hand, these differences are themselves *effects*" (*Margins of Philosophy* 11). "Of what?" it might be asked. Of *différance*, which "produces" the effects of difference. Given *différance*, at least provisionally one would have to say that Derrida privileges difference no more than sameness, the signifier no more than the signified, absence no more than presence. This critique of Saussure is not a mere afterthought; rather, it brings us to what is truly unique and most important in Derrida's writing: the ability to articulate simultaneously, on the one hand, conditions of possibility in the a priori (Kantian) sense and, on the other hand, conditions of impossibility in the spirit of Goedel's proof. Unfortunately Nealon's essay does not take up the particular intervention of *différance*. This omission is a fault only because Nealon, too, in the end seems to place the Derridean text in complicity with the rather leaky notion of "difference without positive terms." Many of Derrida's detractors have taken up his readings of Saussure as a point of attack. In *Myth, Truth, and Literature: Towards a True Postmodernism*, Colin Falk reads Saussure much as Derrida does, and Falk proceeds to show how Saussure is philosophically naive. J. Claude Evans, in *Strategies of Deconstruction*, argues that Derrida has misread Saussure. Falk and Evans are careful thinkers, and their arguments are convincing. But both authors seem to think that they have, as it were, pulled the rug out from under Derrida, because both assume without question that Derrida's effort relies in some inextricable way on Saussure. Again, this assumption cannot be simply made. What would have to be analyzed is what is entailed in Derrida's provisional appropriation of Saussure's work. The question would be whether Derrida does not in truth remain bound to Saussure even after breaking with him—whether, that is, Derrida does not somewhere make difference into a foundation and in so doing fall short of the rigor necessitated by the demanding "sous rature."

But any discussion of Derrida's writings is preliminary to the further question of what bearing they have on the study of literature, if any at all. These writings are relevant to the study of literature when they are read as Nealon attempts to take them rather than as some simple machine for cranking out interpretations. Specifically, *différance*, as a *condition of (im)possibility*, should be of great interest to students of theories of figuration, including scholars who are historically inclined or are concerned with "imagination." But

since, as Nealon says, the *discipline* of deconstruction is dead, his essay is a much needed addition to a discussion that is struggling to live.

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To the Editor:

In "The Discipline of Deconstruction," Jeffrey T. Nealon discusses extensively the objections made to the deconstructionist doctrines of Jacques Derrida, but Nealon takes exclusively the point of view of literary theory. Aside from one passing reference to Saussure (1274), Nealon makes no mention of linguistics, or of the considerations based thereon that demonstrate the total untenability of the dogmas of deconstruction (Derridean or any other kind). I can only summarize those considerations briefly here.

First and most fundamental, Derrida's insistence on the primacy of writing over speech is wholly unfounded. On the contrary, the primary importance of speech is shown by four major aspects of human language: (1) the universality of speech in contrast to the relatively narrow diffusion of writing among human beings; (2) the length of time that human beings must have been speaking (many tens of thousands of years) in contrast to the few millennia (usually placed at six) since writing began to be used; (3) the ontogeny of language in individuals (the child learns to speak between one and three years of age, but never learns to write before four); and (4) the universal, but also almost universally neglected, fact that no reading or writing goes on without at least some speech activity taking place in the brain of the reader or writer, as demonstrated in experimental psychology with electrograms.

The defense that Derrida and others use *écriture* metaphorically, to mean any kind of semiotic marking, would be invalid. (In discussing Derrida, Walter Ong uses the term "semiotic marking" to refer to any visible or sensible indication, not only writing but also, say, animals' use of excreta to indicate possession of turf.) Metaphors always blur meaning, and there is never any excuse for using a metaphor to describe a phenomenon when more exact terms are available.

Derrida and other deconstructionists have badly misinterpreted the Saussurian notion of "l'arbitraire du signe." In the "vulgate" of Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale* (i.e., the editions of 1916 and later), "the arbitrariness of the sign" does not refer to

a supposed "opacity" of the signifier and resultant inaccessibility of the signified. This arbitrariness is simply the absence of any inherent, necessary correlation between the structures of the *signifiant* and the *signifié*—as exemplified by the use of, say, English *dog*, French *chien*, German *Hund*, Russian *sobaka*, and so on, to refer to the same class of animal. This observation has been a truism ever since Plato, in the *Cratylus*, discussed whether meanings were originated "by nature" or "by convention."

The binary opposition of signifier and signified goes back through Saussure and Descartes to the medieval Modistae. It is, however, untenable, inasmuch as we must recognize (with Ogden and Richards and with Stephen Ullmann) not two but three aspects of meaning: the linguistic form, its sense, and its referent. This is because the essence of meaning lies in the correlative tie (C. F. Hockett's term) connecting sequences of sounds with the phenomena of the world we live in (phenomena that include, in a minor way, language itself). This correlation, the sense involved in a linguistic event, exists only in the "mind" (however we define that term) of each individual speaker and hence has to be recognized as distinct from both linguistic form and referent. It is nonsense to say that language refers only to itself, since virtually all normal human use thereof involves reference to relatively observable or deducible phenomena of our experience.

Yet, even though the sense of a linguistic form or construction exists only in individual speakers, it does not follow that any individual can "arbitrarily" decide what sense he or she will choose to give it, as does Humpty Dumpty in *Alice in Wonderland*, and expect others to accept that new sense. In ordinary human life, and in all but the least representative varieties of literature, the range of meaning of words and their combinations is kept within the limits of ordinary (even if inevitably approximative) comprehension by each speaker's need to communicate and collaborate with other members of the speech community. What Locke, Derrida, and others have forgotten is that language is a social, as well as an individual, phenomenon.

Sudden, unannounced use of a term in a meaning very different from that of normal speakers is semantic wrenching, as in Derrida's use of *écriture* for any kind of semiotic marking. (In as early a work as *De la grammaire*, for instance, Derrida uses *écriture* in this way from the beginning but informs the reader of the word's broadened reference only on page 65.) Similar drastic and needless shifts of reference are present in deconstructionists' use of, say, *inscrire* for